CHAPTER 1

Fragmented Foundations within Regional Economic Communities: The Limits and Possibilities of Collective African Agency and the Communicative Implications to Global Powers

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Introduction: Between ideal and reality

Africa's regional integration project has long been viewed as a critical pathway toward achieving collective development, political stability and global relevance. From the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 to the AU and the more recent push toward the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), regionalism in Africa has consistently been positioned as both a response to shared historical experiences and a strategy for navigating a shifting global order (Hettne 1994; Lee 2002). Central to this project are the continent's RECs, which were intended to serve as building blocks for continental unity. However, decades into their existence, Africa's RECs remain marked by considerable variation in performance, overlapping mandates and fragmented memberships. There are eight formally recognised RECs by the AU: Arab Maghreb Union (AMU); Common Market for Eastern and Southern

Africa (COMESA); Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD); East African Community (EAC); Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The chapter (and the volume) identifies the five most influential RECs for analysis in the research, as the other three have less of an impact on the continental and global stage. Additionally, there is an overlap in the membership of countries, whereby members of the five selected RECs are also members of the three other RECs. For example, while Kenya is a member of the relatively least consequential IGAD, it is also a member of the EAC, one of the five identified RECs. This means that by selecting the five, the research does not lose out on important information required about the RECs left out. Khadiagala (2017) discusses the dominant phases in the establishment of regional institutions, highlighting the various actors and processes involved in the formation of RECs for economic integration and security collaboration. This implies that member countries choose to belong to the RECs that best meet their economic and security needs.

This chapter addresses the longstanding puzzle of African regionalism by examining what the current configuration of RECs reveals about Africa's capacity to project agency on the global stage. Rather than focussing on the institutional design or performance of any one REC, the aim is to step back and examine the broader regional architecture as a whole. In the spirit of viewing issues from a broader perspective, the chapter incorporates the communicative implications to enhance holistic understanding (see Wefwafwa and Monyani 2024). It asks the questions: What does the complex, fragmented and at times contradictory nature of REC membership suggest about the viability of a Pan-African voice in international affairs? Are RECs still useful instruments for collective diplomacy and development, or have they become more symbolic than substantive? The chapter further questions the communicative implications for the external funding of the AU and the arbitrary funding of REC member states, which result in unequal power. In a one-on-one conversation with the immediate outgoing AU chairperson, Moussa Faki, Sudan's Billionaire and Philanthropist, Mo

Ibrahim, questioned why the West finances 70 per cent of the AU's budget (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2025).

To explore these questions, the chapter adopts a conceptual approach informed by secondary analysis and synthesis of existing empirical studies and regional documents. It does not undertake new case studies of individual RECs; rather, it draws from the wealth of existing scholarship and policy literature to offer an overarching reflection on the nature of Africa's regionalism today. This approach is appropriate given the structure of the book, which dedicates separate chapters to each of the five main RECs. In this context, this chapter seeks to provide an integrative lens that can inform and frame those deeper institutional analyses.

The theoretical lens guiding this inquiry is new regionalism, a framework developed in response to the limitations of classical regional integration theories. Unlike earlier models that viewed integration as a linear and state-driven process, often inspired by the European Union (EU) experience, new regionalism emphasises the complexity, informality and external embeddedness of regional projects, particularly in the Global South (Grant and Söderbaum 2003; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). For Africa, new regionalism offers a useful way of understanding RECs not as neat steps toward a continental union, but as messy, dynamic and sometimes contradictory entities shaped by both domestic and global forces (Lee 2022). This chapter conceptualises shaping as a communicative implication. The conceptualisation allows one to consider regional institutions not only as structures with rules and mandates, but also as communicative tools of political intent, for external influence and sometimes as sites of contestation.

This chapter, therefore, contributes to ongoing debates on African agency by focussing on the regional level, specifically, how the fragmented structure of RECs may enhance or inhibit the continent's ability to act in a coordinated and effective manner on global issues. The argument advanced is that while RECs continue to serve as important sites of aspiration and experimentation, their current configuration, characterised by overlapping memberships, weak harmonisation and uneven capacities, limits their potential as instruments of collective African agency. In some cases, this fragmentation communicatively implies to the external

actors that they can bypass or selectively engage regional bodies, thereby reinforcing Africa's marginality rather than reversing it.

In the sections that follow, the chapter presents a methodological reflection on how the analysis was constructed, followed by a findings and analysis section that explores key patterns and insights across the RECs. The chapter concludes by reflecting on what a more coherent regionalism might require if RECs are to fulfil their promise as engines of both integration and agency in a changing global order.

Theoretical framework

To analyse the fragmented nature of REC membership and its communicative implications for African agency in global governance, this chapter draws on the theory of new regionalism, as developed by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000, 2007). New regionalism provides a more nuanced and contextually grounded lens through which to understand African regionalism, not as a linear or technocratic process of integration, but as a multi-layered and contested project shaped by global political economy, state interests and the strategic behaviour of both state and non-state actors (Grant and Söderbaum 2003). Emerging in the post-Cold War era, the new regionalism approach offered a shift from earlier, state-centric and integrationist perspectives on regionalism, recognising instead the complex, multilayered and often contradictory nature of regional processes, particularly in the Global South (Hettne 1994). The framework is anchored in the International Relations area of study, even as it subtly adopts aspects of communication. This is to broaden the understanding of the social science issues within RECs.

Unlike neo-functionalism, which focussed on economic spillovers and the eventual political unity of states (Haas 1958), or liberal intergovernmentalism, which viewed integration as the outcome of rational state preferences (Moravcsik 1993), new regionalism understands regionalism as a multidimensional process. It encompasses not only economic factors, but also political, social and security dimensions, many of which are shaped by global political economy, the interests of dominant states, external actors and the agency of non-state

actors (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). It acknowledges that regionalism does not follow a single institutional or ideological path and is often fragmented, overlapping and even contradictory.

In the African context, this perspective is particularly enlightening. African regionalism has historically been driven by Pan-African ideals and aspirations for unity, however, in practice, it has unfolded in a highly uneven and fragmented manner, often funded by external actors. The RECs, which are meant to serve as building blocks of the AU, often reflect national interests, historical colonial legacies, and the influence of external donors and powers (Bach 2016; Söderbaum 2004). This communicatively implies the neo/colonial ties. As such, new regionalism enables one to locate the RECs not only as instruments of regional integration, but as political projects that are embedded in and responsive to, a complex global and domestic landscape.

Several studies have utilised the new regionalism framework to examine African regional organisations. For example, Söderbaum (2004) applied it to analyse the political economy of regionalism in Southern Africa, examining its social construction in the post-apartheid, post-Cold War era, with a particular focus on by whom, for whom and for what purpose various forms of regionalism occur (Hettne 2004).

This chapter views such shaping as the communicative implication about where the real power lies. Similarly, this communicative implication can be traced in Lee's (2002) discussion that African regionalism is often reactive, shaped more by external shocks or elite-driven responses to crises than by sustained and coherent integration strategies. These insights caution against overly formal readings of regional institutions, instead urging scholars to pay attention to the underlying political economies and social structures that sustain or inhibit regional cooperation.

Furthermore, scholars have used the new regionalism lens to critique the overlapping and uncoordinated nature of Africa's regional landscape, which they often refer to as "spaghetti bowl" regionalism (Draper and Qobo 2011; UNECA 2006). This phenomenon, where countries belong to multiple RECs with often conflicting obligations, undermines institutional coherence and complicates efforts at collective diplomacy or trade negotiation. New regionalism, thus, directs attention to both the

structural causes of fragmentation and the agency of actors navigating it, enabling a more grounded understanding of the challenges that confront RECs.

Despite a substantial literature on new regionalism in Africa, most studies still focus on single RECs or narrow sectors (trade, peace and security) rather than the continent-wide implications of fragmentation for African agency. On SADC's evolving role, Nathan (2012) shows how SADC's security ambitions often outran its institutional capacity, complicating its identity as both a development and security actor. On the measurement side, De Lombaerde and Van Langenhove (2005, 2006) developed indicator frameworks for assessing the "depth" of regional integration across RECs, however, these tools are rarely used to link institutional overlap to external bargaining power. Few studies, however, apply the framework to explicitly assess how REC fragmentation affects African agency in global engagements, especially from a continental or cross-REC perspective.

By adopting new regionalism as the theoretical framework, we move beyond narrow institutional or legalist assessments of the RECs. The study rather focusses on RECs' political nature as regional projects embedded in broader domestic and global contexts. The framework helps to interrogate how the structural features of African regionalism, such as overlapping memberships, weak coordination and political rivalry among member states, implicitly communicate the complicated ability of RECs to speak and act with one voice in international arenas. This implicit communication contextualises how external actors, aware of these internal divisions, often engage selectively or bilaterally with African states, bypassing regional mechanisms and thereby, weakening collective agency.

The methodological approach of the chapter, which relies on secondary analysis of key documents, scholarly studies and REC positions during major international forums, is shaped by this theoretical lens. New regionalism encourages one to focus not only on what formal institutions do or say, but also on what they fail to do, and why. It points to the importance of analysing contradictions, silences and inconsistencies across RECs, as well as the broader political economy in which these institutions operate.

In doing so, this chapter can explore five key dimensions of REC fragmentation: political competition and regional diplomacy; membership anomalies; external influence in a multipolar context; sovereignty tensions and institutional weakness, as well as the aforesaid implicit communications beneath. Each of these themes reflects core concerns within the new regionalism literature and is grounded in empirical examples, such as the failed collective support for a single African Development Bank (AfDB) presidential candidate or the divergent national positions taken during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) climate negotiations. These examples underscore how African regionalism, far from being a coherent or unified process, is often riven by national competition and shaped by external pressures.

This framework is especially useful for understanding how RECs simultaneously reflect aspirations for African unity and serve as sites of institutional fragmentation. It also sheds light on how their complex architecture affects their capacity to act collectively on the global stage, thus, offering a valuable entry point for theorising African agency from a structural and systemic perspective.

Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, grounded in the theoretical lens of new regionalism. As discussed in the theoretical framework, new regionalism offers a more flexible and context-sensitive understanding of regional integration, especially in Africa, where formal institutional arrangements often coexist with informal, overlapping, and externally influenced dynamics. Unlike classical regional integration theories that assume linearity and cohesion, new regionalism allows one to study African RECs as multi-layered and fragmented actors, operating within a globalised, multipolar world.

This perspective directly shapes the methodology. Rather than focussing on legal frameworks or purely institutional indicators, the chapter draws on secondary sources including existing policy reports, academic literature, AU documents, think-tank publications and recent

public events to analyse how RECs have exercised, enabled or hindered African agency in global affairs. It also recognises the subtle implicit communication beneath the REC's (African) agency, vis-à-vis the global actors. The method here is qualitative secondary analysis, however, guided by thematic concerns derived from new regionalism: overlapping memberships, external influence, inter-state competition and the role of regional institutions as both arenas and actors.

The secondary material was not treated as neutral information, but read critically through the new regionalism lens. In doing so, several themes emerged that frame the findings and analysis section. For instance, the concept of "regionness" helped assess the varying degrees of institutionalisation across RECs and their implications for collective agency. Similarly, the attention to external drivers of regionalism revealed how global powers often bypass RECs or selectively empower them, reinforcing fragmentation. The theme of hybridity, where formal regional bodies are shaped by informal political alignments or economic dependencies also proved useful in tracing why certain RECs act decisively in some areas, for example, peace and security, however, appear absent in others, for example, trade negotiations.

This method of analysis allowed the chapter to pre-emptively trace patterns that are explored in more detail in the findings section. For example, the inability of RECs to coordinate nominations for international leadership roles, or the tension between national and regional priorities during multilateral negotiations, were read not merely as administrative failures, but as symptomatic of a broader structural and political fragmentation.

Finally, by intentionally keeping the scope at a pan-REC level, rather than drilling into the internal workings of specific RECs (as other chapters in this volume do), the methodology makes it possible to observe common trends across Africa's regional architecture, without repeating case-level detail. This broader sweep is essential for the chapter's aim: to assess whether Africa's regional institutions can collectively project agency in a fragmented and multipolar world.

Findings and analysis

In this section, an integrative lens that informs and frames the deeper institutional analysis is used. It draws from the wealth of existing scholarship and policy literature to offer an overarching reflection on the nature of Africa's regionalism today.

The promise and politics of RECs

From the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) to the Abuja Treaty (1991), African regionalism has been driven by the belief that economic integration and political cooperation are essential for development and sovereignty. RECs were envisioned not merely as trade blocs, but as foundational institutions that would anchor a broader vision of continental unity. This chapter establishes that the RECs are implicitly and sometimes explicitly used to communicate messages within the RECs and the global arena. As identified, the AU formally recognises eight RECs, whose influence and functionality vary widely (African Union [AU] 2025). These are AMU; COMESA; CEN–SAD; EAC; ECCAS; ECOWAS; IGAD and the SADC. Their mandates extend beyond economics to include peace and security, infrastructure development and foreign engagement. Suffice to say, these expansive ambitions remain largely unrealised in part due to chronic underfunding.

Many RECs struggle to sustain operations, relying heavily on external donor funding, rather than consistent financial commitments by member states (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2025). This reliance significantly curtails REC effectiveness and compromises African agency. This is besides the implicit and sometimes explicit communication of REC's lack of economic independence. Take the SADC as a case in point. Recent figures indicate that less than half of the SADC's programmes are financed by member states, as the majority comes from international cooperating partners (ICPs) like the EU, AfDB and various bilateral partners. Still within the member states, South Africa is a major contributor, which communicatively implies that it has more say than the other members (Tjønneland 2006). Despite intentions to strengthen domestic financing

through the Regional Development Fund, which aimed to garner US$ 13 billion, this mechanism remains inactive due to lack of ratification (SADC 2024a). Meanwhile, critical areas like personnel costs, peace initiatives and ministerial travel depend on continued external funding (Tjønneland 2006).

The financial instability undermines regional autonomy in multiple ways, thereby implicitly communicating RECs' vulnerability to both internal and external actors. For one, it creates room for external agenda setting, where donor interests often end up determining the focus of regional programmes, with the potential to sideline what African states themselves deem most pressing (Wafula and Andrews 2023). Also, within the REC member states, the bigger financial contributors within the SADC, such as South Africa, shape the agendas (Ngwawi 2017). In the wording of this research, the shaping communicatively implies the financial power according to the financial abilities of the member states. Operationally, budget shortfalls lead to disruptions in the running of core functions, ranging from regular summits and decision-making forums to security deployments and the implementation of infrastructure projects. Even more worrying, it weakens the collective diplomatic voice of the region, without the capacity to act swiftly and assertively. As a result, the external powers read the communicative implication that RECs are often bypassed, as external powers read the communicative implication of RECs' weaknesses and choose instead to engage directly with individual countries.

An example of this can be seen in the ongoing crisis in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While efforts by the SADC and EAC to lead peace mediation in such a critical regional conflict have not yielded the desired results, other countries such as Qatar, a Gulf state with growing strategic interests in Africa have stepped in to mediate between the DRC and Rwanda, raising questions on African agency (Custers and Kinkoh 2025). Similarly, the United States (US) has pushed for a minerals-for-peace deal, linking access to the DRC's vast critical mineral resources to commitments around regional stability (Moncrieff 2025). At the local stage, individual countries have been seen making decisions that go against the collective REC agreements. For example, during the AU chairperson elections, the candidates campaigned directly to

the individual nations, bypassing the RECs. At the external level, these arrangements raise legitimate concerns about what is being traded in exchange for peace and highlight the long-term risk of undermining African agency in favour of transactional, externally driven solutions. Had RECs such as the SADC, EAC or even the continental body—the AU possessed the financial and operational independence to manage such crises and make decisions by themselves, the continent might not be in a position where peace and perceived national decisions are reached at the cost of sovereignty and RECs' stability.

Membership anomalies and overlaps

A critical barrier to REC coherence lies in the fragmented nature of their membership, that is mainly externally funded. African countries routinely hold dual or even triple memberships in different RECs. While this phenomenon is often justified by overlapping economic interests or political allegiances, it communicatively implies the member states' inability to form a single functional entity that can counter global entities such as the EU. Simplistically put, the external actors pick cues that enable them to detect opportunities for exploiting the RECs. For instance, the DRC belongs to both the EAC and SADC, while Djibouti aligns with both IGAD and COMESA. Such duplication has the potential to undermine the ability of any single REC to articulate a unified position, especially in global engagements where speed, clarity and cohesion are essential (Ogboye and Ochieng 2024).

In some cases, countries exist in a kind of regional limbo. Eritrea remains outside of any functional REC, while the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (a member of the AU) is absent from all major blocs. Island states such as Cape Verde and Comoros are nominally aligned with RECs, but have limited practical engagement. This patchwork undermines REC credibility and complicates efforts to represent Africa as a unified bloc in international forums such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or UNFCCC (Hess and Hess 2008). As aforesaid, this invites external powers to engage African states bilaterally rather than through regional groupings, reinforcing fragmentation.

One of the clearest recent examples of how RECs struggle to speak with one voice, even on relatively straightforward matters, comes from the 2025 AfDB presidential elections (AfDB 2025). In this case, both the SADC and COMESA endorsed Samuel Maimbo, a Zambian candidate with a strong track record in international finance (SADC 2024b), which joint endorsement could have been a moment to demonstrate regional unity and strategic alignment. Instead, it quickly became a case study in fragmentation. South Africa, despite being a member of both the SADC and COMESA, chose to act autonomously by fielding its own candidate, a move that exposed the fragility of regional cooperation. It both implicitly and explicitly communicates that even basic alignment on leadership choices can be sacrificed when national ambitions take over. We can also interpret the move to mean that South Africa funds SADC more than the rest of the member states, and this communicatively implies that it holds more power.

However, there are some instances where some REC member states, with less financial contributions, go against the unilateral decisions of the members. For example, during the recent AU chairmanship elections, although the SADC communicated to members encouraging them to back Madagascar's candidate, because it is a member state, not all the members voted for him (Mbaka 2025). The communicative implication in this kind of disunity goes far beyond elections. If RECs cannot hold together around regional candidates for Pan-African institutions, it raises serious questions about their capacity to act collectively in engagements with global powers. This is because at the global level, the stakes are even higher and the politics are more complex. The AfDB and AU episodes, in many ways, reflect a broader pattern: efforts at regional cohesion often fall apart, not due to lack of formal structures, but because member states prioritise their own geopolitical standing over shared goals.

What made these particular situations even more revealing was the underlying regional power dynamic at play. South Africa's decision could also be an implicit communication that the country is asserting its dominance in the region. It is a statement that its economic weight gives it the right to lead, regardless of broader consensus. This sense of hierarchy within RECs, where some countries behave as "first among equals" is

one of the unspoken tensions undermining their collective strength. The member states' financial contributions within the RECs fuel the situation. For smaller or less economically influential countries, this can foster frustration and disillusionment with the idea of regional solidarity.

All of these point to a deeper issue: RECs are not just struggling with technical coordination; they are wrestling with political trust and uneven power. And until these dynamics are acknowledged and addressed, even well-intentioned efforts at regional cooperation may continue to falter at critical moments.

Fragmented agency in a multipolar world

The rise of multipolarity has seen intensified geopolitical competition for African partnerships, particularly from China, Russia, the US, EU and increasingly, the Gulf States. RECs were built to provide collective bargaining power. However, too often, individual states dominate diplomatic engagement, pushing bilateral deals that undercut regional strategy. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a good example of this. Despite infrastructure frameworks shared with RECs, Chinese partnerships are almost always with individual countries, not blocs (Fan 2023; Ndzendze and Monyae 2019). Similarly, US initiatives such as the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) or the US President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) operate through direct state channels rather than regional institutions, and trade tools such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) are implemented nationally rather than via RECs, even though they have broader implications for the region (Engel 2020). A pattern can be seen where the external actors only acknowledge RECs when they serve their interests. The actors quickly revert to negotiating with individual member states whenever it serves their interests

There are of course some exceptions where RECs have successfully articulated joint positions and stood firm. ECOWAS, for example, took collective action during coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, imposing sanctions and suspending memberships. SADC, too, occasionally unites, such as when addressing Zimbabwe's sanctions or responding to unrest

in Mozambique (Mutsaka 2024; SADC 2022). The EAC joined forces to help stop the post-election violence that followed Kenya's hotly contested 2007 presidential elections. The alleged perpetrators of the violence were prosecuted at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague (Wefwafwa 2015). However, these examples are considered exceptional, rather than the norm. More often, national interests override regional commitments, as states may prioritise domestic stability, strategic alignments, or economic ties with global powers over a common REC stance. Locally, critics argue that, similar to the external actors, RECs' sitting presidents unite to defend their embattled colleagues (Hausken and Ncube 2015).

This pattern reflects a persistent dilemma where states must balance sovereignty and regional identity, and choose when to delegate authority. The result is a fragmented agency. One path forward would involve states ceding authority to RECs for specific issue areas, pre-agreeing that certain negotiations, such as border security, trade agreements or natural resource deals, must be channelled through REC mechanisms, even if parallel bilateral discussions occur. This model mirrors arrangements in the EU, where member states agree to let the bloc negotiate trade deals under the Common Commercial Policy. The move would communicatively imply the goodwill needed from member states to enable the RECs to function as expected. It would also imply to the external actors about Africa's desire to unite with a single voice on the global stage. This would discourage the external actors from "meddling" with RECs through funding that comes with hidden interests and bypassing RECs to negotiate with state members.

Embedding such commitments in REC protocols, perhaps using "opt-out clauses" could strengthen collective capacity without entirely eliminating national expression. Through a clarification of which issues are regional by default, RECs could build credibility and autonomy, making it harder for external powers to exploit state-to-state divisions. Doing so would not abolish state sovereignty, but it would signal strategic cooperation and help African states punch above their weight in a multipolar world (Bach 2016; Söderbaum 2004).

The tension between Pan-Africanism and state sovereignty

Similarly, the tension between the ideal of Pan-African unity and the reality of national sovereignty is another challenge. While most REC treaties promote collective goals, such as working together on security, trade or diplomacy, many member states still prefer to work alone when it really matters. This is often reflected in the uneven implementation of REC decisions and in the growing number of cases where countries pursue their own foreign policies, even when those decisions clearly affect regional interests.

Kenya offers a good example. Though key to the EAC, Kenya often uses bilateral diplomacy to enhance exports or strengthen strategic relations, opting for direct trade deals or partnerships instead of unified regional efforts (Irungu 2024). Likewise, Nigeria, the de facto leader within ECOWAS, has shifted from championing bloc unity to prioritising its own four-dimensional foreign policy agenda. This strategic posture has resulted in reduced cohesion and has, on occasion, sidelined ECOWAS mechanisms in favour of bilateral or national interests (Nwangwu 2024). These examples reflect a pattern of what some scholars call "sovereign pragmatism", a way of prioritising national interests over regional cooperation when the two seem to clash.

These differences make it difficult to agree on a unified REC position in global forums. For instance, during the Russia–Ukraine war, Africa was deeply split: 28 countries voted to condemn the invasion, sixteen abstained and nine did not vote, reflecting a mix of strategic interests and diverse foreign policy traditions (Tawat 2022). In the AMU, century-long tensions between Algeria and Morocco, especially over border disputes and Western Sahara, have consistently blocked collaboration on even basic regional issues like border security or migration (Laadam 2018). These ongoing divides significantly undermine the RECs' capacity to be credible, unified actors in international affairs. The problem here is not just a matter of political will. In many cases, REC structures do not have the authority to require members to act together. Most decisions are based on consensus, and enforcement mechanisms are weak or non-existent. Therefore, even if one country blocks a regional decision,

or ignores it entirely, there are usually no consequences. As a result, the weakness sends a communicative implication to the external actors to easily sidestep RECs and strike deals with individual countries, further undermining the idea of regional agency.

To make RECs more effective, member states might consider giving them more formal authority in certain areas, like trade negotiations, security coordination, or climate diplomacy. This would not mean giving up sovereignty entirely, it would, however, create clearer rules around when and how regional platforms should lead. Some kind of shared commitment, perhaps backed by binding protocols or opt-out clauses could help build more consistent collective action. Without this, RECs risk being sidelined by both their own members and external powers.

Institutional weakness and the limits of soft power

Finally, a key finding that emerged is the limited institutional capacity of most RECs, not just in terms of money and staffing, but also in how they implicitly and explicitly communicate their influence internationally. Many RECs depend heavily on external donors to fund their operations, which can shape priorities in ways that do not always reflect regional needs. Administrative structures are often small and under-resourced, with limited policy expertise and weak enforcement mechanisms. This makes it difficult for RECs to speak with a strong and consistent voice in international spaces, it is also a communicative implication from the external actors about who is more influential. Soft power, the ability to influence through ideas, norms and public diplomacy, is also underdeveloped. Unlike the EU, which has diplomatic missions, cultural programming and recognisable branding, most African RECs have little public visibility. There is no coordinated "REC diplomacy", and awareness of RECs among citizens across the continent remains low (Bach 2016). This weakens their legitimacy and makes it harder to build political momentum behind regional initiatives.

Still, there have been moments of real promise. The response to the COVID-19 Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver proposal at the WTO is a good example. South Africa and

India led the charge, with wide support from across the African continent. This early show of solidarity highlighted how African countries can work together to shape global rules on public health and intellectual property (Amin and Kesselheim 2022). However, as the negotiations progressed, that unity became harder to sustain. Some countries appeared to be pursuing their own vaccine agreements or took more cautious positions, partly influenced by their external partnerships (Bond and Ndlovu 2022). These shifts did not erase the value of the initial collective action, they did, however, communicatively imply how national interests and limited regional coordination can complicate long-term bargaining power.

The takeaway here is not to overlook Africa's agency, but to recognise that sustained collective influence requires stronger REC institutions and clearer coordination mechanisms. Regional solidarity is possible, and has been demonstrated, however, it needs to be backed by more robust institutional support if Africa is to speak and act more effectively on the global stages.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the fragmented nature of Africa's RECs through the lens of new regionalism, offering a conceptual overview of how their structure and operation communicatively imply the continent's incapacity to project collective agency on the global stage. While RECs remain central to the AU's vision of continental integration, the analysis has shown that the current landscape, marked by overlapping memberships, weak institutional alignment, and varying levels of activity presents both practical and political challenges to achieving that goal.

Using a synthesis of existing empirical and policy research, the chapter has highlighted key trends: the coexistence of high-performing and dormant RECs; the blurred lines between economic and political mandates and the tendency for external actors to exploit regional divisions to advance their own interests. These dynamics not only complicate Africa's internal coordination, it also hinders its ability to present a unified voice in international forums. In short, fragmentation at the regional level reverberates outward, shaping the nature and limits of African agency in the global system.

New regionalism proved particularly useful as a theoretical lens that allowed for an appreciation of the RECs as both products and producers of their environments. They are communicatively used by global political and economic forces, as well as by the local actors, to implicitly and explicitly reflect local political realities, institutional histories and evolving interests among African states. This perspective underscores the need for a deeper, context-specific theorisation of regional agency, one that goes beyond institutional design to consider how agency is structured, constrained and exercised within a complex regional and global order.

Overall, if African RECs are to fulfil their original promise, efforts must go beyond technical harmonisation or bureaucratic reforms. What is required is a political recommitment to regionalism that prioritises coherence, clarity of purpose and strategic alignment, both among African states and in their engagements with external powers. Only then can regional institutions move from aspiration to influence, and from fragmentation to meaningful agency.

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