



CONCEPT NOTE

HARNESSING AFRICA'S CONTINENTAL AND REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR PEACE, RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION AMID A FRAGMENTING GLOBAL ORDER

THE 4TH COMESA-IRSK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

11TH – 13TH NOVEMBER 2026, NAIROBI, KENYA

INTRODUCTION

The international system is undergoing a profound period of transformation marked by geopolitical rivalry, the weakening of multilateralism, protracted conflicts, climate stress, technological disruption, and economic fragmentation. The erosion of consensus-based global governance, rising great-power competition, and the instrumentalisation of trade, finance, and security have fundamentally altered how states and regions pursue peace, development, and strategic autonomy.

For Africa, this fragmenting global order presents both acute risks and strategic opportunities. On the one hand, external shocks, ranging from conflicts in Europe and the Middle East to supply chain disruptions and climate-induced crises, have exposed Africa's structural vulnerabilities. On the other hand, Africa's continental and regional institutions have gained renewed relevance as platforms for collective action, resilience-building, and strategic coordination. Institutions such as the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and specialised continental agencies increasingly function as anchors of peace and security, economic integration, norm-setting, and diplomatic agency.

These institutions' ability to deliver meaningful outcomes, however, continues to be undermined by threats of a varied nature - threats that are not solely geopolitical, but financial and transnational in nature. Africa's peace, security and development agenda has been increasingly impacted by illicit financial flows, transnational organised crime, and corruption - particularly through sophisticated channels that exploit gaps in trade, customs, banking oversight, and regional regulatory coordination. Of growing concern is the emergence of Trade-Based Money Laundering (TBML), in which criminal networks disguise their proceeds through trade transactions. Practices such as these not only erode financial integrity, but consequently distort regional markets, weaken state legitimacy, and fuel conflict economies.

Against this backdrop, the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK) proposes to convene the 2026 IRSK Annual Conference as a high-level forum bringing together policymakers, diplomats, scholars, development partners, and practitioners to critically examine how Africa's continental and regional institutions can be more effectively harnessed to advance peace, resilience, and transformative development in an increasingly fractured global system. This fourth edition of the conference is being organised in partnership with the **Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)**, the **African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)** and **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) – Kenya Office**.

The 2026 IRSK Conference, whose theme is **“Harnessing Africa’s Continental and Regional Institutions for Peace, Resilience and Transformation amid a Fragmenting Global Order,”** will be held in Nairobi, Kenya from **Wednesday, November 11 to Friday November 13, 2026**. The Conference is expected to draw approximately 200 attendees, including government officials, parliamentarians, diplomats, scholars, policymakers, youth and business leaders, media personnel, think tanks, and civil society representatives, among others. Special attention will be given to ensuring broad geographic representation and the involvement of women and youth from as many COMESA Member States as possible.

RATIONALE AND POLICY RELEVANCE

Africa's continental and regional institutions were conceived as collective responses to historical fragmentation, external dependency, and political instability. Foundational frameworks such as the Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union, Agenda 2063, and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) articulate an ambitious vision of integration, peace, and self-reliant development. More recently, initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and evolving regional peace mechanisms signal a shift toward functional integration and problem-solving regionalism.

However, the effectiveness of these institutions is increasingly tested by overlapping mandates, capacity constraints, financing gaps, and complex geopolitical pressures. At the same time, the global turn toward protectionism, bloc politics, and selective multilateralism has elevated the strategic importance of regional and continental cooperation as buffers against global volatility.

This conference is therefore timely and policy relevant. It seeks to interrogate not only what Africa's institutions do, but how and under what conditions they can deliver peace dividends, economic resilience, and structural transformation. It asks how these institutions can be strengthened, synergised, and made more effective to secure African interests, manage continental peace and security, build economic resilience, and catalyse sustainable transformation. Building economic resilience serves as a solid pathway towards sustainable peace. However, as regional trade expands under the RECS as well as the AfCFTA, vulnerabilities linked to economic ills such as TBML are likely to grow, thereby necessitating strengthened capacity and institutional coordination between continental and regional institutions, Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) and law enforcement across the continent.

The Conference will move beyond normative commitments to examine institutional performance, political economy constraints, diplomatic practice, and reform pathways grounded in empirical evidence and applied policy analysis. The conference will also provide a platform for advocacy aimed at ensuring this evidence-based research meaningfully informs policy conversations and mechanisms at continental, regional, and national levels.

CONFERENCE METHODOLOGY

The conference will adopt a multi-layered and interactive methodology combining:

- High-level keynote addresses by senior diplomats and international policymakers
- Plenary and roundtable discussions anchored in policy-relevant themes
- Peer-reviewed research paper presentations
- Practitioner-focused policy labs and closed-door dialogues
- Side events on professional development, mentorship, and publications

This approach is designed to foster rigorous debate, cross-sectoral learning, and the co-production of policy-relevant knowledge, making the conference an exceptional and memorable event.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

- Advance high-level policy dialogue on the role of Africa's continental and regional institutions in peacebuilding, resilience, and transformation.
- Interrogate the links between emerging risks, such as TBML and cybercrime, and regional conflict dynamics to identify the necessary institutional policy responses and continental and REC levels.
- Generate evidence-based insights, through high-level policy dialogue on institutional effectiveness, coordination, and reform in a fragmenting global order.
- Bridge theory and practice by connecting academic research with policy formulation and diplomatic action.
- Strengthen professional networks among diplomats, policymakers, scholars, and development partners.
- Contribute actionable policy recommendations to inform African, regional, and international decision-making processes.

CONFERENCE TRACKS

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

Track I: International Relations, Peace and Security

- African Peace and Security Architecture in a contested global order
- Conflict prevention, mediation, and peace enforcement
- Governance, legitimacy, and democratic resilience
- Cyber security, emerging technologies, and regional stability

- Money laundering and financing of crimes
- Migration, displacement, and human security
- Multilateralism, Regionalism, and South-South Cooperation
- The politics of gas and rail infrastructure

Track 2: Diplomacy, Global Governance and African Resilience

- African diplomacy in a multipolar and fragmented world
- Economic and commercial diplomacy under geoeconomic competition
- Climate, environmental, and humanitarian diplomacy
- Digital and public diplomacy in an era of disinformation
- Norm diffusion, soft power, and Africa's global voice
- Mineral Diplomacy and Green Energy Transition

Track 3: Regional Integration, Transformation and Development

- AfCFTA, Tripartite, regional markets, and industrial transformation
- Infrastructure, connectivity, and supply chain resilience
- Finance, debt, and development cooperation
- Labour mobility, social cohesion, and inclusive growth
- Regional institutions as drivers of structural transformation
- Trade governance and Trade-Based Money Laundering (TBML) risks under AfCFTA

Across all tracks, the conference will emphasise interdisciplinary analysis, empirical evidence, and policy applicability.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The expected outcomes are as follows:

- i. Enhanced understanding of the strategic role of Africa's continental and regional institutions in peacebuilding, resilience and transformation
- ii. Targeted recommendations on mitigating TBML risks within continental and regional trade frameworks
- iii. Policy-relevant recommendations on institutional effectiveness, coordination and reform in a fragmenting global order
- iv. Dissemination of cutting-edge research through conference publications and increased visibility of African scholarship and policy perspectives in global debates
- v. Strengthened professional and institutional networks
- vi. Evidence-based and actionable policy recommendations aimed at strengthening African, regional and international decision-making processes
- vii. Experiential Learning and Mentorship

CONCLUSION

As global fragmentation accelerates, Africa's continental and regional institutions stand at a critical juncture. Their ability to deliver peace, resilience, and transformation will shape the continent's trajectory in the decades ahead. The 2026 IRSK Annual Conference provides a timely and authoritative platform to rigorously interrogate these challenges, elevate African agency, and contribute meaningfully to policy and practice at national, regional, and global levels.

PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS



International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)

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

www.irskenya.or.ke



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 governance, 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)

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