



# CONCEPT NOTE

## THE 3<sup>RD</sup> IRSK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

**1<sup>ST</sup> – 3<sup>RD</sup> OCTOBER 2025, 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 third IRSK Annual Conference. This third edition of the conference is being organized in partnership with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (AACCORD) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) – Kenya Office. The 2025 IRSK Conference, whose theme is **“Enhancing COMESA’S Strategic Positioning and Resilience in the Evolving Global Order,”** will serve as one of the Pre-Summit Events for the 25th COMESA Heads of State and Governments Summit which will be taking place in Nairobi, Kenya later in the year. This 3-day event will be held in Nairobi, Kenya from **Wednesday, October 1 to Friday, October 3, 2025.**

The 2025 IRSK Conference will feature high-level, insightful, evidence-based deliberations on the ongoing global developments and how COMESA as a region and its members are positioning themselves strategically and building resilience to adapt to structural challenges like climate change, technological disruptions, conflicts and economic shocks amidst the evolving international order. The conference will assess the adequacy of existing norms, institutional frameworks, and capacities to withstand the political, economic, peace and security, and developmental shocks and turbulence that will be brought about by global dynamics. It will also explore how participants including governments, regional organizations, civil society groups, private sector entities and academia can collaborate to influence the region’s priorities with a view to strengthening its resilience and ensuring long-term stability and growth for its member states.

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.

## CONFERENCE METHODOLOGY

The conference 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 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 2025 IRSK Annual Conference will serve as a pivotal platform for participants to reflect on the ongoing global developments and their implications for Africa's and COMESA's priorities. Through engaging dialogue, discussions, and debates, the 2025 IRSK Annual Conference will foster a reservoir of ideas, perspectives and experiences that will help participants understand how global trends, such as technological advancements and shifting geopolitical dynamics, will shape future diplomatic interventions and policy decisions in the COMESA region and beyond. By bringing together diverse perspectives from policymakers, diplomats, scholars, civil society and media, the conference aims to generate actionable recommendations that will inform and enhance COMESA's strategic positioning in the evolving global landscape.

## THEMATIC OVERVIEW

Over the last few years, significant developments have occurred around the globe, presenting both challenges and opportunities for Africa while demanding both proactive and strategic responses from the continent. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed Africa's vulnerabilities in addressing global health crises, highlighting the need for stronger healthcare systems and emergency preparedness. Geopolitical events, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, disrupted global supply chains and exacerbated food insecurity, underscoring Africa's reliance on imports and the urgency for agricultural self-sufficiency. The Gaza conflict and the reduction in foreign aid under U.S. President Donald Trump further complicates Africa's diplomatic and economic engagements, revealing the continent's struggle to navigate shifting global power dynamics. These challenges have emphasized the importance of resilience and adaptability in an increasingly volatile global order.

Amid the increasingly volatile global order—or disorder, marked by rapid changes in trade dynamics, supply chains, geopolitical alliances, and inter-state relationships, Africa has also encountered significant opportunities to strengthen its position on the global stage. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has emerged as a transformative initiative, fostering regional integration, boosting intra-African trade, and creating a unified market for economic growth. Furthermore, digital transformation and technological innovation are unlocking new possibilities for development, enabling Africa to leapfrog traditional barriers and compete in the global digital economy. By leveraging these opportunities, Africa can address its vulnerabilities, reduce dependency on external actors, and chart a path toward sustainable development. This call for strategic collaboration, forward-thinking policies, and a unified approach to ensure Africa's resilience and prosperity in a rapidly evolving world.

Within the COMESA region, these opportunities are amplified by its status as one of Africa's largest regional economic communities. 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. Since its establishment 30 years ago, intra-COMESA trade has steadily grown, reaching \$14 billion. Additionally, the combined GDP of member states has expanded from \$90 billion in 1994 to an impressive \$1.13 trillion in 2024, representing one-third of Africa's total GDP. At the same time, many countries across the region have enjoyed sustained rates of economic growth, significant infrastructure development, the adoption of information and communication technologies, improved governance, and increasing investment flows, creating new opportunities for social, economic and human development. Yet, the region continues to contend with recurrent crises and stresses such as conflicts, climate variability, disease, rapid population growth, disputed elections, and uneven resource distribution that too often overwhelm traditional coping mechanisms, leaving many countries struggling to recover and unable to expand economic opportunities or to improve well-being. As COMESA celebrates 30 years of progress, it can leverage its collective strengths to develop innovative strategies, tools and frameworks to both withstand external shocks as well as capitalize on emerging opportunities, thereby driving inclusive growth and development across the region.

Against this backdrop, the 2025 IRSK Annual Conference adopts the forward-looking theme, **“Enhancing COMESA's Strategic Positioning and Resilience in the Evolving Global Order.”** This theme invites participants to critically examine how the region is positioning itself strategically and building capacity to withstand and adapt to global shocks while advancing its strategic objectives and contributing to a more stable and prosperous Africa in the face of global challenges. This theme underscores the importance of proactive engagement, collaborative efforts, and forward-thinking policies to entrench COMESA's vital role in driving Africa's integration agenda and ensuring a prosperous future for the region. Through this lens, the conference also aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue on COMESA's role in aligning with broader global and continental frameworks such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa Union's Agenda 2063, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as well as important regional initiatives such as the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area which came into effect in July 2024.

## CONFERENCE TRACKS

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.

### **Track 1: International Relations**

- i. Peace and Security
- ii. Democracy and Elections
- iii. Good Governance
- iv. Geopolitics
- v. Foreign Policy
- vi. Human Rights
- vii. Migration and Labor Mobility
- viii. South-South Cooperation

### **Track 2: Diplomacy**

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

### **Track 3: COMESA's 30 Year Journey**

- i. Trade and Investment
- ii. Green Energy Transition
- iii. Food Systems and Security
- iv. Infrastructure Integration
- v. Regional Cooperation
- vi. Competition and Consumer Protection
- vii. Development Cooperation
- viii. COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite

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 COMESA region. These are to be embedded in elaborate, innovative and empirical examination in order to spur both rigorous academic and policy discourse. The conference will emphasize broad-based interdisciplinary approaches that help inform more effective diplomatic approaches to addressing some of the region's most complex challenges.

## CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes are as follows:

- i. Enhanced Professional Networks and Connections
- ii. Innovative Policy Solutions to Regional Challenges and Opportunities
- iii. Impactful Research Dissemination
- iv. Expanded Knowledge and Insights on Global and Regional Co-Operation Processes
- v. Experiential Learning
- vi. Informed Policy Options
- vii. Deeper Understanding of Regional Dynamics
- viii. Research Advancement
- ix. Mentorship

## 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 collaboration with various actors at national, regional, and international levels.

[www.irskenya.or.ke](http://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](http://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](http://www.accord.org.za)



### **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)**

KAS is a German political foundation, present in over 100 countries around the globe, and has been active in Kenya since 1973. The KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, and academia, building strong partnerships along the way. The Foundation seeks to intensify political cooperation at the national and international levels through the promotion of productive diplomatic engagements and shared democratic values.

[www.kas.de/en/web/kenia](http://www.kas.de/en/web/kenia)