



CONCEPT NOTE

THE 2ND IRSK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

20TH – 22ND NOVEMBER 2024, NAIROBI, KENYA

INTRODUCTION

The International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK), the professional body for international relations and diplomacy in Kenya, is pleased to announce the upcoming second IRSK Annual Conference. This 3-day event will feature high-level, insightful evidence-based deliberations regarding current challenges and priorities in international relations and diplomacy. The conference is being organized in partnership with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD). The second IRSK Annual Conference builds on the inaugural conference and represents a significant milestone in advancing the discourse and practice of international relations and diplomacy in Kenya, COMESA region, and the wider African continent.

The theme of the 2024 IRSK Conference is **“Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy.”** Participants at the conference will delve into the critical role of international relations and diplomacy in strengthening ties among stakeholders as well as for overcoming deep-seated political, economic, peace and security and developmental challenges in the COMESA region. It seeks to examine how diplomatic efforts and international relations frameworks facilitate collaboration and partnership between governments, regional organizations, civil society groups, and private sector entities and how the highlighted challenges impact on regional integration and cooperation. It will be a platform where participants reflect on the past progress at regional integration and cooperation in the COMESA region and examine how International Relations and Diplomacy can be enhanced to inform future efforts.

The conference is expected to draw around 200 attendees, including government officials, parliamentarians, diplomats, scholars, policymakers, business leaders, media personnel, think tanks, and civil society representatives, among others. Special attention will be given to ensuring broad geographic representation and the involvement of women and youth from as many COMESA countries as possible. The conference will be held in Nairobi, Kenya from **November 20 to November 22, 2024.**

CONFERENCE METHODOLOGY

The conference approach will encompass a dynamic blend of elements, ensuring a rich and transformative experience for all participants. Participants can expect captivating keynote addresses, engaging roundtable discussions, debates, dialogue, and workshops aimed at propelling these vital discussions, paving the way for informed action as well as impactful solutions. Beyond the intellectual discourse, the agenda also encompasses vibrant social events, networking sessions and cultural activities. The fusion of these components creates an inclusive platform that aims to nurture knowledge, dialogue and collaboration amongst participants, making the conference an exceptional and memorable event.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

- Policy dialogue and intellectual discourse.
- Practical policy incubation
- Knowledge exchange and research dissemination
- Professional development and skill enhancement.
- Networking and collaborative engagement.
- Promoting Inclusivity

CONFERENCE OPPORTUNITY

The dialogue, discussions, and debates that will take place at the 2024 IRSK Annual Conference will foster a reservoir of insights that will help to illuminate the progress that the COMESA Integration Agenda has made in fostering diplomacy and promoting cordial relations among Member States, what tools they are using and to what extent they are effective, and what innovative and practical approaches can be used to upscale the continent to desired levels of integration. This conference, therefore, serves as a unique platform for sharing ideas, perspectives and experiences, forming partnerships, as well as exploring innovative approaches and strategies of using diplomacy and international relations in addressing regional integration and co-operation challenges. By so doing, the conference provides an opportunity to advance pragmatic solutions that could recast the trajectory of international relations and diplomacy within the context of regional integration in the COMESA region and beyond.

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

Regional integration and cooperation have been key priorities for African leaders since the Pan-African movement of the 1960s. Within the COMESA region, regional integration and cooperation remain crucial pathways to sustainable development, as outlined in the Abuja Treaty of 1989. The treaty advocates for the establishment of the African Economic Community (AEC) through integration starting at regional levels, with COMESA being one of the pillars. Specifically, the first principle of establishing and strengthening existing Regional Economic Communities (RECs) places significant responsibility on organizations like COMESA to lay a strong foundation for the AEC's success. Furthermore, the Constitutive Act of the African Union (CAU) recognizes RECs as the building blocks of the continent's peace and security architecture.

From the onset of its foundation, COMESA has built its reputation as a prominent front-runner in the promotion of Africa's Regional Integration Agenda. Established in 1994, COMESA stands as one of the largest regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa, comprising 21 member states and representing over 560 million people. COMESA's primary objective was to facilitate the economic growth and development of the integrating states. During this time, significant progress has been made in areas such as trade facilitation, infrastructure development, policy harmonization and promotion of good governance, peace and security. The achievements made thus far provide an impetus for COMESA to expand and deepen its regional integration agenda, which is critical to realizing the region's full potential.

Despite the progress being made in advancing the “negative agenda” i.e. removing barriers to trade and advancing socioeconomic transformation, there equally is an important need for moving toward the “positive agenda” or providing goods that markets do not supply. Good governance, peace and security are fundamental regional public goods necessary for realization of benefits of integration. In this regard, COMESA is emerging as a regional leader in the promotion of political stability and international cooperation amongst its member states. Through its various programs, initiatives, and partnerships across its member states, COMESA has earned its reputable name and emerged as a leader through its collaboration with various stakeholders at both continental and global levels. Furthermore, its engagement with external partners and regional organizations has expanded its influence and contributed to broader efforts aimed at enhancing economic prosperity and peace and security in the region.

Thus, many RECs in Africa face deep seated challenges, hindering the full realization of its integration and cooperation objectives as envisaged in the Abuja Treaty. Some of the barriers to the integration and co-operation agenda in the sub-region include fragile economic structures, civil strife, political instabilities and wars. If not urgently addressed, these threaten to derail the progress and achievements as envisaged in the Abuja Treaty of 1989 remain largely elusive. This underscores the need for concerted efforts to promote good governance, peace and security within the COMESA region and the continent at large. For this to be a success, it cannot be overemphasized that these efforts should be grounded in sound IR analysis and should be evidence-based.

It is in this context, that the theme of the second IRSK annual conference for the year 2024 is **Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA region through International Relations and Diplomacy**. The theme underscores the critical role of diplomacy and international relations in shaping the COMESA Integration agenda, the success of the region and the entire African continent. The conference provides a forum for the participants to take a retrospective pause and re-examine the strides the region has made in integration process, but also to critically analyse why it hasn't fully achieved the objectives, with a view to identifying pragmatic and innovative ways of pursuing the agenda. The conference also provides a platform for delving into the positive contemporary issues and particular the importance peace, security, political stability for sustainable development of the region.

The conference theme is guided by the theoretical assumption that by combining various IR and diplomacy theories, frameworks, and methodological instruments, we can better understand, analyze, and explain the current level of integration and cooperation in the COMESA region. Utilizing eclectic and multidisciplinary approaches is crucial for analyzing these factors and their implications for sustainable economic and social progress of member states. The conference will also propose sound and function policy recommendations to enhance integration, sustainable peace, security, and inclusive growth in the region.

CONFERENCE THEMES

The conference will be organized around three distinct tracks with various thematic strands. For each sub-theme, there will be keynotes, roundtable discussions, and research presentations highlighting specific issues, including case studies, and moderated discussions.

Theme 1: International Relations

- i. Peace and Security
- ii. Democracy and Elections
- iii. Good Governance
- iv. Geopolitics
- v. Foreign Policy
- vi. Cyber Security
- vii. Migration

Theme 2: Diplomacy

- i. Environmental Diplomacy
- ii. Public Diplomacy
- iii. Economic/Commercial Diplomacy
- iv. Development Diplomacy
- v. Education Diplomacy
- vi. Humanitarian Diplomacy
- vi. Digital Diplomacy
- vii. Cultural Diplomacy

Theme 3: Regional Integration

- i. International Trade
- ii. Investment and Finance
- iii. Harmonization of Policies and Standards
- iv. Infrastructure Integration
- v. Regional Cooperation
- vi. Movement of People and Labor Mobility
- vii. Cultural Integration and Social Cohesion
- viii. Development Cooperation

In line with the above thematic strands, the conference will critically interrogate theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches as well as instruments adopted to deal with these issues within the context of regional integration and cooperation in the region. These are to be embedded in elaborate, innovative and empirical examination in order to spur both academic and policy discourse. The conference will emphasize broad-based interdisciplinary approaches that support access to resources, participatory decision-making and equity.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes are as follows:

- i. Enhanced Professional Networks and Connections
- ii. Innovative Policy Solutions to Regional Challenges
- iii. Impactful Research Dissemination
- iv. Expanded Knowledge and Insights on regional integration and co-operation processes
- v. Experiential Learning
- vi. Informed Policy Suggestions
- vii. Deeper Understanding of Regional Dynamics
- viii. Research Advancement
- ix. Mentorship

The launch of the publications of the 2023 conference papers during the conference, panel discussions on selected themes such as women in diplomacy, democracy and elections, the place of youth in regional integration and cooperation in the COMESA region trading for peace, media work and other outreach activities will raise the international visibility of the conference and will contribute to increased awareness of the objectives of the conference.

PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS



International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)

IRSK is the professional body for the international affairs and diplomacy fields in Kenya. The Society serves as a forum for the exchange of ideas, networking, and programmatic initiatives among those involved in the study, teaching, and practice of international relations and diplomacy. IRSK works to promote policy dialogues on international affairs and diplomacy between various parties, carry out pertinent and substantial research, and engage in conversation and collaboration with various actors at national, regional, and international levels.

www.irskenya.or.ke



The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

COMESA was established in 1994 to replace the former Preferential Trade Area (PTA). It is the largest Regional Economic Community with a total of 21 Member States. COMESA's main focus is to promote economic prosperity through regional integration. Its objective also includes the promotion of peace and security in the region as espoused in Article 3(d) of the COMESA Treaty. The program on peace and security specifically focuses on governance, conflict prevention, conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction.

www.comesa.int



African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)

ACCORD is a civil society organisation working throughout Africa since 1992, to bring creative African solutions to the challenges posed by conflict on the continent. We impact political developments by bringing conflict resolution, dialogue, and development to the forefront as an alternative to protracted conflict. As part of its strategic objectives, ACCORD aims to generate, document, and share knowledge that positively impacts conflict prevention, management, resolution and transformation.

www.accord.org.za