

2024 IRSK ANNUAL CONFERENCE







































Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy



CONFERENCE REPORT

























FOREWORD

It is with great pride and anticipation that we present the 2024 International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK) Conference Report. This year's conference was convened under the banner of "Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy." The discussions that unfolded over the course of the three-day event were both timely and transformative, reflecting the richness of African thought, the urgency of regional cooperation, and the critical need to reimagine diplomacy in a multipolar world.

The 2024 conference brought together a vibrant mix of diplomats, scholars, students, civil society actors, and institutional partners. From deep reflections on peace and security in the COMESA region to incisive critiques of digital activism, civic agency, and trade governance, the sessions showcased the breadth and depth of African expertise. Especially noteworthy were the voices of young people, whose assertiveness, clarity, and policy-oriented demands underscored a generational shift in how we understand leadership, accountability, and participation.

The report captures the intellectual energy of these conversations, preserving not only the ideas exchanged but also the aspirations that bind us. It is a resource for researchers, policymakers, and advocates and is intended to inform future programming, guide institutional reform, and inspire inclusive diplomacy rooted in dignity.

We extend sincere gratitude to all our partners: Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Kenya Office, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, the Australian High Commission, East African Tax and Governance Network, the United Asian Network Limited (UAN), whose support made this gathering possible. We also salute the authors, speakers, moderators, and organizing team for their unwavering commitment to excellence.

As the world confronts intersecting crises, from geopolitical fragmentation to youth disenfranchisement, we believe Africa has a unique opportunity to lead through dialogue, innovation, and cooperation. IRSK will continue to serve as a platform for this leadership to flourish.

We invite all readers of this report to engage critically, reflect deeply, and act boldly in advancing the ideas captured herein.

Dr. Kizito Sabala

Chair 2024 IRSK Conference

Dr. Peter Mwencha

Coordinator, 2024 IRSK Conference

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



On behalf of the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK), we extend our deepest gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the 2024 IRSK Annual Conference. This year's convening was a remarkable testament to the power of dialogue, scholarship, and collaboration in shaping Africa's role in global affairs. The conference brought together a diverse community of scholars, practitioners, students, and policymakers who enriched our shared understanding of regional integration, diplomacy, governance, plus youth agency.

We are especially grateful to our institutional partners whose support made this event possible. We thank the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) for their invaluable support and commitment to advancing regional cooperation. COMESA's engagement reaffirmed the importance of multilateral platforms in fostering economic integration and policy dialogue across Africa. Their participation strengthened discussions on trade, governance, and youth empowerment, aligning with our shared vision for a more interconnected and prosperous continent.

We express sincere thanks to our colleagues at African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) for their collaboration, particularly through the African Journal on Conflict Resolution, which served as the publication platform for several of this year's presented papers. We congratulate ACCORD on the 25th anniversary of the Journal and acknowledge their important role in promoting African knowledge production and peacebuilding research.

We would also like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) - Kenya Office for their continued partnership and generous contribution. Their support not only strengthened the conference program but also deepened the level of critical engagement, intellectual exchange and intergenerational learning throughout the sessions.

We also recognize and appreciate the Australian High Commission in Kenya for their collaboration and support. H.E. Jenny Da Rin's participation added great value to the conference and reaffirmed the importance of global partnerships in strengthening democratic values and multilateral cooperation.

We are also grateful to other partners and sponsors for their contributions that ensured that the conference was a resounding success.

To all the panelists, presenters, moderators, and delegates, thank you for your time, insights, and commitment. Your active participation demonstrated the vibrancy and relevance of inclusive policy dialogue. Finally, to the IRSK secretariat and volunteers, your tireless efforts behind the scenes ensured the smooth running of the conference.

We look forward to building on this momentum as we prepare for the 2025 conference and continued collaborative engagement in advancing Africa's interests through diplomacy, scholarship, and civic participation.

Mr. Leonard Wanyama

CEO,

International Relations Society of Kenya





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The 2024 IRSK Conference Report is a compilation of policy and scholarly contributions, insights, and discussions presented during the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK) Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya between 20th - 22nd November 2024

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THE ORGANISERS



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



Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) – Kenya Office

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





CONFERENCE PARTNERS



























SESSION 1: OPENING SPEECHES AND REMARKS

Introductory Remarks

Mr. Leonard Wanyama,

CEO, International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, esteemed partners, practitioners, scholars, and students of international relations, on behalf of the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK), I take this opportunity to warmly welcome you to our second annual conference. It is an honour and privilege to gather with you once again as we deliberate on the theme: "Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy."

We are proud to co-host this important convening with our esteemed partners: the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD). We also welcome new partners joining us this year including the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at Wits University, the European Union (EU), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the East African Tax and Governance Network (EATGN), and the United Asian Network (UAN).

As a professional platform for individuals passionate about diplomacy, IRSK serves as a hub for exchange of ideas, networking, and collaborative initiatives aimed at enriching the understanding and practice of Kenyan foreign policy, linking academic theory to real-world experiences and pressing global issues. This gathering builds upon the momentum of other IRSK initiatives this year. Notably, we held a career mentorship forum for students at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in collaboration with the International Relations Students Association of Kenya (IRSAK); signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Nairobi's Department of Diplomacy and International Studies (DDIS); and entered a scholarship partnership with UNICAF to offer flexible, blended learning opportunities to our members.

These steps are part of a larger vision: to position IRSK as a central, credible actor within Kenya's foreign policy ecosystem by providing strategic direction, enhancing professional development, and promoting inclusive diplomacy.

Since our last conference, Kenya's international relations landscape has been marked by major developments: presidential visits, shifting diplomatic alignments, and increased scrutiny of foreign engagements. President Ruto's state visit to the United States, for example, was a landmark event. The growing discourse on Kenyan labor migration to Germany and other countries has also raised important questions about the nature of international cooperation, equity, and opportunity.

Additionally, Kenya's participation in global forums such as BRICS and engagements with multilateral organizations like the IMF has sparked domestic debates around sovereignty, transparency, and the future of international engagement. Notably, decisions around Kenya's police deployment to Haiti and public consultations on foreign policy, led by the Prime Cabinet Secretary and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Musalia Mudavadi, have signaled a new era of public involvement and accountability.

This evolution aligns with Kenya's 2010 Constitution, which enshrines the principles of public participation and inclusivity in governance. As such, the Kenyan diplomatic community must adapt to reflect these values, ensuring that foreign policy is not just an elite pursuit, but one that draws from and speaks to all Kenyans.

In response, IRSK seeks to play three pivotal roles.

First, we aim to offer constructive debate and impactful critique that strengthens democratic practice in foreign policy formulation. This will allow for bold, visionary thinking that responds to emerging global paradigms such as "African Renaissance," "Ubuntu," "America First," "World Majority," and "Multi-alignment."



Second, we strive to improve representation in diplomatic practice, championing open and parliamentary diplomacy that reflects Kenya's vibrant, pluralistic society and taps into its rich pool of human resources.

Third, and more practically, as Kenya prepares to host the 2025 COMESA Summit, this conference provides an important precursor. It will help us deepen our understanding of regional integration, African agency, democracy, peace and security, and the broader geopolitical forces shaping trade and cooperation in our region.

As we begin this important conference, I invite you all to think critically, engage constructively, and connect meaningfully. Let us use this forum to craft a new narrative for Kenyan diplomacy, one that is grounded, inclusive, and forward-looking.

With these few remarks, I warmly welcome you and wish you fruitful deliberations over the next three days.

I wish you fruitful deliberations. Thank you.







Welcome Remarks

Dr. Kizito Sabala (Ph.D.),Chair, 2024 IRSK Annual Conference

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my profound honour and privilege on behalf of the IRSK Organizing Committee, which includes COMESA, ACCORD, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation - Kenya, and the African Centre for the Study of the United States at the University of the Witwatersrand, to warmly welcome you to Nairobi, to Kenya, and indeed to Africa, for this year's conference.

Our theme, "Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy," reflects the critical role that diplomacy and international engagement must play in developing inclusive frameworks and collaborative approaches to regional development. This gathering underscores the power of dialogue and shared purpose in addressing the pressing challenges facing our continent.

The support and collaboration of our key partners, including UNICAF, and the contributions from our visionary institutional and private sector sponsors, speak volumes. They are a testament to our shared commitment to regional integration, cooperation, and collective action. This partnership highlights not only our mutual values but also our common vision for Africa's future.

Today, we are privileged to host a diverse and distinguished gathering of minds spanning academia, government, parliaments, the diplomatic corps, business, civil society, and the media. Most importantly, we have robust representation from women and youth. Their voices are integral to shaping forward-looking, sustainable solutions. Their presence ensures that our conversations reflect the full richness of the continent's talent and perspectives.

Allow me to recognize and celebrate a special group among us – young international relations scholars and early-career diplomats. As some of us prepare to exit the stage, it is inspiring to see the next generation of bright, capable men and women who are ready to lead Africa into the future. IRSK is committed to supporting this transition. A shining example is Dr. Winnie Rugutt, my colleague at the university, who is moderating today's session. Winnie, we are very proud of you!

As we begin our deliberations over the next three days, let us remember: the challenges we face are real and complex, but they are not insurmountable. Africa does not lack knowledge. It does not lack experience. What we do have is the determination and the will to overcome these obstacles, especially when we work together.

I encourage each of you to fully engage in these conversations. Challenge the existing paradigms. Offer solutions that are not only innovative but also actionable. This platform belongs to you – to shape the future of diplomacy, international relations, and regional integration.

I believe we will have critical conversations over the next few days on issues including trade, regional integration, peace and security, election management and mismanagement in Africa, and the growing role of external regional actors influencing our continent's diplomacy.

The conference tracks – international relations, diplomacy, and regional integration are not just academic points for discussion. They are a call to action. Through theoretical, empirical, and practical lenses, we will interrogate ideas, propose policy improvements, and explore instruments that can meaningfully advance integration and cooperation within the COMESA region.

The presentations we will hear are rooted in evidence-based research. Scholars and practitioners will speak to core themes such as democracy, governance, geopolitical competition, cyber security, and the role of technology in shaping modern diplomacy.



We will also explore emerging domains like environmental diplomacy, economic and cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and the increasingly vital area of digital diplomacy. Other areas of focus include harmonization of trade policies, infrastructure development, and social cohesion, key pillars of regional stability and prosperity.

Let me be clear: this conference is not just about identifying problems. It is also about celebrating progress. While we must confront the challenges before us, we must also recognize and build on the many strides already made. Let's not just lament the grey areas; instead, let us also highlight the significant achievements that have advanced governance, the rule of law, and regional cooperation.

Ultimately, this conference is about collective action. It is about the determination and commitment of all of us – scholars, policymakers, diplomats, and citizens – to build the Africa we want.

In closing, allow me to extend my deepest gratitude to our partners and sponsors who have made this gathering possible. I look forward to rich, thought-provoking, and action-oriented deliberations over the next three days.

Thank you very much.







Welcoming Remarks

Dr. Oita Etyang,

Head-Governance, Peace & Security,
Common Markets for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

Dear ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I join the International Relations Society of Kenya, the African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes to welcome you all to this Second Annual IRSK Conference. But before I get to the main business of the day, I bring you greetings from the Secretary General of COMESA, H. E Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe who has not been able to join us due to other pressing engagements. I also wish to take this opportunity to thank the Government and People of Kenya for hosting this conference and for the warm reception granted to all of us since we got here.

Today is a truly historic day for two reasons. First, we are celebrating 30 years of existence and 30 years of adding value to our region. Second, today also marks our second IRSK conference, which is fundamentally about fostering regional integration, particularly from a commercial perspective. The real question we must ask, especially among the think tanks, researchers, and experts assembled here, is how we can harness regional integration for the benefit of our people.

The region we are talking about comprises 21 member states, a population of around 640 million people, and a combined GDP of over one trillion US dollars. The core challenge before us is: how do we transform this immense market into tangible opportunities for our people? That is the central question we must address as we discuss the thematic areas of this conference. The founding vision of the action plan was clear: regional economic communities were meant to serve as the foundation for continental integration.

But now, as COMESA celebrates 30 years of existence, it is time to ask: how far have we come? How successful have we been in bringing our people together? We have a massive market and significant labor resources. With the tripartite agreement now in place, uniting SADC, EAC, and COMESA, how do we create opportunities here so that our people do not feel compelled to seek work in Germany, Tasmania, or the United States? We must harness our own value for our own good.

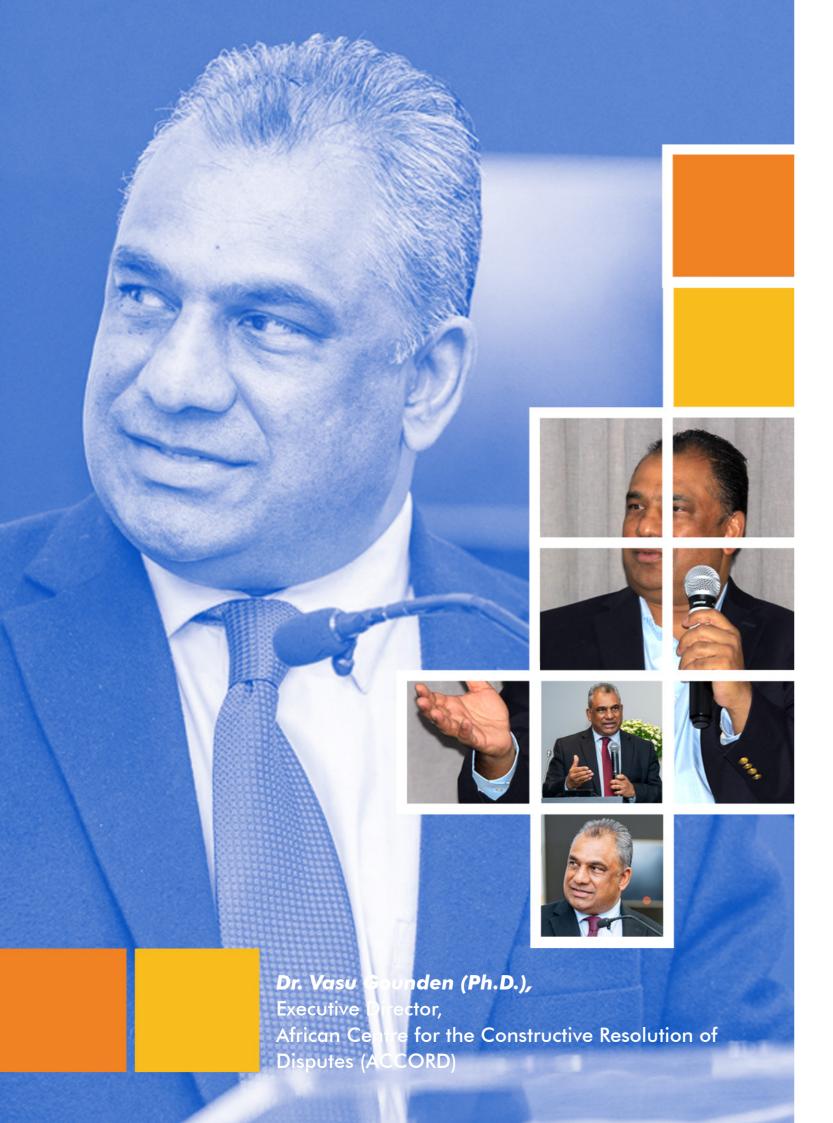
As we reflect on this conference, we must confront the persistent challenges that hinder not only the COMESA region but the entire continent. We must fix our governance, enhance interconnectivity, and remove unnecessary barriers like the \$30 visa fees between countries that should be working closely together. We must invest in infrastructure, facilitate the free movement of people, and, most importantly, silence the guns across our region. Only by addressing these issues can we truly unlock the potential for job creation and self-reliance among our youth.

While global leaders are strategizing, Africa must not lag behind. Our leaders may travel internationally, but how long will this continue without a clear, homegrown strategy? This conference should be a turning point, a moment for us as international relations and diplomacy experts to start shaping the debate in every circle we occupy. We must reposition Africa strategically as a force to be reckoned with.

We have every advantage: good weather, vast land, and brilliant human resources. So, why are we not moving to the next level? As practitioners gathered here, we need a paradigm shift in how we operate. Over the next three days, let us focus on producing actionable solutions, not just lamenting the problems and let us carry these solutions into the spaces where we can influence real change.

And with those few remarks, ladies, and gentlemen, I wish in conclusion to thank all you dear participants that have made time to join us and I look forward to fruitful deliberations.

Thank you very much.





Opening Remarks

Dr. Vasu Gounden (Ph.D.),

Executive Director,

African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is truly an honour to address you today at this Second Annual Conference of the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK). Let me begin by expressing my sincere appreciation to Mr. Leonard Wanyama, the CEO of IRSK, for the thoughtful leadership and continued partnership in advancing this vital initiative. It is also a pleasure to reconnect with my brother Dr. Oita Etyang from COMESA, and to acknowledge the presence of H.E. Jenny Da Rin and Ambassador Sebastian Groth, whose support and commitment to dialogue and diplomacy are deeply valued.

It's a privilege to stand before you again this year, following last year's conference. As I noted then, I've become increasingly concerned and admittedly, somewhat pessimistic about recent global developments. Today, I want to share three key reflections on why I believe we are entering a profoundly different era in international relations and diplomacy.

First, we are witnessing a global transition into a new era in international relations and diplomacy. One illustrative case is Western Europe, a region that, since the 1950s, had achieved a long and admirable period of peace. This peace was not accidental. It was built through decades of deliberate diplomacy and cooperation with the aim of making war not only unthinkable but virtually impossible. This success story was a product of robust international relations among European states, which prioritized dialogue, shared interests, and interdependence. However, recent developments and dynamics are affecting the long peace the continent has enjoyed since the 1950s.

Second, if we look back over the past three decades, the post-Cold War period was marked by great optimism and the emergence of a liberal peacebuilding paradigm. In 1990s, institutions like the United Nations intensified its diplomacy and peacebuilding role, thereby fostering diplomacy, dialogue and international cooperation. This was later mirrored by the development of the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture. This era created global interdependence intended to promote sustained peace and cooperation among nations. And, for the better part of two of those three decades, it seemed to be working. We saw the growth of global institutions, dialogue between nations, and shared frameworks of values. Many believed that globalization would usher in a new era of shared prosperity and reduced conflict.

However, that optimism is now fading. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has aptly described, the world is entering a new Zeitenwende – a turning point. This new era, unfortunately, is not defined by cooperation but by competition. Ambassador Sebastian Groth spoke about the importance of shared interests, and H.E. Jenny Da Rin emphasized building normative frameworks and a rules-based global order. But such frameworks were made possible by a values-based paradigm driven by cooperation. Today, that foundation is shifting. Where cooperation once drove diplomacy, competition is now taking centre stage. And competition, unlike cooperation, is driven by narrow interests rather than shared values.

Third, this transition into an interest-driven era leads us toward a more transactional global order. In a values-based system, diplomacy serves transformation, it uplifts societies, protects the vulnerable, and creates inclusive progress. In contrast, a purely interest-driven system results in transactional governance with deals that serve elites, empower billionaires, and marginalize the majority.

I fear that we are entering a prolonged phase – perhaps the next 20 years – defined by this competition. Relations between nations will be shaped less by shared humanity and more by strategic advantage. The consequences of such a paradigm shift are worrying. The gains of inclusive, transformative diplomacy risk being eroded.



Ironically, this shift comes at a time when we have the most advanced tools for communication and cooperation. Innovations in technology provide unprecedented opportunities for dialogue across borders. Cyberspace allows for real-time understanding, cultural exchange, and engagement in ways never imagined. Yet despite this, the world seems to be retreating into silos of self-interest.

This brings me to my central message today: we are at a crossroads. The global system is moving towards competition, transactionalism, and elitism. But the future is not predetermined. We must ask ourselves, as international relations practitioners, diplomats, scholars, and students: How do we reverse this trajectory? How can we return to a values-based international order—one founded on cooperation, dialogue, transformation, and inclusive governance? How can we reimagine diplomacy so that it addresses the needs of the marginalized and does not serve only the powerful?

If we do not act now, we risk entrenching a global system that benefits a small elite while the rest are left to struggle in a world increasingly defined by conflict, inequality, and disconnection. So the challenge I present to you today is this: What must we do to shift this paradigm? What practical steps can we take to build a cooperative and inclusive future?

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing your ideas and insights over the course of this important conference. Thank you.







Featured Address

Amb. Jenny Da Rin,

High Commissioner of Australia to Kenya

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great privilege to address this esteemed gathering, and I begin by acknowledging my friend and colleague, Sebastian Groth, Ambassador for Germany, as well as all diplomatic colleagues, government representatives, civil society leaders, and members of academic and professional institutions present here today. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK), my fellow speakers, and all of you in the audience for your participation in this important conference.

This event marks the first formal engagement between the Australian High Commission and IRSK, and we are genuinely pleased to partner with IRSK, ACCORD, and others in convening this dialogue. I was particularly encouraged to hear Leonard speak about the ambitions of IRSK. Similar platforms exist globally - including one in Australia - and I share the hope that IRSK will achieve its goals, because forums like this bring together the ecosystem of strategic thinkers in international relations. They expose us to diverse, vital voices that we might not otherwise hear, and remind us that the core of our work is finding common ground and refining the practice - the "tradecraft" of diplomacy. I invite everyone here to engage deeply, and I hope my fellow ambassadors and High Commissioners will join this journey.

Allow me to share Australia's perspective on the current landscape and our role, both regionally and globally. The world faces a convergence of challenges: conflict in Sudan, the Middle East, and Ukraine; the persistent threat of terrorism; economic uncertainty; the impacts of climate change exemplified by the ongoing COP29; growing humanitarian needs; and political pressures that test governments and communities worldwide. Australia, like Kenya and many others, is not immune to these pressures. In an interconnected world, distant developments can have profound consequences for our economies, societies, and national security. That is why Australia is committed to strengthening cooperation with regional and international partners to promote a stable and prosperous world.

Our foreign minister, Penny Wong, recently reiterated at the United Nations General Assembly that Australia's vision is for a world where no country dominates and no country is dominated – where disputes are managed through dialogue and the rule of law, not by force. Global trade, investment, and innovation are being reshaped by technology, which is increasingly a dimension of national power. The economic and supply chain challenges we face transitioning to net-zero economies, securing critical minerals, and harnessing technological advances are influenced by a global race for advantage, including in technology. Yet, these same technologies create new vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit.

As a long-standing advocate for open trade, investment, and innovation, Australia is adapting to ensure not only our own prosperity but also the integrity of the rules and norms that benefit us all. We recognize that solutions to these challenges require collective effort and partnerships with countries that share our commitment to peace, stability, and prosperity. Kenya is a vital partner in this regard, and more broadly, Africa holds immense significance for Australia and the world.

The numbers are compelling: by 2030, Africa is projected to have the world's largest workforce, and by 2060, its middle class is expected to exceed 1 billion, surpassing even India and China. Africa's growing economic and strategic importance is reflected in our expanding relationship, as we work together to address both the opportunities and challenges ahead.

It is for these reasons that Australia welcomed the African Union's membership in the G20, reflecting our belief that the global economy cannot thrive without Africa's full participation. We also support greater African representation in the United Nations, an organization Australia helped found and to which we remain the 11th largest contributor. While the UN is imperfect, we are dedicated to advancing its reform, particularly to amplify Africa's voice, including on the Security Council.



Our partnership with Africa is underpinned by shared strengths and values: a history of peacekeeping, support for democracy (including in new nations like South Sudan), and joint contributions to development in health and education. Both Australia and Africa are rich in critical minerals essential for the clean energy transition, a transition that will require a fivefold increase in mineral extraction by 2050. Whether mined in Australia, Africa, or elsewhere, these resources are vital for powering the future.

Australia is a global leader in extractive industries, with significant investments across Africa –over 300 projects and approximately 60 billion Australian dollars invested on the continent. Our companies are creating jobs, building capability, and fostering research, infrastructure, and economic growth. Here in Kenya, we are deepening bilateral ties: recent high-level visits and the signing of a memorandum of understanding have paved the way for enhanced cooperation across sectors, and we look forward to welcoming a Kenyan delegation to Australia next year.

In 2023 we held our inaugural senior official talks with the Kenyan government and signed a memorandum of understanding that sets the stage for enhanced cooperation across various sectors and we're looking forward to welcoming a Kenyan delegation to Australia next year for our next senior official talks.

As part of our partnership with IRSK, we will host a panel discussion tomorrow exploring the intersection of clean energy, international relations, supply chains, and partnerships, featuring experts from both Australia and East Africa. I warmly invite you to join us for what promises to be a stimulating conversation.

In closing, I thank you once again for your engagement and wish you productive discussions over the coming days. I look forward to our continued partnership in shaping a more secure, resilient, and prosperous future for all.

Thank you very much.







Keynote Speech

Amb. Sebastian Groth,

Ambassador of Germany to Kenya

Good morning everyone. I want to begin by recognizing Dr. Kizito Sabala, Mr. Leonard Wanyama, H.E. Jenny Da Rin, Dr. Vasu Goundan, and Dr. Oita Etyang, all the participants in this hall, and everyone who helped organize this important conference. I'm honored to be part of this distinguished gathering of foreign policy experts.

Looking through your ambitious three-day program, I am deeply impressed by the range of issues you intend to tackle. Having worked in policy planning in my ministry as the Director of Policy Planning, I know how vital independent and forward-looking perspectives are in shaping national strategies. Policy planning is the part of the ministry that tries to look ahead 5 to 10 years and bring fresh ideas into mainstream foreign policy discourse. The kind of work you do as academics, think tanks, and civil society actors is essential in that process.

The timing of this conference couldn't be more appropriate. Globally, we are confronted with several significant challenges: the outcome of the U.S. elections and its impact on global politics and Africa policy; the state of multilateralism, particularly the UN, and the rules-based international order; and of course, the devastating war in Ukraine, which reached its thousandth day yesterday.

Russia's aggression has upended the security architecture we've built in Germany and Europe over the past 30 years. Meanwhile, the Middle East faces ongoing humanitarian crises and terrorism, with no resolution in sight. Europe is grappling with its own political upheavals - right-wing populism, difficult coalition politics, and growing polarization. Domestic politics are increasingly shaping foreign policy, especially in migration debates, where xenophobic rhetoric is moving from the fringes into the mainstream, thereby affecting policymaking.

Turning to this region, we face complex situations in Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, where humanitarian crises are worsening. Kenya plays a crucial role in regional peacebuilding, whether through AMISOM's successor arrangements, the Tumaini Initiative, or mediation efforts in eastern DRC. These regional conflicts underscore the need for multilateral cooperation and robust diplomacy.

Beyond crises, structural challenges like artificial intelligence, climate change, and energy transition demand urgent and coordinated global responses. We are already beyond the 1.5-degree climate threshold, and our future prosperity depends on managing the trade-off between growth and environmental impact.

Germany is committed to upholding the multilateral order. We recently adopted our first-ever National Security Strategy and invested €100 billion in strengthening our defense, including our Bundeswehr and armament industries. This shift in policy, our "Zeitenwende" or "turning point", was triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It marks a broader reorientation in foreign, economic, and tech policy as well.

Kenya has stood with Germany and many other allies in calling out Russia's actions. We deeply appreciate your principled position and leadership. Yet, amidst these grim global realities, I also want to highlight the great potential in the Germany-Kenya and broader Europe-Africa relationship. Our shared history is complex, shaped by colonialism, but we now have a shared future built on partnership, not paternalism. With Kenya's dynamic, youthful population and Germany's aging society, there is great potential for complementary collaboration.

Germany was the first country to recognize Kenya's independence in 1963, and we've maintained a strong development partnership for over 60 years. We recently signed a new two-year development cooperation program worth €150 million, focusing on agriculture, youth and employment, and climate and energy. Governance will be a cross-cutting theme, reflecting both demand and need.



However, the traditional donor-recipient relationship is outdated. Kenya is a strong regional and global actor. We must move toward a joint agenda rooted in shared values — multilateralism, human rights, digital innovation, and climate action. We are working together on the UN Pact for the Future and believe in inclusive global governance.

One promising example of our evolving cooperation is the recently signed Labor Migration and Mobility Agreement between Kenya and Germany. It's a win-win actually for both countries and their citizens. Germany needs between 250,000 and 400,000 workers annually. Kenya produces nearly a million job seekers each year. This agreement opens up opportunities for trained Kenyans in areas like nursing, hospitality, and transportation without triggering a brain drain. We are not looking to recruit Kenya's few heart surgeons, but we do welcome bus drivers, cooks, and other skilled workers. We're already seeing a 20–30% increase in visa applications, and we're working to scale up support through close cooperation with the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.

To conclude, I encourage you to reflect on the German-Kenyan partnership as a model for equitable, interest-based North–South cooperation. Let's build on this foundation to create joint political agendas, and not just development programs. That's why we see so many German delegations coming to Kenya. Our Vice Chancellor and Minister of Economic Affairs will visit next week, following visits by the Chancellor and Foreign Minister. President Ruto and Chancellor Scholz have met seven times in the past two years – a clear signal of the strength of our relationship.

Thank you again for the invitation. I wish you fruitful discussions, bold thinking, and continued success in your important work.







Keynote Speech

Government of Kenva

Hon. Beatrice Askul Moe,
Cabinet Secretary, East African Affairs,
Arid and Semi-Arid Lands and Regional Development,

The Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Kenya, H.E. Sebastian Groth, the Australian High Commissioner to Kenya, H.E. Jenny Da Rin, Chief Executive Officer of the International Relations Society of Kenya, Mr. Leonard Wanyama, corporate partners and executives of supporting organizations, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to join you at this important gathering to deliberate on a subject that forms the foundation of economic and social transformation in our region – regional integration and cooperation.

The COMESA region remains a key trading bloc for Kenya and serves as a model for free trade arrangements on the African continent. The success of trade within the COMESA framework has not only stimulated production and manufacturing but has also strengthened diplomatic and economic ties among member states. Kenya is privileged to be a member of both the COMESA Free Trade Area and the East African Community (EAC). The EAC mirrors COMESA in many ways, with seven out of its eight partner states also belonging to COMESA. These two regional blocs therefore share common objectives: to foster economic growth, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable development across the region.

As a leading economic bloc in the continent, the EAC has established best practices and foundational pillars that have propelled its integration success. One of its core achievements has been the deepening of policy harmonization, leading to the creation of a single market for goods and services. The Customs Union, in particular, has facilitated the free movement of goods across borders on duty-free and quota-free terms. This has significantly increased trade volumes and expanded intra-regional commerce. Trade facilitation mechanisms such as the Single Customs Territory, the Integrated Customs Management System, the operationalization of One Stop Border Posts, and the Single Window System have collectively reduced the time and cost of cross-border trade by up to 79%. These innovations underscore the region's commitment to efficiency and seamless trade.

The EAC has also implemented the Common Market Protocol over the past 14 years. This protocol supports the free movement of goods, persons, labour, services, and capital, and guarantees the right of establishment and residence. The result has been an expansion of economic opportunities across member states, spurring intra-regional investment, opening markets, and enabling greater mobility for citizens to explore work and business prospects. Thanks to these efforts, local businesses are scaling across borders, delivering much-needed solutions, creating wealth, and deepening the welfare benefits among partner states. The success of the Common Market is also supported by shared physical infrastructure. The region benefits from two major transport corridors – Northern and Central – with partner states enjoying harmonized transit laws that enhance trade flow and connectivity.

However, these achievements have not come without challenges. Persistent and longstanding non-tariff barriers have hampered the realization of a truly functional Customs Union. Additionally, some partner states remain partially non-compliant with their obligations under the free movement of services, often enacting laws and administrative measures that restrict service providers. Another challenge is the slow implementation of policy directives and decisions by regional organs, which has delayed the pace of integration. Despite these hurdles, the recent expansion of the EAC to include two new partner states in the past two years demonstrates the bloc's commitment to deepening integration and cooperation.

Moving forward, it is critical that we strengthen mechanisms to eliminate barriers to trade and investment, so we can maximize the benefits of integration. Each member's commitment will be instrumental in advancing not only COMESA's regional goals but also those of the broader continent. Our shared objective remains clear: to connect our communities and unlock inclusive prosperity for all.

As I conclude, I wish to commend the International Relations Society of Kenya for organizing this timely platform to further the discussion on regional integration and cooperation. In this regard, this conference provides the ideal setting to explore actionable ideas. I trust that the discussions will offer valuable insights, build strong networks, and advance our collective understanding of diplomacy, cooperation, and shared progress.

It is now my pleasure to officially declare the International Relations Society of Kenya's 2024 Annual Conference officially open.

Thank you very much.







HIGH-LEVEL OPENING PANEL

Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy

This panel session brought together a distinguished group of diplomats, leaders, policymakers, scholars and experts dedicated to advancing regional cooperation and integration within the COMESA region. The discussions focused on harnessing diplomacy and international relations to strengthen integration, drive sustainable development, and develop unified strategies for addressing regional challenges. Through shared insights and collaborative efforts, panelists explored innovative approaches to enhancing trade, promoting political cohesion, and unlocking economic potential across member states, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and interconnected regional community.

Moderator

Dr. Winnie Rugutt, Lecturer, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Panelists

Dr. Dr. Kizito Sabala, Chairman, 2024 IRSK Annual Conference

Mr. Leonard Wanyama, CEO, International Relations Society of Kenya

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head-Governance, Peace and Security, COMESA

Key Interventions

Dr. Kizito Sabala underscored that regional integration is not merely a bureaucratic ambition but is a critical vehicle for asserting Africa's agency in global affairs. He noted that Africa's colonial-era borders continue to impede the continent's growth by limiting connectivity, trade, and cooperation among nations. While regional economic communities such as COMESA have made notable progress in developing legal frameworks, institutions, and norms to advance integration, Africa still faces a stark implementation gap. He further noted that Africa's political leadership must rise to the occasion and champion concrete, sustained actions that translate vision into progress. According to Dr. Sabala, the inability to translate policy into action is rooted in weak political will, underperforming leadership, and an overdependence on external actors. He called for a renewed political commitment across African states to move beyond summits and communiqués and instead focus on tangible progress such as increased intra-African trade, local industrial development, and shared infrastructure. Integration, he argued, must be operationalized in ways that enhance Africa's economic sovereignty and reduce fragmentation

On his part Dr. Oita Etyang framed regional integration as a pragmatic strategy rooted in collective interests and interdependence. He highlighted that integration is not just an abstract goal but a necessary approach to tackling shared political, economic, and social challenges. However, he highlighted the missed opportunities across the region by failing to invest in domestic industries, reflecting on Africa's importation of even basic goods as a symptom of weak productive capacity. He observed that private sector needs to be more involved in regional integration by building stronger economic and trade linkages. In his view, peace is both a prerequisite for and a product of deeper integration. Drawing attention to the disconnect between peace and trade interventions, he warned against siloed approaches to trade, peace, and development, urging a holistic view that integrates all sectors. Dr. Oita also emphasized the need to shift from overreliance on donor-funded peace efforts to locally-owned solutions, and to ensure that policies lead to visible improvements in people's lives.

Mr. Leonard Wanyama grounded the conversation in everyday realities through a compelling grassroots perspective, argued that integration must be human-centered, enabling everyday mobility, trade, and interaction. Mr. Wanyama emphasized that regional integration is already unfolding informally through the lived experiences of ordinary Africans, from hawkers and small-scale traders to students and entrepreneurs. He cited the example of East African traders and families engaging in commerce, education, and cultural exchange as a testament to the organic integration taking place outside official corridors. However, he warned that policymakers often overlook these dynamics and instead focus on abstract visions and frameworks that fail to address logistical constraints like infrastructure, customs bottlenecks, and policy inconsistency. He called for a bottom-up approach to integration – one that supports local entrepreneurs, strengthens regional value chains, and fosters inclusive, citizen-led cooperation. For Wanyama, real integration is practical, not theoretical – it thrives on action, not declarations.

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Key Takeaways

1. Regional Integration Must Be People-Centered and Action-Oriented

While institutional frameworks and regional treaties exist, integration efforts must prioritize tangible benefits for citizens. Everyday cross-border exchanges through trade, education, and migration are already facilitating integration from the ground up. Policies should build on these lived experiences by removing practical barriers and enhancing mobility and trade infrastructure.

2. Peace and Integration Are Mutually Reinforcing

Peace is not merely a precondition for integration; it is also an outcome of shared interests and deepened cooperation. The panel emphasized the need to link peacebuilding efforts with economic development and regional trade strategies to ensure sustainable and inclusive integration processes.

3. Implementation and Leadership Gaps Are Hindering Progress

Despite having strong normative frameworks and regional visions, implementation remains weak. The panel called for renewed political will, stronger leadership, and greater engagement of non-state actors – particularly the private sector – to translate policies into real change. Closing the gap between commitment and action is essential for advancing COMESA's integration goals





LAUNCH OF 2023 IRSK CONFERENCE PAPERS

Launch of ACCORD Journal Special Edition and COMESA BOOK

The plenary session unveiled a collection of research papers that were presented during the 2023 IRSK Annual Conference and have now been published by COMESA and ACCORD. The book published by COMESA is titled "Regional Integration in an Era of Polycrisis and Geostrategic Competition in COMESA." The second publication is a special issue of the African Journal on Conflict Resolution (AJCR), which was published by ACCORD. The papers delved into critical issues facing the region, offering in-depth exploration of challenges, opportunities, and innovative solutions to foster regional integration, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. Reflecting the collaborative spirit and intellectual rigor of the conference community, these publications brought together diverse perspectives to enrich policy dialogues and inspire future research. The launch marked not only a notable scholarly achievement but also a meaningful step toward actionable impact within the region.

Moderato

Dr. Andrea Prah - Senior Researcher, ACCORD

Panelists

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head, Governance, Peace and Security Unit, COMESA

Ms. Elizabeth Mutunga, Coordinator, APSA, COMESA and Co-Editor, AJEN Special Edition

Dr. Kizito Sabala, Senior Lecturer, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Key Interventions

Dr. Oita Etyang emphasized the importance of documenting and disseminating knowledge on regional integration in Eastern and Southern Africa. He introduced the COMESA book, "Regional Integration in an Era of Polycrisis and Geostrategic Competition in COMESA," as a platform for scholars to contribute African-centered analyses on integration frameworks, legal instruments, and branding of regional agendas. He highlighted the underproduction of scholarly works in East Africa and called for a deliberate culture of writing that reflects African realities and aspirations. The book, according to Dr. Etyang, aims to preserve historical memory, foster academic exchange, and inspire future generations to write, publish, and shape discourse from within the region. He also supported a suggestion from the plenary for Africans to set up more publishing houses so as to give scholars on the continent more platforms for publications. He praised IRSK, ACCORD, and COMESA for creating space for scholarly work and encouraged young scholars to take advantage of these opportunities. Urging action, he called on senior scholars with PhDs to mentor emerging researchers and commit to co-authoring at least one publication together by the end of the conference, reinforcing the importance of intergenerational academic collaboration.

Dr. Kizito Sabala provided insights into the academic publication process, stressing that publishing is an iterative journey that applies equally to junior and senior scholars. He reassured aspiring writers that rejection is part of the process and should be embraced as an opportunity for growth. Dr. Sabala highlighted the need for focus, resilience, and responsiveness to editorial feedback, emphasizing that only through quality peer review and thematic alignment can academic work attain global visibility and credibility. He underscored IRSK's commitment to taking conference papers to the next level, ensuring they are not only published, but also indexed and accessible, thus contributing to the collective intellectual wealth of the continent. Dr. Sabala emphasized the importance of timeliness in academic publishing, noting that delays from both editors and authors can render research outdated by the time it reaches publication. He called for mutual responsibility – editors should provide prompt feedback, and authors should remain current and responsive in revising their work. Timely revisions should also reflect ongoing developments in the field to maintain relevance.

Ms. Elizabeth Munga spoke on the special edition of the African Journal on Conflict Resolution (AJCR), which features peace and security research stemming from the IRSK conference. She introduced four key papers that examine topics ranging from regional interventions in the DRC to conflict dynamics in Ethiopia, insurgency in Mozambique, and regime transitions in COMESA member states. On a personal note, Ms. Munga noted the persistent challenge of finding African-authored works during her PhD research and stressed the importance of writing for future scholars. She also reflected on the importance of collaboration, contextual relevance, and the use of research to shape not just academic debate but also policy and practice. She acknowledged that for research from the IRSK conference to meaningfully influence policy and attract sustainable funding, it must be timely, high-

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quality, and strategically disseminated, both through efficient publication processes and deliberate engagement by COMESA with member states to ensure research informs regional decision-making. Her call to action was clear: African scholars must write, publish, and amplify their voices to reshape global narratives.

Key Takeaways

1. Africa Must Write its Own Story

All speakers emphasized the need for African scholars to produce and publish research that reflects the continent's realities. Without African-authored knowledge, global narratives on issues like regional integration, peace, and security remain biased or incomplete.

2. The Publication Process is Demanding but Rewarding

The journey from presentation to publication requires resilience, revision, and engagement with peer review. Speakers demystified the process and encouraged young scholars to embrace constructive criticism as part of academic growth.

3. Research Must Be Accessible and Actionable

For research to have real impact, it must be widely disseminated through online platforms, institutional support, and strategic outreach. Uptake by policymakers, educators, and other researchers is crucial to turning knowledge into change.

4. Mentorship and Collaboration are Essential

Senior scholars with PhDs were encouraged to mentor young researchers and co-author papers with them, promoting knowledge transfer and building a stronger scholarly community.

5. Institutionalization of Research-to-Policy Linkages

There was a strong recommendation from the plenary for COMESA to establish a formal mechanism to ensure that research outputs and policy recommendations from the IRSK conference are shared with, and utilized by, member state governments.

6. Regionalization of the IRSK Conference

The IRSK platform, while initially Kenyan, is evolving into a significant regional forum. There is a proposal to elevate it further by organizing follow-up engagements such as regional workshops to present research findings directly to policymakers across the COMESA region.



PEACE AND SECURITY PANEL 1

Navigating Regional Stability and Security Challenges in Eastern and Central Africa: Examining Peace Architectures, Ethnic Dynamics, and Political Risk.

This thought-provoking session dissected the intricacies surrounding the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) deployment in the conflict-ridden eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Despite its noble aspirations to secure peace and stability, the intervention has encountered formidable challenges, prompting a critical examination of its effectiveness. Moreover, EACRF's deployment introduces an additional layer of complexity given the presence of MONUSCO. In essence, the session navigates through the multifaceted challenges, casting a critical lens on the viability and impact of the EACRF intervention in the pursuit of lasting peace and stability in the eastern DRC.

Moderator

Dr. John Mwangi Githigaro, Senior Research Fellow, Mashariki Research and Policy Centre

Panelists

Prof. Kasaija Phillip Apuuli, Professor, Makerere University, Uganda

Mr. Muhindo Vyalirendi Jacques, Doctoral Candidate, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Dr. Dan N. Odaba, Executive Director, Institute for Economics and Peace, Kenya

Dr. Kizito Sabala, Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Ms. Berita Musau, Doctoral Fellow, Strathmore University, Kenya

Discussant

Dr. Jonathan Ang'ani Omucheshi, Lecturer, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

Key Interventions

One of the central discussions focused on the transition from the East African Community (EAC) Regional Force to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission in the DRC. Presented by Mr. Jacques Muhindo and Dr. Kizito Sabala, the analysis highlighted the consequences of the EAC's withdrawal in December 2023. This vacuum quickly led to the resurgence of armed groups, casting doubt on the sustainability of external peacekeeping interventions. Although SADC's intervention promised a more offensively postured approach, it has faced considerable skepticism. Insecurity in eastern DRC has been compounded by external actors – particularly Rwanda and Uganda – whose alleged support for proxy groups such as the M23 has further destabilized the region. While the SADC mission draws on past experience such as its 2012–2013 operations against M23, presenters argued that the current context is far more complex and entrenched. These challenges, the panelists concluded, necessitate a fundamental reevaluation of African-led peace operations and the assumptions underpinning them.

Offering an alternative perspective, Dr. Dan Odaba of the Institute for Economics and Peace introduced the concept of "positive peace" as a more sustainable model for stability. Unlike "negative peace," which merely denotes the absence of violence, positive peace emphasizes the systemic conditions such as good governance, equitable resource distribution, and investment in human capital that foster resilient societies. Using the Global Peace Index (GPI), Dr. Odaba illustrated the stark contrast between conflict-affected nations like South Sudan and the DRC and more peaceful countries such as Finland and Denmark. He urged multilateral actors and African governments to move beyond reactive, militarized peacekeeping models and adopt a proactive, evidence-based framework grounded in the eight pillars of positive peace.

In a related presentation, Ms. Berita Musau offered a critical examination of the failures of liberal peacebuilding in South Sudan. Her analysis focused on how ethnic divisions, patriarchal structures, and militarization have consistently undermined efforts to build durable peace. The 2018 revitalized peace agreement, while more inclusive than its 2015 predecessor, remains largely unimplemented—particularly in the areas of transitional justice and institutional reform. Musau argued that liberal peacebuilding has repeatedly rewarded armed actors while excluding women, youth, and civil society. She advocated for a hybrid peacebuilding model that blends formal institutional mechanisms with grassroots reconciliation efforts.

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Professor Kasaija Phillip Apuuli provided a sobering assessment of the peace and security architecture within the EAC, attributing its ineffectiveness to institutional weaknesses, overlapping regional memberships, and the failure to adequately engage with intractable conflict environments. He pointed out that mechanisms such as the EAC Panel of Eminent Persons and regional early-warning systems have lacked both political authority and operational capacity. The disintegration of the EAC Regional Force in the DRC, the elite-centric approach of IGAD's mediation efforts in South Sudan, and the fragile ATMIS transition in Somalia all serve as evidence of systemic dysfunction. Professor Philip warned against the continued reliance on liberal peacebuilding templates, which often result in bloated institutions without addressing the underlying drivers of conflict.

Key Takeaways

1. Regional Peacekeeping Models Are Insufficient Without Local Ownership and Accountability

The transition from EAC to SADC missions in the DRC revealed serious limitations in externally driven peacekeeping operations, particularly when they lack host-state support, regional coherence, or sustainable funding. Speakers emphasized the need for peace models that prioritize local agency and regional accountability, rather than relying on reactive, militarized interventions.

2. A Shift Toward Positive Peace and Hybrid Frameworks is Essential for Sustainable Stability

The session strongly advocated for moving beyond the liberal peacebuilding model. Positive peace that is rooted in strong institutions, equitable governance, and social resilience offers a more sustainable alternative. Hybrid models that combine formal processes with community-led reconciliation are better suited to Africa's complex sociopolitical landscapes.

3. Structural and Political Barriers Must Be Addressed to Strengthen Regional Peace Architectures

Presenters identified overlapping regional memberships, weak institutions, and the political manipulation of peace processes as major impediments. The failures of the EAC in the DRC, IGAD in South Sudan, and ATMIS in Somalia highlight the urgent need for reforming peace infrastructures to respond more effectively to dynamic and entrenched conflicts.

AFRICA AGENCY PANEL

The Role of International Relations and Diplomacy in Achieving African Agency in a Changing Global Order.

This session explored Africa's evolving agency in global affairs amid renewed great power interest often likened to a new "scramble" for the continent. Drawing from historical, diplomatic, and institutional perspectives, the panel examined how Africa engages global actors such as China, the U.S., Russia, BRICS nations, and the Middle East. Presentations highlighted both the formal role of institutions like the African Union and COMESA, and informal networks of non-state actors in shaping Africa's diplomatic positioning. Discussions critically reflected on the challenges posed by colonial legacies, internal regional tensions, and limited analytical frameworks. The session emphasized the need for stronger, unified African diplomacy, more strategic engagement with global powers, and deeper analysis of African agency as both a concept and a practice in international relations.

Moderator

Mr. Lweendo Kambela, Doctoral Fellow, University of Tasmania, Australia

Panelists

Prof. Macharia Munene, Professor, United States International University-Africa, Kenya

Dr. Edson Ziso, Lecturer, University of Adelaide, Australia

Mr. Leonard Wanyama, CEO, IRSK

Discussant

Dr. Stephen Singo Mwachofi, Lecturer, University of Nairobi

Key Interventions

Mr. George Ngoha, a peace and security researcher from the University of Nairobi, emphasized the critical role of African youth in shaping agency. Mr. Ngoha noted that youth are often framed as either victims or problems, yet their influence is undeniable, citing Kenya's protests, which forced IMF policy adjustments. With Africa's youth being the demographic majority, their role in markets, governance, and peace is pivotal. However, engagement remains superficial, often reduced to tokenism in forums. Mr. Ngoha questioned whether African leaders intentionally empower youth beyond symbolic inclusion, stressing that meaningful participation is key to sustainable change. He highlighted the paradox of youth being both political tools and drivers of progress, urging leaders to move beyond rhetoric and foster genuine youth agency in policymaking.

Dr. Edson Ziso, an international relations scholar, argued that while Africa is increasingly visible in global diplomacy because of institutions like the African Union (AU) and COMESA, African agency remains either underestimated or overgeneralized. He highlighted the disconnect between African governments and citizens, using Kenya's protests as a case study. While Kenyan youth successfully resisted unpopular policies, he noted that many African leaders ignore public dissent, ruling as minorities over majorities. He criticized non-state actors, who often foreign, of exploiting Africa's resources through elite collusion. For real agency, Dr. Ziso argued, African leadership must align with grassroots demands rather than external interests. The youth's rising political consciousness, Dr. Ziso suggested, could bridge this gap, but only if governance shifts from exclusionary to participatory. He called for greater analytical specificity to understand how African actors shape and are shaped by global interactions.

Professor Macharia Munene, a politics lecturer, critically examined Africa's place in a shifting world order. He warned of sovereignty erosion, citing Kenya's mismanagement of national assets due to external influence. The youth, he argued, must challenge dependency and debt-driven policies. Prof. Munene criticized African leaders for prioritizing foreign validation over local expertise, recalling a failed consultant exposed by a former classmate. He stressed that true agency requires self-interpretation, asking, "Who defines Africa's interests?" Historical colonial legacies, he noted, still shape external perceptions, making intellectual liberation urgent. Prof. Munene urged youth to lead accountability efforts, as they bear the long-term consequences of today's decisions.

Mr. Leonard Wayama, from the International Relations Society of Kenya, focused on Africa's lack of a cohesive foreign policy doctrine. Mr. Wayama critiqued Kenya's vague "Look East, Look West" approach, arguing that African nations lack confidence in

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defining their global stance. Drawing from Kenya's youth-led protests, he noted a growing demand for dignity in governance, which should extend to foreign policy. Mr. Wayama proposed a "Pax Savannah" doctrine, urging African intellectuals to lead in crafting a strategic vision. He highlighted Kenya's pride in athletics and agriculture but lamented the absence of intellectual rigor in diplomacy. For true agency, he argued, Africa must articulate its own doctrines rather than relying on external frameworks. In a passionate reflection on the panel discussion, Dr. Stephen Singo Mwachofi emphasized that Africa cannot be discussed without centering youth, who are often viewed as tools of violence, victims, or economic markets. Dr. Mwachofi challenged the idea that exporting youth for menial jobs abroad is a sustainable solution, instead calling for real empowerment. He also questioned Kenya's lack of a national doctrine, arguing that without the means to implement one due to factors such as debt and corruption, it remains an abstract idea. Citing historical figures like Muammar Gaddafi, he advocated for African self-sufficiency and criticized Kenya's loss of production capacity, from agriculture to manufacturing, due to poor governance and misplaced priorities.

Key Takeaways

1. Rethinking African Agency

Africa's growing role in global diplomacy is frequently acknowledged but poorly understood. African agency is often underestimated or generalized, underscoring the need for detailed, context-specific analysis of how African actors engage with and influence global power dynamics.

2. The Dual Role of Institutions and Networks

Both formal institutions like the AU and COMESA and informal non-state networks are central to exercising African agency. Understanding their interplay is crucial for enhancing Africa's strategic position and capacity to navigate external influences effectively.

3. Overcoming Historical and Regional Divides

Colonial legacies and intra-African tensions such as regional frictions remain major obstacles to unity and collective agency. Bridging these divides is essential for building a coherent African front in global negotiations and partnerships.

4. Diplomacy as a Development Tool

African states must align foreign policy with development priorities by building strong diplomatic narratives and governance frameworks. Strategic, pragmatic engagement with global powers can help Africa shape outcomes rather than merely respond to them.

5. Youth as Catalysts for Change

African youth are a demographic and political force, capable of influencing policies (e.g., Kenyan protests impacting IMF reforms), but their inclusion remains tokenistic in many spaces.

6. Sovereignty vs. External Dependency

African leaders often prioritize foreign approval over local needs, risking sovereignty. Intellectual and economic self-reliance is critical to breaking cycles of exploitation.



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SESSION 4

DIPLOMACY PANEL

The Role of Diplomacy in Advancing Sustainable Development, Regional Integration, and Gender Inclusion in Africa

This session explored how diplomacy can be reimagined to advance sustainable development, regional integration, and gender inclusion in Africa. Discussions emphasized the underrepresentation of women in diplomatic roles and the need for structural reforms and affirmative action. Environmental diplomacy was presented through the lens of the blue economy, stressing the importance of integrated strategies, data systems, and regional coordination. The transformative potential of digital diplomacy was also highlighted, alongside the challenges of access, disinformation, and generational divides. The session concluded with a call for research that probes deeper power dynamics beyond surface-level representation, encouraging critical approaches that illuminate the ideological and structural forces shaping African diplomacy today.

Moderato

Mr. Moronge Obonyo, Lecturer, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Panelists

Mr. Peterson Waweru, MA Student, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Shem Siteki, PhD Candidate, United States International University-Africa, Kenya

Ms. Vumile Mncibi, Lecturer, University of Zululand, South Africa

Discussant

Dr. Daniel Oloo Ong'ong'a, Lecturer, Mt. Kenya University, Kenya

Key Interventions

The first speaker, Ms. Vumile Mncibi, a scholar from the University of Zululand, South Africa, presented a paper on global governance and gender equality. She critiqued global governance structures for reproducing patriarchal inequalities, particularly in diplomatic spaces where women remain underrepresented. With only 21% of ambassadors globally being women, and a mere 9% of peace negotiators, the paper emphasized the systemic nature of exclusion. While South Africa has made legal strides through frameworks such as the Promotion of Equality Act, gaps remain, especially in research and practical implementation. Ms. Mncibi proposed a standalone national diplomacy framework for women, supported by affirmative action, to ensure meaningful representation and participation in foreign policy and peacebuilding processes.

The second panelist, Mr. Peterson Waweru, from the University of Nairobi, focused on environmental diplomacy and the blue economy within the COMESA region. The blue economy was framed as a critical contributor to future African prosperity, encompassing fisheries, ocean governance, and maritime trade. Yet, the continent faces challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and fragmented national policies. Mr. Waweru emphasized the need for integrated strategies, robust data systems for resource accounting, and greater stakeholder engagement, especially among coastal communities. COMESA, as a regional bloc, was encouraged to play a coordinating role in harmonizing policy and mobilizing resources for environmental diplomacy.

The third presenter, Mr. Shem Siteki, a PhD candidate from USIU-Africa, examined digital diplomacy in the context of COMESA. His research highlighted how digital tools such as social media and hybrid conferencing have transformed regional diplomacy by enabling broader public engagement and faster coordination. However, several obstacles persist: disinformation, unequal internet access, cybersecurity threats, and generational gaps in technology use. COMESA was commended for its active online presence on platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, but was also encouraged to expand into youth-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The speaker recommended investments in data analytics and capacity building to make digital diplomacy more effective and inclusive.

The session concluded with commentary from the discussant, Dr. Daniel Oloo Ong'ong'a, a lecturer at Mount Kenya University. Dr. Ong'ong'a offered reflections on each presentation, raising questions on whether increased female representation in diplomacy would alter peace outcomes, and how extractive industries align with environmental diplomacy goals. On digital diplomacy,

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she noted the tension between media narratives and state control, referencing the "CNN Effect." He challenged researchers to go beyond representation and media amplification, urging them to use critical discourse analysis to uncover deeper power dynamics in regional diplomacy. The audience engagement that followed reinforced themes of structural change, sustainability, mentorship, and African success stories in diplomacy and environmental innovation.

Key Takeaways

1. Gender Inclusion Requires Structural Change

Achieving true gender inclusion in diplomacy goes beyond representation. It requires institutional reforms, targeted policies, and affirmative action to dismantle patriarchal barriers. Legal frameworks must be strengthened to ensure women participate meaningfully in decision-making, especially in peace processes and foreign policy negotiations across Africa.

2. The Blue Economy Needs Integrated Governance

A thriving blue economy in Africa demands more than national strategies – it requires regional coordination. COMESA must harmonize member states' priorities, facilitate data-driven planning, and involve coastal and inland communities. Balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability is critical for long-term environmental diplomacy and marine resource management.

3. Digital Diplomacy Demands Innovation

Digital tools offer unprecedented potential for inclusive diplomacy, yet their effectiveness depends on innovation and equitable access. COMESA and similar bodies must bridge generational and technological divides, combat misinformation, and expand digital presence across platforms to better engage citizens and support regional integration.

4. Research Must Uncover Power Dynamics

Beyond visible diplomatic outcomes, scholars must interrogate underlying power structures that shape global and regional governance. Critical discourse analysis can reveal how media, policy narratives, and institutional frameworks perpetuate inequality. This deeper understanding is essential to designing inclusive, effective, and contextually grounded diplomatic strategies.



PEACE AND SECURITY PANEL 2

Institutionalising Wisdom:The Role of the Panels/Councils in Peace-making in Africa

The session, which launched ACCORD's monograph Africa Dialogue: Institutionalizing Wisdom – The Role of Panels and Councils in Peacemaking, explored the critical role of regional and continental panels in African peacebuilding. Panelists highlighted the importance of institutionalizing traditional wisdom, strengthening structural and financial autonomy, and ensuring grassroots integration. Emphasis was placed on transforming these bodies from symbolic institutions into proactive mechanisms capable of preventive diplomacy and long-term conflict resolution across the continent.

Moderator

Dr. Andrea Prah, Senior Researcher, ACCORD

Panelist

Ms. Katharine Bebington, Researcher, ACCORD

Prof Tim Murithi, Head of Programme – Peacebuilding Interventions, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, South Africa

Dr. Festus Aubyn, Senior Research Fellow, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), Ghana

Prof Kasaija Apuuli, Professor, Makerere University, Uganda

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head, Governance, Peace and Security, COMESA

Key Interventions

Ms. Katherine Bebington opened the dialogue by positioning the monograph as part of ACCORD's broader commitment to strengthening African peacemaking infrastructures. She explained that the publication draws from five case studies, covering the African Union (AU) Panel of the Wise, YouthWise (the AU's youth mediation network), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Panel of Elders, the East African Community (EAC) Panel of Eminent Persons, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Council of the Wise. Katherine highlighted how these institutions embed African traditions of elder mediation into formal governance structures. Despite their potential, these mechanisms often suffer from implementation gaps, resource constraints, and low visibility in public discourse.

Professor Tim Murithi offered a detailed critique of the AU Panel of the Wise, established in 2007. Positioned as an independent body capable of undertaking preventive diplomacy, the Panel has engaged in quiet mediation in complex conflicts such as those in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. However, Murithi lamented the structural weaknesses undermining its impact—most notably, the absence of a dedicated secretariat, budget, and systematic engagement with civil society and think tanks. He argued that the Panel is often eclipsed by more politicized organs like the AU Peace and Security Council. To enhance its effectiveness, Murithi recommended granting the Panel financial and operational autonomy, fostering linkages with African research institutions, and increasing public awareness of its work to legitimize its interventions.

Dr. Festus Aubyn discussed the ECOWAS Council of the Wise, a body recently revived but still constrained by political dependencies. He pointed to the Council's role in mediating the Mali crisis, led by former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, as a success. However, he also highlighted the body's failure to intervene effectively in Niger and Burkina Faso, attributing this to its ad hoc structure and reliance on ECOWAS leadership for activation. The Council's politicization – evident in the sidelining of members based on national leadership changes –undermines its consistency and legitimacy. He also noted that the lack of involvement of cultural leaders also limited its effectiveness. Dr. Festus called for institutionalizing the Council as a standing body with its own budget and expanding its mandate to incorporate community-level peacebuilding.

Professor Kasaija Apuuli's remarks focused on the East African Community's Panel of Eminent Persons, a body that has achieved limited results beyond its 2015 intervention in Burundi. He argued that the Panel's effectiveness is undercut by its reliance on head-of-state discretion for activation and a lack of structural independence. He cited Uganda's refusal to allow EAC mediation in its internal conflict as an example of how national sovereignty can stifle regional solutions. Professor Apuuli advocated for reforms to transition the Panel into a permanent body with a defined mandate, secured budget, and transparent appointment processes to mitigate elite capture and political interference.

Dr. Oita Etyang and Dr. Namaiko's chapter on the SADC Panel of Elders underscored the importance of grounding high-level peace efforts in cultural legitimacy and local wisdom. Using the 2008 Kenyan post-election crisis as an illustrative example, she explained how elder-led dialogue was essential for sustaining peace beyond elite-driven agreements. Her analysis emphasized that top-down political settlements are often short-lived unless accompanied by community engagement and long-term monitoring mechanisms. Namaga urged panels to serve as conduits between national negotiations and grassroots reconciliation, thereby transforming symbolic elder involvement into substantive peacebuilding.

During the interactive segment, participants raised fundamental questions about the independence of peacemaking panels, the compatibility of formal institutions with traditional conflict-resolution systems, and the role of education in promoting peace. Calls were made for the decolonization of peace education curricula and for its integration into early learning. Additionally, participants emphasized the need to formalize civil society partnerships to enhance panels' legitimacy and reach.

Both Professor Murithi and Dr. Aubyn agreed that meaningful reform and public engagement are necessary for these panels to transcend their current symbolic status. The discussion emphasized that trust in these institutions will only grow if they become more transparent, inclusive, and visibly effective.

Key Takeaways

1. Peacemaking Panels Need Structural Reforms to Be Effective

Most regional panels (AU, EAC, ECOWAS, SADC) face limitations due to ad hoc activation, lack of dedicated funding, weak institutional capacity, and opaque appointment processes. To become credible and proactive instruments of preventive diplomacy, they require permanent mandates, operational independence, and transparent governance structures.

2. Integration of Traditional Wisdom Strengthens Legitimacy

Panels of elders and councils are rooted in Africa's longstanding traditions of conflict mediation. Embedding these cultural practices within formal governance structures enhances their legitimacy and increases the likelihood of sustainable peace, particularly at the community level.

3. Disconnect Between High-Level Peace Agreements and Grassroots Realities

Many peace processes fail to address the lived experiences of communities. Without local buy-in and sustained dialogue beyond political settlements, even well-negotiated agreements risk collapse. Panels must act as bridges between elite negotiations and grassroots implementation.

4. Public Engagement, Education, and Civil Society Partnerships Are Crucial

There is a need for broader awareness and public pressure to reform and strengthen panels. Peace education which should ideally be decolonized and introduced early in the curriculum, along with partnerships with civil society organizations, can amplify the relevance and impact of these bodies in preventing and managing conflicts.



TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL

Strengthening Resilience, Cooperation and Development by Leveraging Trade and Investment: Perspectives and Lessons from the COMESA Region

This session explored diverse regional dynamics and policy lessons drawn from Africa's evolving approaches to integration, security, and development. Presenters examined the potential for COMESA to strengthen its regional security complex by identifying common threats and leveraging machine learning tools for conflict analysis. Mauritius was highlighted as a model of successful industrial development driven by effective use of foreign aid, offering important governance and consultation lessons for broader economic transformation across African states.

Moderator

Ms. Jane Kibiru, Research Fellow, Trade and Economic Policy, COMESA

Panelists

Ms. Elizabeth N. Mutunga, Coordinator, APSA, COMESA, Zambia Dr. Kizito Sabala, Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi, Kenya Dr. Winnie Cheptoo Rugutt, Lecturer, University of Nairobi, Kenya

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Discussan

Dr. Socrates Majeune, Lecturer, Department of Economics and Development Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Key Interventions

Ms. Elizabeth Ntue Mutunga and Dr. Kizito Sabala explored the potential for COMESA to evolve into a robust regional security complex. Drawing parallels with the European Union's success in transforming historical rivalries into enduring peace through economic interdependence, and ASEAN's model of stability among diverse member states, they questioned why RTAs in the Global South, including COMESA, remain vulnerable to persistent conflicts. Ms. Mutunga and Dr. Sabala argued that COMESA, with its own diversity, could similarly strengthen its security architecture by identifying and responding to shared security threats. Using concepts from Copenhagen and Welsh Schools of Security Studies, they proposed a novel approach employing machine learning tools developed by COMESA to isolate structural factors associated with peace and instability. By focusing on collective threat perception and cooperative solutions, they argued that COMESA can reinforce its regional peace and development agenda, moving towards an integrated security complex model tailored to its unique context.

Dr. Winnie Rugutt's presentation analyzed how Mauritius has successfully transitioned from a sugar-dependent economy to a diversified industrial hub, offering valuable lessons for African countries. Drawing on qualitative interviews and secondary data collected in 2023, Dr. Rugutt focused on the role of foreign development aid in supporting industrial growth. Mauritius, she argued, stands out for its strategic management of aid, characterized by transparent, consultative engagement between government institutions and the private sector. Unlike many African states, she notes that Mauritius leveraged aid to boost exportoriented manufacturing, underpinned by sound governance and coordinated policy implementation. Dr. Rugutt recommended that other African countries adopt similar governance reforms, improve transparency, and foster inclusive decision-making processes to maximize the impact of development assistance and accelerate industrial transformation.

SESSION 4



Key Takeaways

1. Strengthening Regional Security Through Shared Threat Identification

COMESA can build a viable regional security complex by identifying common security threats and applying data-driven tools, echoing successful models like ASEAN. Collaborative solutions rooted in regional realities can foster lasting peace and stability.

2. Mauritius as a Model for Aid-Driven Industrial Growth

Mauritius demonstrates how foreign aid, when paired with strong governance and public-private consultation, can support export-oriented industrialization. African nations can replicate this success by promoting transparency and inclusive management of development financing.

MEDIA INFLUENCE PANEL

Shaping Migration and Diplomacy through Media Narratives: Analysis of Selected African Newspapers and their Influence

This session interrogated how media narratives influence migration diplomacy and cross-border relations in Africa. Comparative studies of international and local media revealed contrasting portrayals of migrants, some humanizing their experiences, others reinforcing stereotypes of illegality and threat. Coverage of diplomatic crises between neighboring countries showed how media often mirrors state interests, exacerbating tensions. Discussions emphasized the need for more balanced reporting that highlights migrants' contributions and addresses systemic drivers like poverty and governance failures. The session also questioned the assumption of media independence, advocating for critical discourse analysis and inclusion of African media perspectives. Overall, it called for ethical, human-centered, and culturally inclusive approaches to migration governance and diplomatic engagement.

Moderator

Mr. Michael Higgins, Senior Researchers, Sahan East Africa

Panelists

Dr. Esther Muthoni King'ori, Lecturer, Strathmore University, Kenya

Dr. Maureen Syallow, Lecturer, Strathmore University, Kenya

Ms. Charlotte Irigoga, MA Candidate, Aga Khan University, Uganda

Mr. Eliud Kibii, Diplomatic Reporter, The Star Newspaper

Discussant

Prof. George Nyabuga, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Media and Communication, Aga Khan University, Kenya

Key Interventions

Dr. Esther Muthoni King'ori and Dr. Maureen Syallow's study analyzed BBC and Al Jazeera's coverage of migration in the COMESA region, revealing stark contrasts. BBC's reporting balanced human stories with systemic challenges, portraying migrants as individuals with agency and fears. Al Jazeera, however, emphasized danger and illegality, reinforcing negative stereotypes. The researchers argued that such framing impacts policy, with Al Jazeera's tone potentially discouraging open-border policies. Their recommendations included shifting narratives to highlight migrants' contributions and addressing root causes like poverty. This study underscores media's power in agenda-setting but also raises questions about its independence from state and corporate influences.

Ms. Charlotte Irigoga's research on Uganda-Rwanda diplomatic crisis between 2019 and 2022, illustrating how media reporting exacerbates such tensions. She employed discourse analysis and framing theory as its theoretical framework to analyze the media coverage from this period. By comparing Daily Monitor (Uganda) and New Times (Rwanda), she showed how divergent framing of espionage accusations versus state rhetoric deepened the crisis. While the coverage from both newspapers displayed imbalances, favoring the perspectives of their respective countries (i.e. mirroring state narratives), Ms. Irigoga underscored the media's pivotal role in framing international conflicts, navigating pressures from political and institutional actors, and shaping public discourse in cross-border diplomatic crises.

Mr. Eliud Kibii examined the complex interplay between migration, governance, media framing, and diplomacy. He highlighted how weak domestic regulation, conflict, and poverty are major drivers of forced migration, with significant refugee and labor migrant flows from Africa and Asia to the Middle East and Europe. While remittances are often celebrated, media narratives tend to overlook the welfare of migrants, focusing instead on economic gains. Migration is also politicized through securitization and xenophobic discourse, often ignoring root causes like poor governance. Mr. Kibii called for better bilateral labor agreements, stricter regulation of rogue recruiters, and more balanced, humane media coverage. Ultimately, the discussion emphasized the need for ethical migration governance and culturally inclusive diplomacy in destination countries to ensure migrants' dignity and safety.

SESSION 4



In his synthesis as the discussant, Prof. George Nyabuga challenged the widely held assumption that media operates independently in shaping diplomatic relations, arguing instead that state actors often exert significant influence over narratives. In his opinion, examples such as Rwanda's New Times and Uganda's Daily Monitor illustrate how media outlets frequently reflect the political agendas of their respective governments. Prof. Nyabuga also critiqued the overreliance on agenda-setting theory in analyzing media's diplomatic role, proposing alternative frameworks such as moral panic theory, "othering" analysis, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) for a more nuanced understanding. He also questioned the methodological focus on international media like BBC and Al Jazeera, advocating for greater inclusion of local African outlets in media studies. He also argued that the so-called "CNN effect" is limited in African contexts, where state control of media remains prevalent. A notable insight summarized this view: "Media independence is often a fallacy in our contexts - we must ask whose agendas are really being served."

Key Takeaways

1. Media as a State Instrument

The professor debunked media's "independent power" myth, showing how African outlets like New Times amplify government positions. Critical discourse analysis is needed to unpack state-media collusion in migration narratives.

2. Beyond Crisis Framing

Participants urged moving beyond negative migration stories (crime, burden) to highlight contributions (e.g., remittances, labor) and systemic solutions (e.g., bilateral agreements, poverty reduction).

3. Human-Centered Approach

The discussion emphasized migration's human dimension, that is, stories of survival and resilience, calling for media to counter xenophobia by personalizing migrant experiences and challenging politicized stereotypes



AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION PANEL

International Relations: Implications of Clean Energy Trends

This session examined the opportunities and challenges of Africa's clean energy transition, emphasizing the need for equitable, locally tailored solutions. Panelists highlighted the collaborative potential between Australia and Africa in advancing the clean energy transition, emphasizing Africa's vast reserves of critical minerals essential for renewable technologies. They also discussed Australian investments in over 200 mining projects, valued at \$60 billion, and deliberated on the role of initiatives like the Africa Green Hydrogen Hub. The discussions also assessed Africa's clean energy goals, including Kenya's target to generate 100% renewable electricity by 2030, while highlighting how both regions are working towards achieving SDG 7 for sustainable and modern energy access. The session emphasized that technology must combine with governance reform and inclusive planning to ensure a just transition that delivers both climate action and development outcomes.

Moderato

Georgie Ndirangu, Award-winning Communications Professional

Introductory Remarks

H.E. Jenny Da Rin, The Australian High Commissioner to Kenya

Speakers

Ms. Nikhath Zigmund, Kenya Country Director, Fortescue Future Industries
Mr. Matthew Tilleard, Co-Founder and Managing Partner, CrossBoundary Group
Dr. Faith Wandera, Director of Renewable Energy, State Department for Energy
Mr. Amani Mhinda, Senior Advisor in Charge of Business and Strategy, Africatalyst

Key Interventions

Her Excellency Jenny Da Rin, the Australian High Commissioner to Kenya, provided a comprehensive overview of Australia's strategic approach to the energy transition. She emphasized that climate action must be viewed through both an environmental and economic lens, highlighting Australia's AUD 22.7 billion Future Made in Australia initiative as a blueprint for renewable energy development. This ambitious plan focuses on transforming Australia from a fossil fuel exporter to a clean energy leader through investments in green hydrogen, critical minerals processing, and renewable manufacturing. High Commissioner Da Rin stressed the importance of international partnerships, particularly with Pacific Island nations and African countries, to create mutually beneficial solutions. She noted that while competition in clean energy technologies is inevitable, collaboration on skills transfer, technology sharing, and ethical mineral supply chains is essential to ensure an equitable transition that leaves no communities behind.

Dr. Faith Wandera, Director of Renewable Energy at Kenya's State Department for Energy, offered a detailed assessment of Kenya's energy transition progress and challenges. While celebrating Kenya's global leadership in renewable energy with 76% of electricity coming from geothermal, wind, and solar sources, she candidly addressed the slower progress in clean cooking adoption, which stands at just 31%. Dr. Wandera explained Kenya's comprehensive approach through the National Cooking Transition Strategy, which combines technology innovation, behavior change campaigns, and financial mechanisms like subsidies to overcome cultural and economic barriers. She particularly highlighted the potential of electric cooking solutions in urban areas and improved biomass stoves in rural communities. However, she emphasized that policy frameworks alone are insufficient without robust implementation mechanisms, consistent funding, and rigorous monitoring systems to track progress against the ambitious 2028 clean cooking target.

Ms. Nikhath Zigmund, Head of Energy for Africa at Fortescue Future Industries, presented a compelling vision for green hydrogen as a transformative solution for Africa's energy and industrial needs. With over 15 years of experience in Africa's power sector, she outlined how Fortescue's Naivasha Green Hydrogen project aims to produce fertilizer using Kenya's abundant renewable resources, potentially revolutionizing agricultural productivity while decarbonizing a traditionally carbon-intensive industry. Ms. Zigmund emphasized that Africa's unparalleled solar and wind resources position the continent to become a global leader in green hydrogen production but stressed that this potential can only be realized through strategic investments in skills development and

SESSION 5



local capacity building. She detailed Fortescue's innovative partnerships with Strathmore University and Australian institutions to create tailored training programs that prepare African workforces for the jobs of the future renewable energy economy.

Mr. Matt Tillard, Co-Founder and Managing Partner at CrossBoundary Group, delivered a data-driven analysis of renewable energy's economic advantages. Drawing from his firm's extensive experience financing energy projects across Africa, Mr. Tillard presented compelling evidence that solar-plus-storage now consistently outcompetes fossil fuels on price, citing examples where his firm provides reliable power to African mines at 13 cents per kWh - a cost that decreases annually due to technological improvements. He challenged traditional notions of energy infrastructure, arguing that Africa's energy future will be decentralized, with microgrids and rooftop solar often proving more efficient than centralized fossil fuel plants. Tillard cautioned African governments that bureaucratic hurdles and policy uncertainty risk delaying critical investments, urging streamlined regulations to attract private capital during this pivotal transition period.

Mr. Amani Mhinda, Senior Adviser at AfriCatalyst, provided a critical political economy perspective on the energy transition. With expertise in development and governance, Mr. Mhinda exposed the power imbalances in global climate negotiations, particularly in carbon markets where African nations often bear disproportionate burdens. He argued forcefully that Africa must assert control over its transition timeline, resisting external pressures that don't align with continental development priorities. Hinda emphasized that energy policy is inherently political, requiring careful navigation of competing interests between urban and rural populations, different economic sectors, and short-term versus long-term planning horizons. He called for increased African-led research and data collection to inform evidence-based policies and stressed that partnerships with developed nations must be structured to build genuine local capacity rather than creating dependency.

Key Takeaways

1. Renewables as Development Catalysts

Africa's clean energy transition must simultaneously tackle energy poverty and drive economic growth. By leveraging renewable technologies like green hydrogen for industrial applications, the continent can create sustainable local industries while closing energy access gaps.

2. Policy Implementation Gap

Ambitious renewable energy targets require robust governance frameworks to become reality. Stable regulations and public-private collaboration are essential to bridge the gap between policy commitments and on-the-ground implementation. Without coordinated action and clear accountability mechanisms, even well-designed strategies risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

3. Decentralized Energy Future

Off-grid and mini-grid renewable systems present a pragmatic solution for rapid electrification, particularly in remote areas. These modular alternatives often prove more cost-effective and quicker to deploy than traditional grid extensions, offering scalable energy access while supporting local economic activities through reliable power supply.

4. Equitable Transition Framework

A just energy transition must center African priorities, protecting vulnerable groups while maximizing local benefits. This requires solutions that respect national sovereignty in energy planning, ensure fair labor transitions, and distribute economic opportunities equitably across communities rather than extracting value for external stakeholders.





LABOR MIGRATION PANEL

Managing Labour Migration in Africa: Balancing Between Opportunity and Exploitation

Africa is experiencing a significant surge in labour migration, both voluntary and forced, driven by numerous factors such as economic disparities, climate change, conflicts and political instability. While labour migration can offer substantial economic benefits to both source and destination countries, it also presents significant challenges, including exploitation, feminisation of migration, human trafficking, and social disruption. It is against this background that the panel on labour migration explored and provided valuable insights on the multifaceted and complex dynamics of labour migration in Africa and identified practical solutions to address the challenges and maximize the opportunities associated with this phenomenon. Discussants shared their experience on how to improve labour migration governance in the region. The panel discussion contributed to a more informed and effective approach to managing labour migration in Africa.

Moderato

Joy Doreen Biira, Journalist and Media Personality

Introductory Remarks

Mathias Kamp, Country Director, KAS Kenya

Panelists

Amb. Tom Amollo, Former Ambassador of Kenya to Germany

Dr. Margaret W. Gichanga, Steering Committee Member, Migration and Refugee Research Network,

Oxford Brookes University, UK

Mr. Frank Nuwagaba, Immigration Officer, IOM, Uganda

Ms. Priscilla Kerebi, Vice Chair, KEPSA Education Sector Board

Key Interventions

The session kicked off with Mr. Mathias Kamp, the Country Director, KAS delivering introductory remarks. Mr. Kamp noted that migration is a historical constant and a key driver of human progress. He acknowledged Germany's growing need for labor, particularly in nursing and care sectors, observing that Kenyan youth could fill this gap if supported by ethical frameworks. However, he cautioned against romanticizing migration, citing real challenges like wage disparities, racism, and skills loss at home. He advocated for bilateral partnerships that respect the dignity of migrant workers while ensuring their expertise benefits both host and home countries. His call-to-action focused on policy frameworks that safeguard rights, close wage gaps, and foster reciprocal development through labor mobility.

On his part, Ambassador Tom Amolo emphasized the positive aspects of migration, drawing from personal experience in creating a hybrid home influenced by international exposure. He highlighted remittances as a tangible economic benefit, with Kenyans abroad sending home \$4.2 billion in 2023 alone. However, he cautioned against overlooking the challenges, particularly the reintegration of returnees, many of whom face unemployment despite advanced qualifications. Amb. Amolo called for deliberate strategies to harness diaspora potential through instruments like diaspora bonds and reintegration schemes. He stressed the need for structured return pathways that recognize the unique contributions of globally trained Africans, ensuring they aren't marginalized upon returning home.

Ms. Priscilla Kerebi brought a private sector lens, underscoring both the opportunities and dislocations caused by labor migration. While remittances sustain families and fuel economic growth, she pointed out that the separation of families takes a toll on social cohesion. She called for accelerated adoption of Competency-Based Education (CBE) to prepare youth for global labor markets, especially in high-demand sectors like healthcare. Ms. Kerebi also emphasized the potential of digital and remote jobs to reduce the need for physical migration altogether. She cited Kenya's draft BPO policy as a promising step toward regulating online work and protecting digital migrant laborers from new forms of exploitation.

SESSION 6



Mr. Frank Nuwagaba highlighted the importance of legal and institutional frameworks in managing labor migration. While Uganda has ratified the African Union's Free Movement Protocol, implementation remains weak. He stressed the importance of bilateral labor agreements to standardize wages and ensure ethical recruitment practices. Additionally, Mr. Nuwagaba proposed digital tools to allow migrants to report abuse anonymously and securely. He emphasized that irregular migration, especially among unskilled laborers, poses significant risks, and that both host and sending countries have a duty to provide protection and support services. His presentation underscored the structural imbalances in migration systems and the urgent need for institutional reform.

Dr. Margaret Gichanga provided a data-driven perspective, revealing that by 2019, there were over 14.5 million African migrant workers, most moving within the continent. She drew attention to the vulnerabilities of undocumented workers, especially women, who often face sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) without viable reporting mechanisms. Her recommendations included community-based protection structures, enhanced pre-departure orientation, and innovative tools like Ethiopia's migrant mobile app. Dr. Gichanga urged policymakers to view migration not merely as a crisis to manage but as a system requiring governance, investment, and human rights safeguards. Her approach merged empirical evidence with practical solutions rooted in migrant dignity and resilience.

Key Takeaways

1. Migration has Wide-ranging Benefits but is Risky

Migration serves as a vital economic lifeline for many African countries through remittances, which inject billions into national economies annually. Migration also fosters innovation, cross-cultural learning, and remittances that stimulate development in both origin and destination countries. However, these benefits come with serious risks as migrant workers often face exploitation, racism, and even modern slavery in host countries.

2. Ratify Protocols and Enforce Bilateral Agreements

Despite existing continental and regional frameworks, implementation remains slow. Governments must accelerate the ratification of protocols such as the AU Free Movement Protocol and strengthen bilateral agreements to guarantee fair wages, decent working conditions, and access to redress mechanisms.

3. Leverage Returnees' Skills and Investments for Development

Brain drain continues to deprive African nations of skilled labor. Yet returnees can be valuable assets if supported properly. Targeted reintegration programs, investment vehicles like diaspora bonds, and policies that recognize foreign-acquired qualifications can help convert migration into a development dividend rather than a persistent loss of talent.

4. Put in Place Proactive Support Mechanism for Migrant Workers

Migrants often leave unprepared, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. African governments and their partners must put in place robust protection mechanisms, including ethical recruitment practices, fair wages, and consular support abroad. Migration must be reframed not only as an economic gain but also as a human rights issue requiring urgent safeguards.



PEACE AND SECURITY PANEL 1

Advancing Peace, Security, and Trade in the COMESA Region: Challenges, Opportunities, and Collaborative Solutions

This session examined how regional dynamics spanning governance, security, economic integration, and social protection intersect in shaping COMESA's stability and development. A study on Zambia's gang networks revealed how socio-economic marginalization, political exploitation, and weak state presence have fueled the rise of violent groups like the JBs and Junes, posing a growing threat to peace. Another intervention assessed the European Union's support to COMESA's peace and security programs, cautioning that overreliance on donor funding may undermine long-term sustainability and local ownership. A third paper argued for integrating child protection into COMESA's peacebuilding frameworks, proposing a transformative, child-centered approach to regional stability. The final presentation challenged assumptions that trade alone reduces conflict, urging a deeper analysis of informal trade flows, internal unrest, and structural inequalities within the region to guide integration and conflict prevention.

Moderator

Dr. Winnie Rugutt, Lecturer, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Panelists

Mr. Evans Daka, Lecturer, University of Zambia

Ms. Elizabeth Mutunga, Coordinator, APSA, COMESA

Dr. Hiroyoshi Fujimoto, Economist, Embassy of Japan in Zimbabwe

Mr. Sean Yeo, Engineer & Analyst, Virtual Research Associates, Boston, US

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head, Governance, Peace and Security, COMESA, Zambia

Mr. Lweendo Kambela, University of Tasmania, Australia

Mr. Boniface Cheembe, Lecturer, University of Zambia

Dr. Musavengana W.T. Chibwana, Research Fellow, University of Free State, South Africa

Discussan

Prof. Kasaija Apuuli, Professor, Makerere University, Uganda

Key Interventions

In an enlightening session, Dr. Oita Etyang and his co-presenters – Mr. Lweendo Kambela and Mr. Boniface Cheembe – explored the rise, structure, and implications of gang activity in Zambia, focusing on two dominant groups: the JBs and the Junes. The panelists examined the evolution of these gangs within Zambia's shifting political and economic landscape, arguing that their emergence stems from systemic governance failures, youth unemployment, and socio-economic marginalization. Anchored in Relative Deprivation and Political Economy theories, the study shows how gangs exploit state vacuums, particularly in copper mining regions, where they offer security and exert territorial control. Historically rooted in Zambia's economic collapse of the 1980s and social disintegration caused by the HIV/AIDS crisis, these gangs have become tools of political elites and survival mechanisms for disenfranchised youth. The discussion warned that if unaddressed, these groups risk transforming into violent non-state actors. Stakeholders, including regional bodies like COMESA and the AU, were urged to implement proactive interventions.

Further enriching the discussion, Mr. Evans Daka's research examined the role of external actors, particularly the European Union (EU), in supporting peace and security efforts within the COMESA region. According to Mr. Daka, despite COMESA faces persistent challenges such as conflict, climate change, and governance deficits, compounded by inadequate funding. To address this, COMESA has partnered with the EU, which provides dual support: promoting socio-economic development and conflict prevention. Notable EU-backed initiatives include the Regional Integration Support Mechanism and the Maritime Security Programme. However, he cautions that COMESA's reliance on EU funding risks undermining program ownership and sustainability and recommends diversifying partnerships to maintain autonomy while benefiting from external collaboration. Mr. Daka also proposed solutions like member-state levies and private-sector engagement to reduce reliance on volatile foreign aid, ensuring COMESA's long-term stability.

SESSION 7



Dr. Musavengana W.T. Chibwana highlighted the evolving role of Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as COMESA, in addressing child protection within the broader framework of peace and security. Traditionally focused on economic integration, RECs are now recognizing that sustainable development requires tackling structural vulnerabilities, including the protection of children in conflict-affected areas. Dr. Chibwana drew on experience from the African Union's Peace and Security Council, the author identifies a gap in existing frameworks, namely the lack of systematic, child-centered approaches. He therefore proposed transformative framework for RECs includes child-focused conflict prevention, survivor-centered remedies, and inclusive post-conflict reconstruction. COMESA has made strides by integrating child indicators into early warning systems, but implementation remains a challenge. Dr. Chibwana recommendations include institutionalizing youth participation, aligning post-conflict programs with child rights, and training mediators. In conclusion, he submitted that safeguarding children is integral to achieving lasting regional integration and stability.

Ms. Elizabeth Mutunga and her co-researchers Dr. Hiroyoshi Fujimoto and Mr. Sean Yeo explored the complex relationship between trade and conflict within the COMESA region, challenging assumptions from classical liberal theory that economic interdependence automatically reduces conflict. According to the researchers, despite a significant rise in intra-COMESA trade, the region continues to experience recurring tensions. Ms. Mutunga and her team analyzed over 20 million events between 2001 and 2020 using an Adjusted Cooperation Index (ACI) that tracks shifts between cooperative and conflictual interactions among states. The findings revealed a positive link between trade and cooperation, though weaker among neighbors sharing borders. Ms. Mutunga and team highlighted key limitations including low-intensity and internal conflicts, informal trade, and data gaps. In their presentation, they emphasized the need to go beyond formal trade figures and interstate metrics, urging future research to integrate internal dynamics, informal trade flows, and broader political factors into regional integration and peacebuilding strategies.

Key Takeaways

1. Gangs and Governance Gaps in Zambia

Gang proliferation in Zambia is linked to governance failures, youth marginalization, and economic collapse. Groups like the JBs and Junes have filled state vacuums in resource-rich regions, posing a risk of evolving into violent non-state actors if not addressed through regional and national interventions.

2. EU's Double-Edged Support to COMESA

While the European Union has bolstered COMESA's peace and security agenda through socio-economic and maritime initiatives, heavy reliance on EU funding threatens the region's program ownership and sustainability. Diversifying funding sources is critical for autonomy and long-term resilience.

3. Child Protection as a Peacebuilding Imperative

Regional blocs like COMESA must broaden their mandates to include child protection in conflict settings. A transformative, child-centered approach encompassing prevention, response, and reconstruction is necessary for meaningful and sustainable regional integration.

4. Rethinking the Trade-Peace Link in Africa

Trade alone doesn't automatically reduce conflict within COMESA. Although trade boosts cooperation, its effects are uneven, particularly among neighbors. Informal trade, internal conflict, and structural inequalities must be incorporated into peacebuilding and regional integration frameworks.



GEO-ECONOMICS PANEL

Examining the Geo-Strategic Role of Corridor Infrastructure in the Horn of Africa Region: Intersections of Development, Diplomacy, and Debt.

This session brought together scholars and researchers who explored the intersection of infrastructure development, diplomacy, and geopolitics in the Horn of Africa, offering three diverse case studies. It examined how projects like Somaliland's Berbera Corridor enhance regional integration and economic leverage, while Kenya's road infrastructure diplomacy highlights the link between development, debt, and foreign partnerships. The session also discussed how mega-infrastructure projects, largely funded by non-traditional actors like China and Türkiye, introduce new geopolitical dynamics that can both advance and complicate regional development. Speakers emphasized the need for strategic, sovereign planning to balance foreign involvement with national priorities, ensuring infrastructure investments promote inclusive growth, stability, and long-term debt sustainability.

Moderator

Mr. Moronge Obonyo, Lecturer, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology

Panelists

Dr. Mohamed Osman Guudle, Associate Professor, University of Hargeisa, Somaliland

Ms. Susan Handa Onyango, Lecturer, Strathmore University, Kenya

Mr. Stephen Fowler, Senior Consultant, Abu Dhabi

Dr. Kizito Sabala, Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Lemmy N. Mulaku, Ph.D. Candidate, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Discussant

Dr. Peter Mwencha, Faculty Member, Aga Khan University, Kenya

Key Interventions

Mr. Stephen Fowler and Dr. Mohamed Osman Guudle explored the strategic significance of Somaliland's Berbera Corridor, presenting it as a model of how infrastructure can drive regional cooperation, trade, and diplomatic engagement. Positioned at a key juncture in the Horn of Africa, the corridor has bolstered Somaliland's economic and geopolitical relevance, particularly through strengthened ties with Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates. Mr. Fowler and Dr. Guudle employed a realist lens to analyze how Somaliland leverages geography and economic diplomacy to attract investment and improve stability. Their paper underscored how infrastructure, when aligned with national interests and strategic partnerships, can contribute to both state-building and regional integration. In conclusion, they called for broader stakeholder engagement to ensure the corridor's continued success and inclusive economic impact.

Dr. Kizito Sabala and Mr. Lemmy Mulaku analyzed the geopolitical dynamics surrounding mega infrastructure projects such as ports, railways, and industrial parks across the Horn of Africa. Focusing on the increasing involvement of non-traditional actors like China, Türkiye, and Dubai Port World, the paper examined how these investments have shifted the balance of power and created new forms of regional dependency. While infrastructure development is essential, the presenters warned that many of these projects are shaped by foreign strategic interests rather than local needs. In their analysis grounded in geopolitical theory, Dr. Sabala and Mr. Mulaku argued that mega projects often reinforce external control and economic extroversion, thereby exacerbating regional inequalities. In sum, they called for more sovereign, context-driven infrastructure planning to prevent the entrenchment of asymmetrical power relationships.

SESSION 7



Ms. Susan Handa Onyango presented on the intersection of road infrastructure, diplomatic engagement, and debt management in Kenya. In her paper, she assessed how road projects have become tools for fostering international partnerships and advancing Kenya's development goals, particularly in the COMESA region. While acknowledging the benefits of enhanced connectivity and trade facilitation, Ms. Onyango raised critical concerns over Kenya's increasing dependence on debt to finance these projects. She argued that without clear debt sustainability frameworks, such investments risk undermining long-term economic stability. Drawing from literature and case studies, her paper recommended a more balanced, transparent approach to infrastructure diplomacy, one that aligns development ambitions with responsible financial governance and collaborative planning. In a nutshell, Ms. Onyango emphasized the importance of safeguarding national interests while engaging with global development partners.

Key Takeaways

1. Strategic Infrastructure as a Diplomatic Tool

Infrastructure like the Berbera Corridor illustrates how economic development can be harnessed as a tool for diplomacy and regional integration, strengthening state influence and attracting investment while reinforcing political and economic ties between regional and global partners.

2. States Should Manage Geopolitics of Mega-Projects Prudently

Foreign-led infrastructure investments in the Horn of Africa, while offering economic opportunity, also risk deepening dependency and geopolitical manipulation. Regional states must navigate external influence carefully to avoid becoming pawns in broader strategic rivalries.

3. Debt-Financed Development Call for a Complex Trade-Off

Kenya's case reveals the double-edged nature of debt-financed infrastructure and highlights the complex trade-offs of infrastructure diplomacy. While roads enhance connectivity and trade, rising debt levels demand cautious financial planning and balanced strategies to ensure projects remain economically sustainable and development-driven over the long term.

DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS PANEL

Towards Fair, Peaceful and Inclusive Elections in the COMESA Region: Leveraging Technology, Political Mobilization and Democratic Practices

This panel discussion brought together researchers and scholars to examine critical issues surrounding electoral processes in Africa, with a focus on COMESA member states. Three key themes emerged: the evolving role of election observers, technology's double-edged impact on electoral integrity, and the complex dynamics of youth participation in elections. Experts analyzed how observation missions can strengthen democratic processes while navigating sovereignty concerns, explored both the promises and limitations of electoral technologies, and investigated the root causes of youth involvement in electoral violence. The discussion highlighted persistent tensions between international standards and local political realities, emphasizing that technical solutions alone cannot address deeper institutional weaknesses. A recurring theme was the need to balance innovation with trust-building measures, particularly in contexts where electoral credibility remains contested. The panel concluded that sustainable electoral reform requires addressing structural inequalities while adapting global best practices to regional specificities.

Moderator

Edward Kakumu, Program Manager, Mzalendo Trust

Panelist

Ms. Fridah Wanjiru Njoki, PhD Candidate, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Immanuel Mwendwa Kiilu, Student, Strathmore University, Kenya

Ms. Thelma Nabwire Mondoh, Researcher, Golden Letters Research, Kenya

Mr. Renic Ochieng, Researcher, Golden Letters Research, Kenya

Discussant

Dr. John Mwangi Githigaro, Senior Research Fellow, Mashariki Research and Policy Centre

Key Interventions

Mr. Immanuel Mwendwa Kiilu opened the discussion by analyzing the role of Election Observation Missions (EOMs) in democratic consolidation across Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia. He highlighted how EOMs enhance electoral transparency and credibility but also face challenges such as political resistance, weak institutional capacity, and sovereignty concerns. His research underscored the need for long-term EOM engagement, capacity-building for electoral bodies, and clear communication to mitigate perceptions of foreign interference.

Ms. Fridah Wanjiru Njoki, a PhD candidate at the University of Nairobi, shifted the focus to technology's role in preventing electoral violence, using Kenya as a case study. She noted that while biometric systems like Kenya's KIEMS improve efficiency, technical failures, distrust in digital systems, and opaque procurement processes often undermine their effectiveness. Ms. Njoki emphasized that technology alone cannot guarantee credible elections; it must be accompanied by early voter education, conflict mapping, and strong political will to uphold electoral integrity. Her examples from Ghana, Gabon, and the U.S. illustrated how hacking fears and institutional weaknesses persist globally.

Ms. Thelma Nabwire Mondoh and Mr. Renic Ochieng presented their research on youth participation in electoral violence in Kenya. Their mixed-methods study revealed how economic and social marginalization makes youth susceptible to political manipulation. Politicians exploit these strains through handouts and incitement, transforming grievances into violence during elections. They called for systemic interventions, including education reforms, stricter regulation of political incitement and enhanced early warning systems to address root causes rather than symptoms.

Dr. John Mwangi Githigaro, the discussant, tied together the panel's themes, stressing that trust in electoral processes remains the cornerstone of democratic stability. He critiqued the over-reliance on technology, citing Kenya's 2017 election nullification as proof that digital tools must be paired with procedural rigor. He also flagged voter apathy (e.g., Kenya's 64% turnout) as a red flag for democratic backsliding and urged a shift from patronage politics to issue-based engagement.

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Key Takeaways

1. Observer Missions as Partners for Reform

Election monitoring should evolve from passive observation to active capacity-building. While international observers enhance transparency, their long-term effectiveness depends on collaborating with domestic stakeholders to strengthen institutions without appearing to impose external standards that may trigger sovereignty concerns.

2. Technology is a Tool, Not a Fix

Digital voting systems offer efficiency but introduce new vulnerabilities. Successful implementation requires parallel investments in cybersecurity, voter education, and contingency planning to maintain public trust when technical failures inevitably occur during high-stakes electoral processes.

3. Transforming Youth from Perpetrators to Participants

Addressing youth electoral violence requires moving beyond security-focused responses to tackle underlying drivers like unemployment and political exclusion. Sustainable solutions must create meaningful participation channels while regulating political manipulation tactics that exploit youthful frustrations.



REGIONAL INTEGRATION PANEL ON THE EAC

Balancing National Priorities and Collective Goals in the EAC Region: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects.

This session explored the tension between national interests and regional integration within the East African Community (EAC). One presentation examined how unilateral actions by member states have slowed progress toward collective goals, weakening institutional authority and policy implementation. Another contribution analyzed the feasibility of a common East African currency by drawing lessons from the Eurozone, identifying key gaps in labor mobility, capital flow, and fiscal alignment. A third presentation emphasized the potential of the EAC to drive economic growth and sustainable development but noted persistent obstacles such as trade imbalances, regulatory barriers, and policy mistrust. The session underscored the need for stronger political will, regional coordination, and structured reforms to deepen integration and harness shared prosperity.

Moderator:

Mr. Con Omore Osendo, Independent Consultant, Governance and Economics

Speakers and Panelists

Dr. Kizito Sabala, Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Benedict Arwa, Doctoral Candidate, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. James Shikwati, CEO, Inter Regional Economic Network East Africa, Kenya

Mr. Lawrence Jost, Researcher, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Kenya

Discussant

Dr. Janet Muthoni Kiguru, Political and Economic Affairs Manager, Australian High Commission to Kenya

Key Interventions

Dr. Kizito Sabala and Mr. Benedict Arwa examined how unilateral actions by East African Community (EAC) member states in pursuit of national interests have undermined regional integration efforts. They noted that since the EAC's formation and reformation in 1967 and 1977 respectively, member states have frequently prioritized their individual objectives over collective commitments, impeding progress toward regional cohesion. Anchored in Neorealism and Rational Choice theories, their study utilized secondary data to assess how unilateralism weakens institutional authority, dilutes common policy implementation, and risks fragmenting the bloc's future. Dr. Sabala and Mr. Arwa argued that although national interests partly motivated early cooperation, their unchecked pursuit now disrupts the regional agenda. To overcome these challenges, they called for renewed political will to respect Article 37 of the EAC Customs Union Protocol and other statutes, strengthen adherence to regional institutions, and promote democratic governance across member states to ensure legitimacy, trust, and deeper integration.

Mr. Lawrence Joost presented a comparative study exploring the feasibility of an East African common currency by analyzing the Euro transition through the lens of Optimum Currency Area (OCA) theory. His study sought to determine how the political, economic, and social conditions that enabled the Euro compare to those within the EAC. Employing a hybrid methodology of primary and secondary data using qualitative content analysis, the study assessed labor flexibility, capital mobility, fiscal mechanisms, and policy shocks. He identified significant gaps in economic integration and institutional alignment among EAC members. Mr. Joost emphasized the need for structured policy reforms and regional coordination to overcome these barriers and proposed a policy roadmap with clear criteria for convergence, helping policymakers identify and manage impediments to monetary integration.

Mr. James Shikwati highlighted the significant potential of the East African Community (EAC) for fostering economic growth and regional prosperity. However, he pointed out the ongoing challenge of balancing individual national priorities with broader collective goals. According to Mr. Shikwati, some of the key obstacles include policy mistrust among member states, trade imbalances, delays in project completion, and regulatory hurdles that impede integration efforts. Despite these challenges,

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Shikwati remained optimistic, viewing deeper regional cooperation as essential for driving innovation, enhancing food security, and ensuring sustainable development across the EAC region.

Key Takeaways

1. National Interests Undermining Regional Integration

Unilateral decisions by EAC member states in pursuit of national interests continue to hinder effective regional integration. Strengthening institutional commitment and respect for shared protocols is essential to safeguard the bloc's long-term unity and cooperation.

2. Currency Union Readiness Requires Reform

EAC lacks several conditions needed for a common currency. Compared to the Eurozone, gaps in labor flexibility, fiscal harmonization, and capital mobility remain critical barriers that require targeted economic and governance reforms.

3. Strategic Policy Alignment Is Crucial

Both papers underscore the importance of harmonized strategies and institutional coherence in regional blocs. Whether through legal frameworks or monetary coordination, sustainable integration demands both technical capacity and political will.



REGIONAL INTEGRATION PANEL ON COMESA

Navigating the Path to Deeper Regional Integration within COMESA: Harnessing Diplomacy, Competition, and Identity

The panel explored two critical aspects of regional integration in COMESA: supranational branding and competition law.

Moderator

Ms. Jane Kibiru, Research Fellow, Trade and Economic Policy, COMESA

Speakers and Panelists

Dr. Peter Mwencha, Faculty Member, Aga Khan University, Kenya

Dr. Reason Masengu, Senior Lecturer, Middle East College, Oman (Virtual)

Mr. Moronge Obonyo, Lecturer, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Discussant

Amani Mhinda, Senior Advisor in Charge of Business and Strategy, Africatalyst

Key Interventions

Dr. Peter Mwencha and his co-presenter Dr. Reason Masengu opened the discussion by highlighting the absence of a cohesive regional brand for COMESA, despite its economic significance. They noted that while entities like the EU and Nordic Council have successfully built unified identities, COMESA's branding remains fragmented due to overlapping memberships, cultural diversity, and weak institutional capacity. The speakers emphasized the need for a formal branding strategy to foster emotional attachment among citizens, citing the Nordic model as a successful example. They argued that COMESA, as Africa's largest REC, is well-positioned to lead this initiative but must address governance and funding gaps to achieve meaningful progress.

Mr. Moronge Obonyo, a legal expert, shifted focus to COMESA's competition law framework, which aims to ensure fair trade practices across member states. He explained that the COMESA Competition Commission, established in 2013, primarily handles mergers and anti-competitive cases but has recently expanded into consumer protection. Notable cases, such as the ruling against CAF's exclusive media rights, demonstrate the commission's growing influence. However, challenges persist, including disparities in national competition laws and tensions between supranational rules and domestic interests. Mr. Obonyo also discussed the implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area, suggesting that COMESA's robust system could serve as a model for continental integration, provided it harmonizes with emerging AfCFTA protocols.

The discussant, Mr. Amani Mhinda, synthesized the presentations by contrasting "soft power" (emotional branding) with "hard rules" (legal frameworks) in regional integration. He noted that while the Nordics rely on shared cultural values, the EU depends on enforceable regulations, a duality COMESA must navigate. Audience questions further probed the feasibility of a unified COMESA brand and the potential clashes between COMESA and AfCFTA competition laws. Concerns were also raised about elite-driven integration, with participants stressing the need for grassroots engagement to avoid detachment, as seen in Brexit. The moderator concluded by urging COMESA to formalize its branding and legal frameworks, emphasizing that integration must resonate with citizens to endure beyond bureaucratic initiatives.

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Key Takeaways

1. Address the COMESA Branding Gap

COMESA lacks a unified regional identity, necessitating a formal strategy to foster citizen attachment and align with successful models like the Nordics.

2. Legal Frameworks Matter for Effectiveness

COMESA's competition law system is advanced but must reconcile national interests with supranational rules to ensure cohesive market regulation.

3. Citizen Engagement is Critical for Buy-In

Elite-driven integration risks legitimacy; COMESA must prioritize grassroots involvement to avoid detachment and ensure long-term success.

PEACE AND SECURITY PANEL 2

Building Peaceful and Secure Futures: A Multifaceted Exploration of Perspectives on Peace and Security in Africa

The session examined the relationship between geopolitics, regional integration, and forced migration in the Horn of Africa. It emphasized that regional integration is a political process that requires shared sovereignty, internal consensus, and common values among states. The discussion highlighted Ethiopia's strategic ambitions for Red Sea access and how these moves have heightened regional tensions, particularly with Somalia. Additionally, the session explored refugee migration dynamics, drawing attention to the push and pull factors influencing movement, as well as the legal, economic, and social challenges faced by displaced populations. The panel called for African-led solutions, stronger regional institutions, and inclusive policies that prioritize integration, reduce conflict, and ensure that migration contributes to regional peace, stability, and development.

Moderator:

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head, Governance, Peace and Security, COMESA

Speakers and Panelists

Prof. Redie Bereketeab, Senior Researcher, Nordica Africa Institute, Uppsala University, Sweden Mr. Anwar Abdifatah, Doctoral Candidate in International Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya Mr. Edwine Otieno Ayoma, Doctoral Candidate, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Discussant

Dr. Nicodemus Minde, Researcher, Institute of Security Strategies, Kenya

Key Interventions

Professor Redie Bereketeab's presentation explored the complex relationship between geopolitics, regional integration, and development in the Horn of Africa. Framing regional integration as a political, not merely economic or social, project, he emphasized that successful integration requires states to willingly share power and sovereignty, build domestic consensus, and align on common values. Drawing on theoretical frameworks like intergovernmentalism, neo-functionalism, and post-functionalism, he argued that regional integration must be rooted in internal political will, not just day-to-day mobility or trade. Professor Redie also examined how external geopolitical pressures such as Cold War alignments and the global war on terror have undermined regional bodies like IGAD, weakened state institutions, and contributed to underdevelopment and instability in the region.

Mr. Anwar Abdifatah's working paper focused on Ethiopia's evolving maritime strategy and its implications for regional peace and sovereignty. Since becoming landlocked after Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia has pursued sea access with growing urgency, especially following the Tigray War. The country's historical tension with Somalia, fueled by territorial disputes and past military interventions, continues to influence its approach. The controversial 2024 Memorandum of Understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland has heightened tensions, forging new regional rivalries involving Egypt, Eritrea, and the UAE. Mr. Abdifatah warned of escalating conflict if diplomacy fails and called for urgent regional mediation. He emphasized that Ethiopia must respect Somali sovereignty and engage in multilateral dialogue to maintain regional peace and security.

Mr. Edwine Ayoma shared findings from his research on refugee dynamics in Kenya, particularly through the lens of Kakuma Refugee Camp. He identified conflict, climate change, and persecution as key push factors, with economic opportunities acting as primary pull factors. Refugees often face perilous journeys and inhospitable conditions upon arrival, including discrimination, harsh camp regulations, and lack of livelihood options. While Kenya's 2022 Refugee Act marked a significant step toward integration, Mr. Ayoma stressed that implementation remains uneven. He recommended strengthening reception services, expanding economic inclusion, and launching awareness campaigns to reduce hostility. Refugees, he argued, should not be seen as security threats but rather as contributors to national development when properly integrated.

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Key Takeaways

1. External Powers Exploit Regional Divisions

Geopolitical interventions often exploit African resources and undermine integration efforts. These actions have led to instability, displacement, and weakened regional institutions like IGAD.

2. Local Agency is Vital for Stability

For regional integration to succeed, African states must cultivate shared political will, common values, and public legitimacy. Integration should be rooted in domestic consensus rather than imposed externally or driven solely by trade and mobility.

3. Regional Mediation is Required

Urgent diplomatic engagement is required to defuse tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia. Regional actors, including the AU and IGAD, must actively promote legal agreements, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful access to shared resources.

4. Refugee Policies must Foster Self-Relignce

Refugees face discrimination, economic exclusion, and security-related stigma in host countries despite fleeing extreme hardship. With inclusive laws like Kenya's 2022 Refugee Act, states can unlock refugees' economic potential, but only through adequate resettlement, public awareness, and long-term integration strategies.





FISCAL/DEBT DIPLOMACY PANEL

The Economic Diplomacy of Fiscal Justice: How Civil Society and Academia Use Research to Challenge International Norms and Practices

The intersection of economic policy and human welfare has never been more critical, particularly for African nations facing the dual challenges of debt distress and rising inequality. Against this background, the panel session brought together leading voices from civil society, human rights, and development organizations to explore how data, transparency, and collective action are reshaping Africa's fiscal future. The session underscored the growing urgency to reframe economic governance through a lens of justice, equity, and participation, especially amid worsening debt crises, growing inequality, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations.

Moderator

Ms. Wanjiru Gikonyo, Transformational Governance Expert

Introductory Remarks

Mr. Leonard Wanyama, Regional Coordinator, The East African Tax and Governance Network (EATGN).

Panelists

Ms. Riva Jalipa, Advisor, Economic Justice Advisor, Amnesty International

Mr. Kenneth Okwaro, Executive Director, Africa Centre for People, Institutions and Society (ACEPIS)

Ms. Florence Syevuo, Founder and Executive Director, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Kenya Forum.

Key Interventions

Mr. Kenneth Okwaro opened the session by emphasizing the importance of budget transparency and civic participation in fiscal policy. Drawing on over a decade of experience, he traced the transformation of Kenya's opaque budget process into a more open system, crediting persistent advocacy efforts. Mr. Okwaro critiqued the exclusion of citizens from debt decisions that now drive painful austerity measures and called for coordinated African strategies to renegotiate unsustainable debt burdens. He emphasized that evidence, when clearly presented and widely disseminated, has become a formidable tool to challenge unjust economic practices.

Ms. River Jalipa addressed the global dimensions of injustice. She challenged the myth that tax incentives drive investment, using Zambia's copper sector to show how states lose far more in waived taxes than they gain in benefits. On climate justice, Jalipa emphasized that responsibility cannot be equitably distributed when 100 fossil fuel companies account for the majority of emissions. She advocated for a shift from charity-based responses to reparative justice, underscoring the inclusion of human rights in the ongoing UN tax convention negotiations as a landmark development. Her advocacy highlighted the urgency of tackling legalized tax evasion and profit-shifting by multinational corporations, which cost Africa an estimated \$88.6 billion annually.

Ms. Florence Syevuo offered a compelling case for localized, people-driven data in development processes. She noted that citizen-generated data has influenced national planning in Kenya, citing the adoption of disability-inclusive questions in the census and the inclusion of community data in Kenya's Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the SDGs. Ms. Syevuo warned that Africa's Agenda 2063 is at risk of being sidelined by an exclusive focus on the SDGs, calling for harmonization to ensure African priorities remain central. Her presentation highlighted how civil society shadow reporting serves as a critical accountability mechanism in both national and global arenas.

Mr. Leonard Wanyama reframed tax justice through a human rights lens. He introduced the Human Rights-Based Taxation (HRBT) guide as a tool for translating complex fiscal language into accessible principles such as participation, equity, and transparency. Wanyama argued that the 2023 anti-tax protests in Kenya reflected a breakdown in public engagement – not mere opposition to taxation itself. He called for simplified access to climate finance, particularly for youth-led initiatives, and emphasized the link between protest, civic agency, and democratic accountability.

Key Takeaways

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1. Justice as the Core of Economic Diplomacy

All panelists agreed that economic policies must prioritize social justice over austerity. The current global architecture which is dominated by IMF conditionalities and unequal trade terms, must be reformed to reflect African realities and human rights obligations.

2. Evidence and Data as Tools of Empowerment

From citizen-generated data to fiscal policy audits, evidence is increasingly used to hold governments accountable. Strengthening civic access to data and funding community-based research is essential for inclusive policymaking.

3. Unity and Collective Action as Strategic Leverage

Panelists emphasized the need for African solidarity in debt renegotiations, trade talks, and tax reforms. Harmonizing frameworks like Agenda 2063 and the SDGs can consolidate bargaining power and assert continental priorities on the global stage.





YOUTH AGENCY PANEL

Youth Agency and Voice in Democracy and Governance in Africa Today

Africa's burgeoning youth population is increasingly asserting itself as a political and economic force. They are no longer content with symbolic representation but are actively demanding meaningful participation in shaping the continent's democratic and economic future. In a dynamic panel discussion, speakers emphasized the disconnect between policy rhetoric and real inclusion. Despite regional frameworks promoting youth engagement, poor implementation and tokenism persist. Panelists offered diverse perspectives on reform, mobilization, and inclusion strategies to empower youth as agents of change. The discussion called for deliberate, well-funded strategies to move youth from the margins of governance to its core, recognizing them as present-day actors in building resilient democracies.

Moderator

Ms. Eunice Wawuda, Student, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Introductory Remarks

Mr. George Ngoha, Conflict and Peace Researcher, DDIS, University of Nairobi

Panelists

Ms. Esther Nambuye, Membership Coordinator, International Relations Society of Kenya

Ms. Wambui Gachihi, Vice-Chair, International Relations Student Association of Kenya

Ms. Judy Njeri, Communications and Media Relations Assistant, International Relations Society of Kenya

Mr. Edgar Mkalla, Youth Representative, International Relations Society of Kenya

Mr. Byron Osumba, Information Management and Outreach Intern, United Nations Environment Programme

Key Interventions

Mr. George Ngoha opened the session by confronting the persistent tokenism that characterizes youth participation across African policy spaces. He criticized the tendency to view youth as "leaders of tomorrow," a narrative that marginalizes their role in shaping today's decisions. Ministries of Youth, he noted, are often under-resourced and politically sidelined, unable to influence broader economic policies. Mr. Ngoha emphasized that youth must no longer be treated as symbolic placeholders but as active stakeholders whose lived realities demand immediate attention. His remarks highlighted a key contradiction in many African governance frameworks: the disconnect between rhetorical commitment to youth inclusion and the operational reality of exclusion.

Esther Nambuye built on this critique by addressing the gap between youth policy frameworks and implementation on the continent. She highlighted the COMESA Youth Advisory Panel as a promising model yet pointed out that without political will and adequate funding, such mechanisms remain ineffective. Ms. Nambuye called for harmonization of national youth strategies with regional protocols and advocated for sectoral reforms in areas like agriculture. Upskilling youth in agri-tech, she argued, could transform a largely informal sector into a hub of innovation and employment. She also called for meaningful involvement of youth in policy formulation and implementation.

Ms. Wambui Gachihi explored how digital platforms have become tools of youth mobilization and advocacy. Ms. Gachihi added that digital action should be complemented by offline organizing including community barazas, local assemblies, and leadership development at the grassroots remain crucial in translating hashtag movements into sustained change. She called for cross-border collaboration amongst the youth as a way of enhancing regional solidarity. Ms. Gachihi emphasized the need for tracking the progress of political promises in order to foster accountability.

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Mr. Byron Osumba focused on the role of digital diplomacy and advocacy by the youth on the continent. Mr. Osumba highlighted the case of Kenya's 2023 anti-tax protests as a real-time case study of youth agency. The mobilizations which were largely youth-led and digitally coordinated forced the government to roll back elements of a punitive finance bill. He underscored the potential and limits of online activism, particularly in light of digital inequality occasioned by limited infrastructure, state surveillance and internet shutdowns. Access to reliable internet, he argued, must be democratized if youth from all backgrounds are to participate fully.

Mr. Edgar Mkalla focused on the role of the private sector in youth empowerment. He criticized corporations for engaging in what he termed "performative CSR," offering token grants that often fail to reach marginalized rural youth. Mr. Mkalla proposed linking tax incentives to measurable outcomes in youth employment and entrepreneurship. He also urged telecom and tech companies to partner with local incubators to scale digital skills training in underserved regions. He called for the private sector to invest more resources through mechanisms such as grants and microloans in order to empower young people in underserved regions and communities on the continent to engage in business.

Ms. Judy Mbugua reframed youth engagement through a security and governance lens. While emphasizing the continent's "Youth Demographic Dividend," she decried their marginalization in policy making processes. She also challenged the criminalization of youth activism, pointing to instances of police brutality during protests. Ms. Mbugua called for structural reforms, including the integration of youth into security sector governance and civic education. She stressed that young people must be seen not as threats but as contributors to peace and accountability, particularly in fragile states like South Sudan. She challenged African governments to build the capacity and engage the youth more meaningfully, particularly in rural and conflict-prone areas.

Key Takeaways

1. Youth Must Be Central to Today's Policy Debates

Framing youth as "future leaders" excludes them from urgent discussions on economic justice and governance. Their input is vital now, not later.

2. Digital Tools Are Necessary but Not Sufficient

While social media platforms enable rapid mobilization, they must be supported by infrastructure investment and local-level organizing.

3. The Private Sector Must Be Held Accountable

Corporate social responsibility initiatives must go beyond optics to deliver tangible employment, training, and funding for youth, especially in rural areas.

4. Security Reform and Civic Education Are Critical

Protecting youth activism and integrating young voices into governance structures is essential to prevent the erosion of democratic space.



CLOSING CEREMONY

Closing Ceremony of the 2024 IRSK Annual Conference

The conference's closing session was a moment of reflection, celebration, and a collective call to action. Speakers from IRSK, COMESA, KAS-Kenya Office, UNICAF, ACCORD, and the Australian High Commission highlighted the rich dialogues and commended the intellectual energy and inclusiveness of the discussions throughout the conference. The organizing committee thanked all partners for their dedication and outlined plans to publish revised papers and convene follow-up events. With pledges of continued collaboration and institutional support, the session concluded with optimism, underscoring the shared responsibility to drive Africa's democratic and development agenda forward.

Moderato

Mr. Leonard Wanyama, CEO, International Relations Society of Kenya

Speakers

Mr. Jan Ole Voss, Deputy Country Director, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung - Kenya

Dr. Oita Etyang, Head, GPS, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

Dr. Kizito Sabala, Chairman, 2024 IRSK Annual Conference

Ms. Paidamwoyo Mudzimuirema, Media and Communications Officer, ACCORD

Ms. Hazel Cherotich, Public Diplomacy Officer, Australian High Commission in Kenya,

Conference Wrap-Up and Reflections

Dr. Oita Etyang opened the closing session with an uplifting reflection on the role of youth in shaping history. He reminded participants that young people are not merely reliving history but they are actively making it, often without realizing it. Drawing on Kenya's early digital activism platforms such as Mashada.com, he celebrated inter-generational learning and acknowledged the political energy and innovation evident in today's youth. Quoting the MC of the youth session, Dr. Oita concluded with a poignant message: "Young people, the answer is in your hands. You are not a problem to be solved but a voice to be heard. Arise and occupy your rightful spaces."

Representing Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Mr. Jan-Ole Voss expressed appreciation for being part of the conference for the first time. He commended the diversity of opinions and the richness of dialogue, stating that genuine solutions to Africa's complex challenges emerge only through engagement across differing perspectives. Mr. Voss was particularly inspired by the contributions of the youth, noting their political energy and commitment to innovation as vital for regional and global progress. He pledged continued support and expressed eagerness to return in 2025, promising to bring more publications and resources.

Speaking on behalf of UNICAF, Mr. Joshua Nyambane expressed his appreciation at being part of the event and highlighted the enriching discussions and expressed enthusiasm for future involvement. Mr. Nyambane emphasized his organization's commitment to supporting youth education in Kenya through their programs. He urged young people to take their rightful place without apology, encouraging confidence and boldness in occupying public space. He also reminded IRSK members of the discounted online learning opportunities available through their partnership with UNICAF.

Dr. Kizito Sabala, the Chair of the conference, lauded the strong intellectual engagement and the energy displayed throughout the three days. He recognized the collaborative effort between IRSK, COMESA, and ACCORD in organizing the event. Looking ahead, he announced that the organizing committee will follow up with paper presenters to revise and submit their final versions for publication, aiming to launch the proceedings at next year's conference. He also revealed plans for pre-conference build-up activities and welcomed additional partners for the 2025 event. He also acknowledged ongoing pledges of support for the next conference and gave a special mention to Dr. Peter Mwencha, the 2024 IRSK Conference Coordinator, for his vital role in organizing the event. Dr. Sabala concluded with gratitude to all participants and best wishes for safe journeys home.

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Representing ACCORD, Ms. Paidamwoyo Mudzimuirema acknowledged the intense work behind the scenes to make the conference successful. Ms. Mudzimuirema noted that the African Journal on Conflict Resolution served as the publishing platform for some of the conference outputs. She reiterated ACCORD's commitment to youth inclusion, noting her personal enthusiasm for the youth inclusion discussions as a young person herself. She acknowledged the collaborative role of partners, including IRSK, COMESA, KAS and UNICAF, and praised the MediaForce team and MC for their excellent support.

Offering a vote of thanks on behalf of the Australian High Commissioner to Kenya, Ms. Hazel Cherotich affirmed her delegation's appreciation for the IRSK Conference. She noted the High Commissioner's personal attendance for two consecutive days as a testament to the significance of the event. She pledged continued engagement and partnership with IRSK in the future.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Prioritize Youth Inclusion and Mentorship

Conference partners should allocate at least 30% of speaking opportunities to emerging scholars and practitioners; they should also pair them with senior mentors and maintain post-conference engagement to foster long-term capacity building and leadership development.

Recommendation 2: Create a Digital Repository for Knowledge Sharing

A searchable digital archive of presentations, research, and insights should be developed, using accessible platforms to ensure widespread dissemination of conference outcomes and to support ongoing policy dialogue and academic exchange

Recommendation 3: Integrate a Youth-Led Plenary or Roundtable

Introduce a dedicated plenary session fully led by young professionals and students to spotlight fresh perspectives and innovative solutions so as to build confidence and ownership among next-generation African thinkers

Recommendation 4: Ensure Broad Representation from COMESA Member States

Deliberately recruit participants from as many COMESA countries as possible, with attention to geographic, linguistic, and gender diversity, to reflect the full regional spectrum and enrich dialogue with localized insights and lived experiences.

Recommendation 5: Collect and Share Post-Conference Insights

Implement structured feedback collection from participants and disseminate a summary of key takeaways, session analytics, and future action points to all stakeholders.

Recommendation 6: Implement Outcome Tracking Mechanisms

Partners should conduct follow-up surveys 6 months post-conference to monitor how participants have applied insights in their policy work or careers, thus enabling evaluation of long-term impact and informing future programming.

IMPACT STORY



The second Annual Conference hosted by the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK) from November 20-22, 2024 in Nairobi marked a significant milestone in advancing regional dialogue on international relations and diplomacy across the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Under the theme, "Fostering Integration and Cooperation in the COMESA Region through International Relations and Diplomacy," the 3-day conference successfully convened nearly 200 participants from over 30 countries, spanning government officials, diplomats, policymakers, scholars, business leaders, and civil society actors.

The event represented an exciting convergence of theory and practice, offering a unique platform to critically explore the intricate geopolitical, economic, and social challenges facing the COMESA region while emphasizing actionable strategies to promote peace, stability, and prosperity. Its multidisciplinary focus spanned topics such as regional economic integration, conflict prevention, youth and digital activism, climate change, and the role of diplomacy in enhancing cooperation.

A standout impact of the conference was its facilitation of rich, evidence-based deliberations where emerging voices joined seasoned experts in international relations. Participants highlighted the enduring challenge of artificial borders and regulatory barriers that inhibit Africa's full economic potential, while underscoring the need to turn frameworks and policies into practical implementation for tangible outcomes. The conference reaffirmed peace and security as the foundational pillars of sustainable regional integration, stressing that these dimensions are often siloed from economic cooperation and require stronger linkages to unlock inclusive growth.

A recurring theme was the importance of leveraging shared interests and collective strengths among member states to amplify Africa's global competitiveness and agency. Real-life narratives of cross-border traders, entrepreneurs, and migrant workers brought these concepts to life, illustrating how people-to-people integration is an indispensable complement to institutional efforts.

The partnership dimension was another crucial area of impact. IRSK's collaboration with COMESA, ACCORD, KAS and other partners underscored a collective commitment to strengthening regional dialogue and knowledge exchange. The conference also paved the way for further collaborations, including plans to publish revised research papers from the event and initiatives to convene follow-up workshops that ensure conference insights inform policymaking more directly.

Moreover, the conference galvanized youth engagement and digital activism as vital forces shaping the future of diplomacy in Africa. This intergenerational energy inspired commitment among participants to continue fostering inclusive and innovative diplomatic approaches.

By generating actionable knowledge, building strategic networks, and inspiring a shared vision for an integrated COMESA region, the 2024 IRSK Annual Conference proved to be an essential catalyst. It deepened understanding, highlighted implementation gaps, and emphasized the urgent need for coordinated action to translate regional ambitions into durable progress. As such, it has set a robust foundation for subsequent editions and continues to strengthen Kenya's leadership role and the wider region's resilience in the complex landscape of continental integration.



IMPACT TESTIMONIALS

Impact Testimonial:

"The conference's unique blend of scholars and sitting diplomats created unique mentorship moments, proving that academic rigor and practical statecraft can and must intersect."

- Dr. Kizito Sabala, IRSK Conference Chair

Impact Testimonial:

"I left the conference truly empowered. As an aspiring scholar, I struggled to engage meaningfully in policy spaces. But at this year's conference, I have found mentors and allies who are eager to collaborate on regional integration and diplomacy research."

- Thelma Nabwire, Youth Delegate, Kenya

Impact Testimonial:

"The partnership with IRSK goes beyond a single event. We now have a roadmap for ongoing collaboration, capacity building, and shared research that will benefit both Kenya and the wider region well into the future."

- Dr. Oita Etyang, Head of GPS, COMESA

Impact Testimonial:

"The IRSK Annual Conference is setting the standard for how academic and practitioner communities can tangibly affect regional policy."

- Dr. Edson Ziso, Lecturer, University of Adelaide, Australia

Impact Testimonial:

"The feedback from senior scholars and the presentation opportunity gave me confidence and visibility as a young researcher. It's a rare chance to have my voice amplified across the continent."

- Mr. Immanuel Mwendwa Kiilu, Student, Strathmore University, Kenya























