

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICIES OF THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN STATES: CONCEPTUALIZING ROLES AND INTERDEPENDENCIES

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Abstract. The study of international organizations (IOs) has emerged as a sub-discipline in International Relations, with academic debate revolving around areas as different as decision-making, performance and service delivery, agency and reform, autonomy and bureaucracies, peacekeeping and access to leadership positions. Not as much focus has been placed on the complexity of roles that IOs could play in foreign policies of states in the Global South, resulting in interdependencies between national entities and institutions. The article attempts to contribute to this research field by placing the theoretical assumptions concerning the institutional interactions between countries and the UN system entities, “clubs” such as BRICS or G20, and specialized (such as WHO or FAO) and regional (the African Union or African regional economic communities) organizations into the African context. Through systematizing existing approaches to the analysis of interactions between countries and IOs, the paper identifies ten different modes of the interaction between African states and various IOs. While most nations will have an interest in IOs as amplifiers of diplomacy, signalling mechanisms, spaces for socialization or display of identities, as well as springboards to serve their development interest, the content core of such interactions will remain unique to each “state–IO” pair. This work also highlights political ambitions of certain countries in the region and their desire to consolidate their leadership status in the eyes of the international community and brings nuance to the understanding of practical policies of African states in IOs, formulating further research questions.

Keywords: international organizations, multilateralism, Africa, UN, African Union, multilateral cooperation, development agenda, national interests, peacekeeping, integration, global governance

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Since African states gained independence, international organizations (IOs) of various levels have been playing a significant role in their foreign policies as a means of facilitating the pursuit of the states’ broader political objectives and, in certain cases,

serving leadership ambitions of individual states on the continent. This article seeks to systematize the interactions between African nations and principal international institutions. These include formalized intergovernmental organizations, with clearly defined membership criteria, organizational structures, and founding documents, as well as non-formalized groupings and associations that emerged at a later stage in the development of international network diplomacy [Duffield 2007].

LEGITIMIZATION AND SIGNALING THROUGH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

In the early post-colonial years, the United Nations played an important symbolic role, as the full membership in this global organization served as an additional confirmation of the sovereignty of African states and their equality with former colonial powers [Urnov 2011: 8], even though their agency remained limited, both within the global system of international relations and due to the mostly continued orientation of their elites and economic systems toward maintaining close ties with the former colonial powers. By obtaining full membership in the United Nations, they acquired voting rights equal to those of the European nations [Panin 2023b], adhered to the principles of interstate relations enshrined in the UN Charter [Tiunov 2014], while their representatives were now eligible for election to positions of international responsibility. In this way, the United Nations became a channel for legitimizing their statehood: UN membership signified confirmation of sovereignty, recognition of the inviolability of existing borders, and the legitimacy of authority within those borders [Herbst 1996; Alvarez 2016].

Such a perception of the role of the United Nations was also characteristic of separatist and national liberation movements in Africa at a later period: they likewise sought, if not to obtain recognition from the United Nations and regional organizations, then, at least, to establish a certain degree of interaction with them. In particular, almost immediately after the province of Katanga declared independence from Congo, an unrecognized mission was opened in New York in July 1960 [Gerard-Libois 1966]. Similar efforts were undertaken by the leadership of Biafra, which seceded from Nigeria in 1967 [Ignatus 2020; Heerten 2017].

For the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), interaction with the United Nations also played a legitimizing role—especially after the UN General Assembly in 1973 recognized SWAPO as the “authentic representative of the people of Namibia,” who possess an “inalienable and imprescriptible right to self-determination and independence.”¹

A similar role of the United Nations was evident in the lead-up to the independence of Eritrea and South Sudan. Both cases are indicative, as they involved changes to borders on the continent that had remained unchanged since the colonial period, something that until then had been considered impossible². The inviolability of borders was reinforced by one of the inter-African principles, as the Charter of the Organization of African Unity adopted in 1963 stipulated that respect for the sovereignty and territorial

¹ Question of Namibia (A/RES/3111). *UN*. 12.12.1973. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/191238?v=pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

² The United Nations and the independence of Eritrea. UN Department of Political Information. DPI/1850. *UN Digital Library*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/229464?v=pdf>

integrity of African states determines their “inalienable right to independent existence.”³ The UN involvement made it possible to achieve consensus around the legitimacy of these processes amid concerns that the legalization of secession could lead to a broader rise in separatist sentiments⁴.

On the most acute items of the international agenda, international organizations may also reflect the collective position of their member states, acting as “signal beacons” and providing reference points for foreign policies of individual countries. The imposition of sanctions, suspension of membership, expulsion from an organization, and problematization of a domestic situation through placing it as an issue on the agenda of the UN Security Council and General Assembly, or of regional organizations, provide other states with grounds to reconsider previous formats of bilateral relations. For example, South Africa’s membership in the United Nations was suspended in 1974⁵. The mobilization of efforts by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity⁶ (in particular, their joint World Conference for Action against Apartheid held in Lagos in 1977) also made it possible to “break” the resistance of the most influential Western states, which leaned toward “constructive engagement” with the apartheid regime and were therefore unwilling to support its international isolation.

More “soft” measures undertaken by organizations may also play a role—for instance, through “public shaming,” especially in matters of human rights compliance, constitutionality, and security, which serves as a signal that more serious consequences may ensue [Squatrito, Lundgren, Sommerer 2019]. This, however, does not negate the selectivity and politicization of “shaming” and does not guarantee the intended impact on a country’s policies. The electoral crisis in The Gambia that erupted in 2016 is such an example: pressure from the African Union, which condemned Yahya Jammeh’s decision to annul the election’s results and remain in power, did not lead to a peaceful transfer of power. This required an operation to restore democracy by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and additional diplomatic efforts by both regional neighbors and the United Nations.

On the other hand, restoration of membership and lifting of sanctions and embargoes send a signal of a state’s reintegration into the international community, facilitating further restoration of bilateral ties. Thus, following the completion of the power transit in South Africa, the UN General Assembly restored the country’s full membership in the United Nations and removed apartheid from its agenda in June 1994⁷.

A similar signal is sent through IOs when state leaders that came to power through unconstitutional means are granted the opportunity to address the UN General Assembly (or to participate in a summit of any other organization). For example, the presence of Mamady Doumbouya, who led the coup in Guinea in September 2021, at the 78th session

³ OAU Charter. 25.05.1963. AU. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7759-file-oau_charter_1963.pdf (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴ The United Nations and the independence of Eritrea. UN Department of Political Information. DPI/1850. *UN Digital Library*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/229464?v=pdf>

⁵ Teltsch K. South Africa is Suspended by U.N. Assembly, 91-22. *The New York Times*. 13.11.1974. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/11/13/archives/south-africa-is-suspended-by-un-assembly-9122-un-session-barssouth.html> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁶ Organization of African Unity (OAU) was an African intergovernmental organization, the predecessor of the African Union (AU), established in 1963 in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) with the participation of 33 governments.

⁷ Elimination of apartheid and establishment of a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa (resolution). A/RES/48/258. UN. 06.07.1994. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/194333?ln=en&v=pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

of the UN General Assembly⁸, and his meeting with the UN Secretary-General, could be seen as a de facto recognition of legitimacy, in spite of continued international criticism of the regime, including concerns from the UN⁹, and despite the fact that the African Union continues to consider Guinea's membership suspended¹⁰.

“DIPLOMATIC MULTIPLIERS”

Most African countries do not have an extensive network of diplomatic missions, and their diplomatic services often lack resources comparable to the budgets of the Foreign Ministries of many other states. Still, the range of issues of interest to African states is rather broad, which is why they have to prioritize their efforts on the international stage. In particular, during its term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2020–2021), Niger established a special department within the Prime Minister's Office and tripled the diplomatic staff of its mission in New York by assigning its most experienced diplomats. However, even then, Niamey's diplomatic capabilities remained far more limited than those of other Council members. As a result, a decision was made to concentrate the efforts exclusively on the situation in the Sahel during Niger's rotational presidency of the Security Council [Souaré 2023].

IOs give African countries an opportunity to “turn up the volume” of their voice on the most salient of the issues. Engagement in coalitions formed on the margins of the UN or other organizations makes it possible to seek solutions to problems that might otherwise remain outside international attention [Urnov 2011: 11; Panke 2020]. Although African countries account for nearly 30% of all UN mandates, the effective articulation of their positions without amplifying their voice through close coordination often remains ineffective [Urnov 2011: 9; Panke 2019]. Since 1966, the African Group has held three non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council, and it is precisely the format of the “African Troika” (A3), underpinned by work carried out within the African Union, rather than individual diplomatic practice, that enables the continent's countries to bring the most significant issues into the spotlight [Panin 2023a].

Authorship and joint drafting of resolutions (penholding) allow states to be part of shaping the agenda, albeit indirectly. Formal decision-making rules of the UN Security Council (and of other bodies of the UN system) leave room for informal practices that also play a role in strengthening negotiating positions of “weaker” states, while their engagement results in a greater international legitimacy for the decisions adopted.

Although the majority of draft resolutions are penned by the permanent members of the UN Security Council, which allows them to set the tone of the discussion and control its substance [Gifkins 2021], their seeking support of regional groups (or presenting a draft as an initiative of regional states affected by the resolution) enhances that regional state's bargaining leverage. In particular, a U.S. diplomatic cable leaked by *WikiLeaks* underscored the significance of Ghana's support for a U.S.–UK–French draft resolution

⁸ General Debate. General Assembly. *UN*. 21.09.2023. <https://gadebate.un.org/en/78/guinea> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁹ Guinée: un rapport des Nations unies étrille le régime de Mamadi Doumbouya. *Jeune Afrique*. 21.01.2025. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1649956/politique/guinee-un-rapport-des-nations-unies-ettrille-le-regime-de-mamadi-doumbouya/> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹⁰ Communiqué of the 1030th meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council on the situation in the Republic of Guinea. *AU*. 16.09.2021. <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1030th-meeting-held-on-10-september-2021-on-the-situation-in-the-republic-of-guinea> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

on the deployment of a hybrid operation in Darfur, in the absence of such support from other AU member states. Ghana's position, as it was assumed, would be pivotal in orienting the voting of other UNSC members and serving as a counterweight to the views of China, South Africa, and Qatar¹¹.

Penholding of certain topics of resolutions allows a state to acquire additional political weight by demonstrating leadership and assuming responsibility for an international decision. Conducting negotiations on a resolution, coordinating and smoothing positions (especially of the authors and addressees of a resolution), introducing amendments and moderating discussions—all of this enables smaller and less influential states to gain diplomatic experience and bolster their international image [Gifkins 2021]. For instance, while serving as a member of the UN Security Council in 2016–2017, Senegal partnered with the United States on drafting a resolution aimed at enhancing cooperation between the UN and regional organizations, in particular, the African Union¹², which was then adopted in November 2016¹³.

It should be noted, however, that penholding of resolutions most often comes as a result of “delegated authority” by the three Western permanent members of the UN Security Council (P3), rather than as an own initiative of a state, even though the “penholder right” is not formally restricted. However, the permanent members of the UNSC, by virtue of their veto power, exert control over which issues are brought to discussion and in what way [Farrall et al. 2019]. For this reason, the Permanent Representative of Mali appealed to the UN Security Council in March 2023, demanding the withdrawal of France as penholder on all agenda UNSC items on the situation in Mali, citing doubts about Paris's objectivity and impartiality¹⁴.

Table 1 shows that African states have no “penholder right” even on issues that directly concern the situation in the region. An exception is West Africa, as the subregional states have more opportunities to set the tone of the discussion, although this has been a “co-authorship” with Western states since 2018. The West retains a privileged role with regard to which provisions are included in the draft resolutions [Adu et al. 2023]. Nevertheless, penholding distribution in the UN Security Council indicates that the situation has been gradually changing, and the Western P3 are now more willing to “share the pen” with representatives of Africa.

The gradual incorporation of African representatives into penholding practices contributes to the erosion of the structural power of the collective West and reduces the likelihood that the positions of regional states on issues directly affecting them will be ignored [Adu et al. 2023]. However, it is evident that progress remains extremely limited.

¹¹ AU/UN Hybrid in Darfur: Narrowing Differences. *Wikileaks*. 2007. <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2007/07/07USUNNEWYORK563.html> (accessed: 07.03.2025).

¹² Enhancing the relationship between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations, in particular the African Union. UN Security Council. S/2016/977. Draft resolution / Senegal and United States of America. *UN*. 18.11.2016. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/848796?&=pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹³ UN Security Council. Resolution 2320 (2016) on enhancing the relationship between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations, in particular the African Union. *UN*. 18.11.2016. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/849567> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹⁴ Letter from the Permanent Representative of Mali to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council. UN Security Council. *UN*. 01.03.2023. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4006785?v=pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

Table 1. Penholding allocation on African issues in the UN Security Council

Agenda Item	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Burundi	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France
Central Africa, incl. CAR	France	France	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK	France, UK, Mozambique
Cote-d'Ivoire	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France
DR Congo	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France, Sierra Leone
Ethiopia / Tigray	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	Ireland	–	–
Great Lakes	France	France	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	France	France
Guinea-Bissau	Nigeria	Nigeria	Senegal	Senegal	Cote-d'Ivoire	Cote-d'Ivoire	Niger	Niger	–	–	–
Liberia	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	–
Libya	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK, Germ.	UK, Germ.	UK	UK	UK	UK
Mali	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France	France
Sierra Leone	UK	UK	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Somalia	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	U.S., UK	UK	UK
Sudan, South Sudan	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	U.S., UK, Germ.	U.S., UK, Germ.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.	UK, U.S.

Compiled by the author from Security Council Report materials <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org>

At the same time, the assumption of a more active role by a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council under the influence of the Council's permanent members (for example, the UK and France, the two countries that most often act as penholders on African issues) may become subject to bargaining: support for a favorable draft resolution may be “exchanged” for a promise to expand development assistance—the informal price of such support. Donor states may use financial aid as an instrument of exerting political pressure rather than as a means of addressing humanitarian problems. A developing country serving on the UN Security Council may expect, on average, a 59% increase in U.S. aid and a 170% increase during periods when issues of particular importance to Washington are placed on the Council's agenda [Kuziemko, Werker 2006]. Research shows that U.S. aid to African states correlates with their voting behavior in the UN General Assembly, seeking an erosion of African support for China [Xu, Wan, Chen 2024]. This, however, concerns not only the United States but also other donor states

[Strand, Tuman 2012], while “vote trading” does not eliminate diplomatic pressure [Panin 2023b]. Such “vote trading” or “exchange of favors” may become an instrument for obtaining benefits at minimal cost—especially when the vote concerns issues that are not of fundamental importance for the foreign policy of the states casting their votes.

REDUCTION OF COSTS, SOCIALIZATION AND REFLECTION OF IDENTITIES

Amid limited financial resources, systemic shortage of personnel, and insufficient in-house expertise on certain issues, IOs enable African countries to establish contacts with a wide circle of states while incurring minimal costs for maintaining these contacts.

Appendix 1 shows that the aggregate contribution of African states to the United Nations did not exceed 1.2% of its total budget in 2023. Their contribution to the International Labour Organization (ILO) was likewise around 1%, to UNESCO about 2%, and to the World Health Organization (WHO) approximately 3%. Only the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) somewhat stands out, with a total contribution of 10%, half of which is accounted for by South Sudan (see *Appendix 2*).

At the same time, there is no correlation between a country’s GDP (PPP) and its financial contribution. Egypt, the continent’s largest economy, ranks fifth in its financial contribution to the UN, whereas Kenya—the seventh-largest economy—takes first place. Zimbabwe’s economy ranks 23rd in Africa, while Harare’s contribution places the country eighth in the ranking. Angola presents a reverse situation: the 8th economy ranks 26th in its contribution to the UN budget. The contributions of some countries are symbolic: Djibouti closes the list with a contribution of USD 10,200¹⁵. Nor can one discern indisputable “leaders” in financing IOs, as countries prioritize their multilateral participation differently. For example, South Africa accounts for 1% of Africa’s total financial contribution to the UN and for 2% in the case of the WHO.

Beyond using IOs as a “springboard” for diplomatic activity, cost reduction can also be manifested more directly when states derive greater benefits from an organization’s program activities than the costs they incur through membership contributions. As such, Nigeria—the continent’s second-largest economy—receives about 11.5% of WHO funding in Africa, nearly USD 181 million in absolute terms, while its contribution amounts to USD 6.9 million¹⁶. The same can be said of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (USD 140 million received in support with a contribution of USD 7.5 million, which is even more than Nigeria) or Ethiopia (USD 95 million in support with a contribution of USD 200 thousand). African countries receive the larger share of direct financial benefits from membership in the WHO, if one considers the regional distribution of the organization’s budget worldwide¹⁷. A separate aspect concerns regional African institutions that strive for financial independence from external donors

¹⁵ The same applies to other international organizations. In 2023, Liberia’s contribution to the financing of the FAO amounted to USD 4,722; those of Gambia, Burundi, Eritrea, and Djibouti to the WHO budget amounted to USD 4,780; those of Somalia, Liberia, the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Djibouti, Burundi, and several other countries to the ILO amounted to USD 4,157; and Sierra Leone’s contribution to UNESCO amounted to USD 2,700. For more details, see: WHO Programme Budget 2024–2025. Africa. WHO. <https://open.who.int/2024-25/regions/AFR/flow> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹⁶ WHO Program Budget 2024–2025. Africa. WHO. <https://open.who.int/2024-25/regions/AFR/flow> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹⁷ Ibid.

[Gottschalk 2024]. However, the practice of “externalizing” costs while retaining the ability to extract benefits from membership in the African Union could be seen as another confirmation of the deliberate use of institutions to enhance the effectiveness of foreign policy activities at a minimal cost.

Membership in international organizations facilitates the “socialization” of the states, including that of political elites and diplomatic services. Through continuous participation in negotiations, committee meetings, and sideline encounters, a gradual convergence of views and discourse takes place, which is reinforced by peer pressure—the alignment of one’s behavior and positions with informal expectations that influences which issues a country considers a priority and spotlights and supports in voting [Chelotti, Dasandi, Mikhaylov 2022]. In addition, the collective membership of African states in the African Union contributes to mutual understanding, even against the backdrop of persistent contradictions and tension among individual countries [Gottschalk 2024].

Socialization here is understood as either the adoption of values of a broad range of actors or the reinforcement of pre-held views and interests under the influence of an external environment in which the same ideas are practiced [Bearce, Bondanella 2007]. Indirect evidence of this can be found in statements delivered at the UN General Assembly, which can potentially shed more light on state preferences than their voting behavior, since their structure and topical focus are decided by the countries themselves—that is, with the influence of informal expectations of the UN’s social environment but without external pressure or “penholder” restrictions [Jönsson 2003].

An analysis of the statements made by delegates of the 16 most populous African countries at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2024 showed that, despite differences in approaches and priorities, African states, *first*, demonstrate their “embeddedness” in the broader international context (with references to multilateralism and UN principles); *second*, maneuver between the expectations of their partners—with references to democracy, respect for human rights, and climate neutrality (“Western agenda”), while invoking issues of double standards and harmful effects of unilateral sanctions and stressing the importance of sovereignty (“BRICS agenda”). *Third*, they promote pan-African interests (development, debt relief, attracting financing, including peacekeeping, food security, poverty reduction, youth development as social capital, and other related issues).

Membership in an international organization can also send a signal about the identity that a country embraces. Regionalism (for example, subregional integration groupings in Africa) is the most illustrative example. However, even in this case the “declared” identity may change under the influence of political circumstances, leading to duplication or overlap. For instance, in 1976, at the initiative of Zaire (today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo), the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries was established, bringing together Zaire, Burundi, and Rwanda. At the time, this configuration reflected the shared colonial past of Ruanda-Urundi and the Belgian Congo, as well as the desire to preserve economic ties. Soon the situation changed, and the DRC prioritized an “expanded” East Africa identity through the accession to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and, somewhat later, took on a Central Africa identity through membership in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). As the crisis in relations between the DRC and Rwanda deepened, the “East African” component of the DRC’s identity has become less salient. This was manifested in the DRC’s accession to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1997 as a

balancing act. With tensions renewed in 2025, this was further evident in Kinshasa's rejection of the East African Community's peacekeeping mission in favor of a contingent from SADC.

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and their parallel establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States may likewise be interpreted as a shift in political course and manifestation of a new subregional identity.

A SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF INTERESTS

In one way or another, IOs may act as intermediaries that enable states to derive benefits from their membership in accordance with their priorities and national interests. Through IOs, states seek to create or maintain favorable conditions for their development, and they aim to enhance their international image and prestige through leadership on specific issue areas within IOs.

African states are certainly using their IO memberships as a "springboard" that allows them to articulate their challenges and needs to a broad audience, conduct negotiations "on the margins," and project preliminary agreements to the bilateral agenda. In particular, when addressing the UN General Assembly in 2024, representatives of the DRC, Uganda, Morocco, and Madagascar, alongside discussing international issues, called on other countries to invest in specific sectors of their economies. Existing research shows that participation in international organizations can have a positive effect on inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into national economies [Dreher, Mikosch, Voigt 2015].

In general terms, a state's choice of the most suitable IO platform for pursuing its objectives is linked to two main aspects: institutional design (composition of participants, range of addressed issues, decision-making procedures, enforcement mechanisms) and the state's ability to turn all these aspects to its advantage. For example, throughout its post-apartheid history, South Africa sought to avoid active engagement with the Bretton Woods institutions for attracting investment and financing. To address this task, Pretoria relied on being an "invited participant" at G7 summits, as well as on the financial architecture of BRICS and the African Union—and only the COVID-19 pandemic, which required emergency measures, brought adjustments to this approach. Still, South Africa's use of institutions alternative to the IMF and the World Bank made it possible for the country to secure greater flexibility or more preferential conditions in attracting financial resources.

Another example is the discussion of international labor standards under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was initiated by a coalition of Western countries. Most developing states, including African (with whose interests South Africa officially associates its "voice" in the UN, BRICS, G20, and other multilateral platforms), opposed consideration of the issue outside the International Labor Organization (ILO), fearing that Western countries might use this as a hidden form of protectionism to put a cap on competitive advantages of countries with cheaper labor. In this case, Pretoria supported the position of the U.S., France, and Norway, since South Africa was then in the final stages of its democratic transition from apartheid, and it was more important for the country to play the "ideology" card by emphasizing its commitment to human rights and drawing on a strong tradition of trade unionism. Moreover, this stance was helpful for improving relations with the West, which was instrumental for economic recovery after a prolonged period of sanctions and other restrictive measures [Murphy, Kellow 2013].

On another issue within the WTO, the South African government, by contrast, took the initiative in defending the interests of the Global South. By the early 2000s, the problem of HIV prevalence had become markedly acute in South Africa¹⁸. Given this, the government sought greater accessibility of therapies, including through generics of original medicines and compulsory licensing, but it encountered resistance from originator companies—Pfizer, GSK, and Merck—backed by the United States, which initiated legal proceedings on the grounds that South Africa was violating TRIPS¹⁹. Pretoria, however, succeeded in bringing together a coalition of developing countries, the World Health Organization, and relevant non-governmental organizations, which allowed it to bring the issue of pharmaceutical security in the context of the HIV epidemic to the UN General Assembly’s attention in 2001. Ultimately, confirmation of the legality of South Africa’s actions, which helped expand production of generics, came with the adoption of the Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health²⁰. To a large extent, this success was made possible by the efforts of South African diplomacy [Halbert 2002]. In a similar vein, South Africa used the WTO during the COVID-19 pandemic in support of its “vaccine diplomacy,” seeking to represent the interests of developing countries jointly with India²¹.

The conferral by IOs of various formal statuses also enables states to obtain advantages, for which they may deliberately maintain their international posture within certain bounds. Thus, the retention of the “least developed country” (LDC) status contributes to higher exports, especially agriculture and light manufacturing, as well as facilitates access to greater international assistance [Klasen et al. 2020]. After the LDC status was removed from Botswana in 1994, the volume of official development assistance (ODA) declined by 43% over the subsequent five years compared to the preceding five-year period and by a further 52% over the following five years²². Other countries on the continent, such as Angola, have sought to delay the removal of this status: in light of its socio-economic situation and persistent recession risks, Luanda retained LDC status first in 2021 and then again in 2024. Possession of LDC status enabled Angola, inter alia, to justify the preservation of preferences under the U.S. AGOA program²³.

¹⁸ Whereas HIV prevalence among the adult population in South Africa stood at 1.3% in 1990, this figure had risen to 15% by 2003. Prevalence of HIV. *World Development Indicators*. World Bank Group. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.AIDS.ZS> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

¹⁹ The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is an international agreement that forms part of the package of documents establishing the World Trade Organization and sets minimum standards for the recognition and protection of the principal categories of intellectual property.

²⁰ Declaration on the TRIPS agreement and Public Health. Doha Ministerial Conference Declarations. *WTO*. 14.11.2001. https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/ddec_e.pdf (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²¹ India and South Africa proposal for WTO waiver from intellectual property protections for COVID-19-related medical technologies. *Médecins Sans Frontières*. 18.11.2020. https://msfaccess.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/COVID_Brief_WTO_WaiverProposal_ENG_v2_18Nov2020.pdf (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²² Net official development assistance (constant 2021 US\$). *World Development Indicators*. World Bank Group. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.KD> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²³ The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was adopted in 2000. Its purpose is to grant selected Sub-Saharan African countries duty-free access to the U.S. market for more than 6,400 product categories. It should be noted, however, that possession of LDC status as such is not a guarantee of receiving particular preferences. Political factors play a significant role: for example, the United States excluded Burundi—one of Africa’s least developed countries—from the AGOA program in 2015, citing political repression and the suppression of opposition within the country. At the end of September 2025, the program was suspended and, as of November

The attitudes of African states toward BRICS and G20 are also illustrative. While external discourse surrounding their interest in these formats is mostly focused on politico-ideological aspects [Fituni 2022] and the considerations associated with joining an exclusive and prestigious club²⁴, the discussion within African states most often unfolds in economic terms, as evidenced by the cases of Nigeria²⁵, Uganda²⁶, Ghana²⁷, and Kenya²⁸. Thus, according to the cited publication, Kenya's interest in BRICS lies in diversifying the country's sources of capital and in expanding trade ties. When joining BRIC, South Africa likewise linked their expectations to economic considerations: accelerating economic growth, attracting investment and expanding trade, positive effects on employment, and progress toward the objectives of the National Development Plan [Panin 2023c].

Using IOs as “springboards” for advancing interests is linked not only to economic considerations but also to security. For example, in light of the intensification of extremism and banditry within the country, Nigeria took the initiative at the United Nations to promote an international regime for controlling the circulation of small arms and light weapons. This issue became central in a number of addresses that Nigerian leaders presented at the UN General Assembly, which was also reflected in Nigeria's leadership during the UN Review Conference on the implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons [Panin 2025], as well as in Abuja's promotion of this agenda within ECOWAS [Atidoga, Yakubu, Lamidi 2024].

In combating Boko Haram²⁹, the Nigerian authorities made use of various international formats (the UN, the AU, ECOWAS, the Lake Chad Basin Commission), deriving different advantages and forms of assistance from each of them, while avoiding direct external involvement, thereby preserving maximum autonomy in decision-making and minimizing reputational losses as a regional power [Henneberg, Plank 2019].

Cooperation with sector-specific and regional organizations can serve governments not only as a means of increasing the effectiveness of policy programs (for example, through the exchange of experience or the involvement of international experts) but also as a way to share responsibility for outcomes or to avoid criticism for unpopular decisions and reforms [Panke 2020]. In such cases, organizations act as a “buffer” between governments and the population, as authorities can claim that decisions were taken collectively rather than at the national level. For example, in February 2024, the

2025, was not renewed. See: Obama bars Burundi from AGOA. *African Business*. 02.11.2015. <https://african.business/2015/11/economy/obama-bars-burundi-from-agoa> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁴ Zelenova D. The African Agenda of BRICS: Challenges and Prospects of Multipolarity. *Valdai International Discussion Club*. 22.10.2024. (In Russ.). <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/afrikanskaya-povestka-briks/> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁵ Onyeiwu S. Nigeria's Brics partnership: economist outlines potential benefits. *The Conversation*. 05.02.2025. <https://theconversation.com/nigerias-brics-partnership-economist-outlines-potential-benefits-248943> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁶ What Uganda's “BRICS Partner Country” status means. *The Independent*. 31.10.2024. <https://www.independent.co.ug/what-ugandas-brics-partner-country-status-means/> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁷ Ogundele A. The future of Ghana's development and the BRICS opportunity. *GhanaWeb*. 03.02.2025. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/The-future-of-Ghana-s-development-and-the-BRICS-opportunity-1970019> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁸ Maina M. Kenya, a US Ally, Seeks China's Backing to Join BRICS. *Kenyan Foreign Policy*. 07.11.2024. <https://kenyanforeignpolicy.com/kenya-a-us-ally-seeks-chinas-backing-to-join-brics/> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

²⁹ Banned in the Russian Federation.

Nigeria Labour Congress shifted responsibility for the country's energy crisis onto the IMF and the World Bank³⁰, and in most African countries, these two organizations are blamed for the failure of structural adjustment programs and the growth of debt burdens. Similarly, part of the blame for inadequate measures to combat the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa was placed on the WHO³¹, while during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities of Equatorial Guinea accused a WHO representative of falsifying morbidity data and “inflating” the scale of the epidemic³².

MEDIATION AND PEACEKEEPING

The role of international organizations as providers of security has been well described, and it is also frequently criticized—both in academic publications [Volkov et al. 2019; Bokeria 2022; Denisova, Kostelyanets 2023; Tull 2023] and by governments and local populations³³.

Leaving aside questions of the practical implementation of IOs' peacekeeping potential, it should be noted that various international organizations often become the “first line” of support for a country on whose territory a conflict is unfolding. It is IOs, rather than states or mediators, that establish dialogue between the parties, seeking to pave the way toward trust [Edwards, DiCicco 2018], although such efforts most often achieve limited success and only constitute the initial stage on the path to settlement. This is clearly illustrated by the ongoing conflicts in Sudan and in eastern DRC (including the efforts of SADC and EAC, whose summit provided a venue for a meeting between the leaders of the DRC and Rwanda in Tanzania in February 2025³⁴, yet failed to achieve a significant change in the parties' positions or affect the course of the conflict).

In addition to reconciliation efforts, international organizations are tasked with facilitating humanitarian corridors and collecting information about ongoing developments—not so much regarding military aspects as the humanitarian situation and the related challenges and threats, including epidemics, access to water and food, forced displacement, and protection of civilians. The dissemination of this information among states and the wider public makes it possible to draw the attention of the international community to a conflict and, to some extent, to bring closer the search for an optimal formula for its resolution. Thus, during the renewed escalation of the conflict between government forces and the M23 movement in eastern DRC, which began in December

³⁰ Adonu C. NLC blames IMF, World Bank for power sector crisis in Nigeria. *Vanguard*. 23.02.2024. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/02/nlc-blames-imf-world-bank-for-power-sector-crisis-in-nigeria/> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³¹ Burrows T. WHO admits botching response to Ebola as man who discovered virus blames UN's 'incompetent' African offices. *Daily Mail Online*. 17.10.2014. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2797439/world-health-organization-admits-botching-response-ebola-blaming-incompetent-african-offices.html> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³² La Guinée Equatoriale demande le départ de la représentante de l'OMS. *Le Figaro*. 02.06.2020. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/la-guinee-equatoriale-demande-le-depart-de-la-representante-de-l-oms-20200602> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³³ Anyadike O. The changing face of peacekeeping: What's gone wrong with the UN? *The New Humanitarian*. 09.07.2024. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2024/07/09/changing-face-peacekeeping-whats-gone-wrong-un> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³⁴ Rwandan and Congolese leaders join summit on eastern DRC conflict. *The Guardian*. 08.02.2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/08/rwandan-and-congolese-leaders-join-summit-on-eastern-drc-conflict> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

2024, various organizations within the UN system—WHO, UNESCO, and UNHCR—highlighted their respective “sectoral” dimensions of the conflict, creating a more comprehensive picture of events^{35, 36}.

Finally, international institutions may help disputing states avoid a full-scale conflict, as they could act as “arbitrators” under conditions of equality of the parties, preservation of their reputations, regulated procedures, mechanisms for appealing decisions. For example, the Permanent Court of Arbitration³⁷ contributed to settling a border dispute between Sudan and South Sudan (at the time the latter was an autonomous entity rather than an independent state) over the Abyei area. In 2009, the arbitral tribunal established new boundaries and introduced a principle of joint administration by the parties, which facilitated South Sudan’s eventual independence, although it did not fully satisfy either side [Siblesz 2019]. Another example is the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula, which was resolved in 2006 on the basis of proceedings before the International Court of Justice, initiated by Cameroon³⁸. As a result, Cameroon succeeded in establishing sovereignty over the disputed territory, although the Nigerian Senate subsequently refused to ratify the agreement.

CONSOLIDATION OF STATUS

Participation in international institutions can also reinforce a state’s ambitions and status. Since the notion of “status” is a socio-psychological construct [Larson, Shevchenko 2019], state positioning is linked not only to foreign policy actions but also to recognition by other states [Renshon 2017] and social embeddedness of such an identity [Murray 2019]. Given this, international institutions become the most convenient arenas for demonstrating leadership. Of particular importance are “informal clubs,” such as BRICS and the G20, where there are no formal membership criteria and the admission of new participants depends on how they are perceived by existing members of the club.

South Africa, for example, plays a unique role in the G20. It became the only African state to receive an initial invitation to join the forum after U.S. President Bill Clinton put forward such an initiative in 1997³⁹. Subsequently, the format and composition of participants changed—the Willard Group, the G33, and once again the G20—but Pretoria retained its position throughout [Boulle 2011]. South Africa is also a frequent guest at G7 summits (having first received such an invitation in 2000), and, moreover, it was the only

³⁵ Dire health and humanitarian crisis in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo prompts escalation of efforts by WHO, partners. *WHO*. 07.02.2025. <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-02-2025-dire-health-and-humanitarian-crisis-in-eastern-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-prompts-escalation-of-efforts-by-who--partners> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³⁶ Displacement in Eastern DRC and Neighbouring Countries. Two-Month Impact Report. 2025. *UNHCR*. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/DRC%20Two-month%20Impact%20Report.pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³⁷ The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) is an international arbitral tribunal located in The Hague, the Netherlands. It was established in 1899 by decision of the First Hague Peace Conference (18 May–29 June 1899), convened at the initiative of Emperor Nicholas II of Russia. The PCA is the oldest international organization dedicated to the peaceful settlement of international disputes.

³⁸ Nigeria, Cameroon Sign Agreement Ending Decades-Old Border Dispute. *UN*. 02.06.2006. <https://press.un.org/en/2006/afr1397.doc.htm> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

³⁹ A Guide to Committees, Groups, Clubs. *IMF*. <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/A-Guide-to-Committees-Groups-and-Clubs> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

African participant in the G8+5 format⁴⁰. A similar situation persisted in BRICS, where Pretoria for a long time remained the sole “voice” of Africa. This kind of “status resource” made it possible to claim that South Africa was speaking on behalf of the entire continent⁴¹, which bolstered the country’s external image as a leading regional power in Africa, although this status does not enjoy unequivocal support among other African states.

Nigeria’s leadership ambitions are likewise reflected in its participation in international organizations. For a long time, representatives of Abuja pointed out that Nigeria played first fiddle in containing Africa’s conflict potential by providing substantial contingents to UN peacekeeping forces⁴². After 2010, when domestic security challenges intensified, this argument became less prominent, and President Bola Tinubu has placed greater emphasis on engagement with BRICS and G20, similar to South Africa [Panin 2025].

Consolidation of status is also influenced by which international events countries host, as well as by which bodies of international organizations are located on their territory. For example, Ethiopia often positions itself as Africa’s “diplomatic capital,”⁴³ while Kenya constructs a narrative of a major “international hub,” drawing on the fact that one of the UN headquarters⁴⁴ is located in Nairobi⁴⁵. The decision to locate the UN Office for West Africa in Dakar strengthened Senegal’s special role in the subregion [Urnov 2011: 12] amid Nigeria’s leadership ambitions.

International organizations may also serve as an additional channel for lobbying state interests not only through their formal mandates but also through “embedding” national representatives within the ranks of international bureaucracies. Nationals of countries such as Tanzania, Mali, The Gambia, South Africa, and Ghana have, at various times, held a range of senior positions within the UN system [Urnov 2011: 12].

Nigeria has been particularly successful in this: the country has represented the African Group at the United Nations more frequently than other African states (the Nigerian Amina J. Mohammed became UN Deputy Secretary-General in 2017, and Nigeria is the only African country whose representative has twice served as President of the UN General Assembly). Since 1972, Nigeria’s Permanent Representatives to the UN have traditionally held the post of Chair of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34)⁴⁶. Diezani Alison-Madueke, Nigeria’s Minister of Petroleum

⁴⁰ An informal platform between the Group of Eight (G8) and the largest developing economies at the time (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, South Africa), which existed from 2005 to 2008. The countries of the “Five” were viewed as potential candidates for full membership in the G8.

⁴¹ Zuma, Jacob (President). *The Quest for Growth and Stability. South Africa’s philosophy of interconnectedness. The G20 Mexico Summit 2012. G20 Information Centre. Trinity College.* <http://www.g7g20.utoronto.ca/books/loscabos/zuma.html> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴² General Assembly, 65th session: 14th plenary meeting. *UN.* 24.09.2010. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/693750?v=pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴³ Teklemariam S. Addis Ababa, Africa’s Diplomatic Capital. *The Diplomatic Society.* 20.06.2018. <https://thediplomaticsociety.co.za/2486-addis-ababa-africas-diplomatic-capital> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴⁴ Kenya hosts the headquarters of two entities within the UN system: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

⁴⁵ Kisia A. United Nations set to open three new global offices in Nairobi. *The Star.* 19.02.2025. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2025-02-19-un-to-open-three-new-global-offices-in-nairobi> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴⁶ Dietrich T., Keller N., Tierno D., Moeller M. Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. Background Guide. *NMUN.* <https://nmun.org/assets/documents/conference-archives/new-york/2019/ny19-bgg-c-34.pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

Resources, became the first woman to serve as the OPEC President (2014–2015). Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, formerly Nigeria’s Minister of Finance and Minister of Foreign Affairs, has headed the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2021. In October 2025, the Nigerian Philip Mshelbila was elected Secretary-General of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF).

When selecting staff for the structures of the African Union, the influence of individual member states also plays a role, and countries are interested in seeing their representatives appointed to positions of responsibility [Tieku, Gänzle, Trondalet 2020]. For example, South Africa succeeded in 2012 in securing the election of Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the AU Commission, in violation of an informal practice whereby more influential states were expected to refrain from lobbying for their own candidates for this post⁴⁷. During the campaign to elect a new Chairperson of the AU Commission in 2025, Kenya’s ambitions were particularly evident, as it sought to secure the position for the former Prime Minister Raila Odinga—to this end, there was even a special increase in the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴⁸.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual possibilities of interaction between African states and IOs examined in this article represent a first attempt to systematize academically the complexity of roles and interdependencies. It should be acknowledged that the article is of a generalizing nature, while the practical combination of different modes of interaction and the significance of each of the components discussed remain unique to each specific country⁴⁹.

Figure 1 below is intended to schematically illustrate this, as well as summarize the main ideas set out in the article.

Each arrow symbolizes an interaction significant for a state. However, the substance of such an interaction and its priority vary. Some states play a more active role in these interactions (Nigeria in the provision of peacekeeping contingents or the deployment of peacekeeping operations under the auspices of ECOWAS), while others play a more passive role (peacekeeping missions on the territory of the DRC). The meanings, nuances, political expediencies, and degree of state agency in interactions with IOs could be the subject of a separate study.

There are also a number of other questions in the study of such interactions. What is the relationship between IOs and African understandings of multipolarity? In which cases do states prefer to “bypass” organizations, and when do they act “through” them? What influence do organizations exert on the positions of African states and on their perceptions of their place in the world system? Finally, in light of the absence of

⁴⁷ Tikum N. Prejudice disguised as critique: The legacy of AU Commission Chair Dlamini-Zuma. *Pambazuka News*. 28.07.2016. <https://pambazuka.org/prejudice-disguised-critique-legacy-au-commission-chair-dlamini-zuma> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴⁸ Mumby L. How Foreign Affairs budget increased to fund Raila’s failed AU bid – Treasury. *The Eastleigh Voice*. 24.06.2023. <https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/treasury/118529/how-foreign-affairs-budget-increased-to-fund-raila-s-failed-au-bid--treasury> (accessed: 07.03.2025)

⁴⁹ It is equally valid to argue that the agency of international organizations is heterogeneous, as is the manner in which it manifests for different states, since here, too, the determining role is played by the accumulated experience of interaction between a given state and international organizations—an experience that is unique to each country and region.

substantive reforms and the politicization of international platforms, is there a crisis of trust in international institutions among African states? Further research into these questions, in the author’s view, could make it possible to introduce nuances and adjustments to the debate on international organizations—with a particular focus on countries of the developing world.

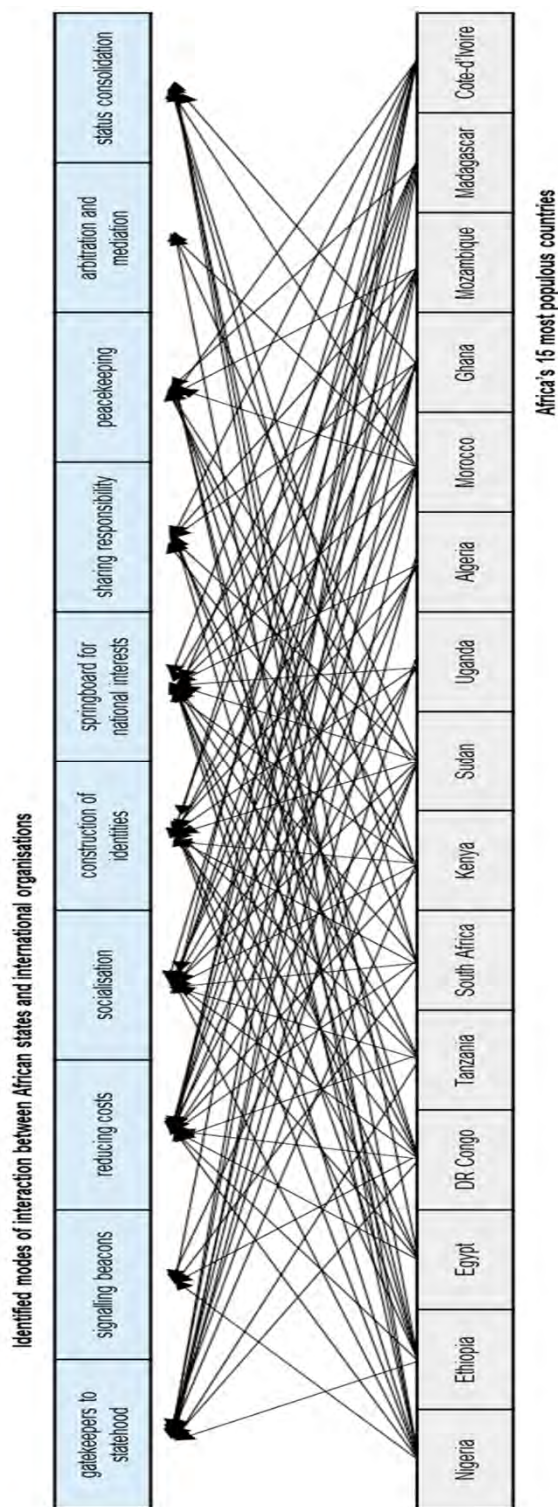


Fig. 1. Indicative correlation of interactions between African states and IOs
 Compiled by the author based on the analysis conducted in the article.

Supplementary materials to the article⁵⁰:

Appendix 1. State contributions to the financing of international organizations (distribution for 2023). Compiled by the author on the basis of data from the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (UN System CEB). URL: <https://unsceb.org/fs-revenue-government-donor>

Appendix 2. Contributions of African states to the financing of international organizations (distribution for 2023). Compiled by the author on the basis of data from the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (UN System CEB). URL: <https://unsceb.org/fs-revenue-government-donor>

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Научная статья

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА ГОСУДАРСТВ АФРИКИ ЮЖНЕЕ САХАРЫ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛИЗАЦИЯ РОЛЕЙ И ВЗАИМОЗАВИСИМОСТЕЙ

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Аннотация. Изучение международных организаций оформилось в самостоятельное направление в науке о международных отношениях. Академическая дискуссия ведется по самым разным направлениям – от процедур принятия решений и оценки эффективности до изучения агентности, реформ, автономии бюрократии, миротворческого потенциала и доступа к ключевым постам. Значительно меньшее внимание в литературе уделяется многообразию ролей, которые эти организации способны играть в реализации внешнеполитических стратегий государств Глобального Юга, порождая сложные взаимосвязи между национальными акторами и международными институтами. Данная статья стремится восполнить этот пробел, помещая в африканский контекст теоретические послы институциональных взаимодействий стран с органами системы ООН, «клубными форматами» (БРИКС, G20), специализированными (ВОЗ, ФАО) и региональными (Афросоюз, африканские региональные экономические сообщества) сообществами. Систематизируя существующие подходы к анализу взаимодействий между государствами и международными структурами, автор выделяет десять вариаций взаимодействия с ними стран Африки. Хотя большинство государств проявляют интерес к ним для усиления своих дипломатических возможностей, используют их для подачи сигналов, как площадку социализации и декларирования идентичности, а также как механизм содействия целям

развития, конкретное наполнение такого рода взаимодействий остается индивидуализированным для каждой пары «государство – организация». Данная работа, кроме того, выделяет политические амбиции отдельных стран региона и их стремление закрепить за собой лидерский статус в глаза международного сообщества. Статья уточняет представления о практиках внешней политики стран Африки в рамках международных организаций и формулирует новые исследовательские вопросы.

Ключевые слова: международные организации, мультилатерализм, Африка, ООН, Африканский союз, многостороннее сотрудничество, повестка развития, национальные интересы, миротворчество, интеграция, глобальное управление

Конфликт интересов: автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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