Policy Brief

Special Edition

Introduction – Pan-African Policy Pathways: Collective Policy Approaches to Common Challenges

Daniel Mulugeta

IPSS-SOAS Pan-African Policy Brief Series

March 2025

IPSS

SOAS
Centre for
Pan-African
Studies

Introduction

Pan-Africanism emerged as a radical response to the systemic exploitation of Africa and its diaspora under colonial and neocolonial systems. Rooted in self-determination, sovereignty, and economic independence, it sought to dismantle the structures that entrenched Africa's marginalisation in world politics. Yet, despite the formal end of colonial rule and its institutionalisation through the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the realisation of collective agency and autonomous development remain elusive. Africa continues to grapple with governance, regional integration, economic, and security challenges that demand a critical reassessment of the frameworks shaping continental cooperation, political accountability, and economic integration. The extent to which existing frameworks and processes meaningfully enhance the well-being of African citizens remain a pressing concern.

This special issue of the Pan-African Policy Brief Series engages with these challenges through six contributions that critically assess governance, regional integration, economic policy, migration, trade, and gendered exclusions in Pan-African policymaking. Each paper highlights the contradictions within regional and continental institutions and individual African states. The contributors reveal the tension between commitments to the collective good and deeply entrenched particularistic practices. State sovereignty is often prioritised over democratic accountability, security concerns over human development, and economic nationalism over meaningful regional cooperation. These contradictions reflect a broader structural issue: the widening gap between the rhetoric of unity and the realities of governance and policy implementation, often reinforced by institutional inertia, fragmented policy approaches, and limited enforcement mechanisms. The contributors argue that, in its current institutionalised form, Pan-Africanism operates within state-centric models that do not adequately serve African citizens. To address these challenges, they call for a fundamental recalibration of Pan-African governance, one that centres the lived realities of African people rather than sustaining existing hierarchies of power.

A persistent challenge, central to the governance crisis in Africa, is the AU's inconsistent response to unconstitutional changes of government. In recent years, the AU has been swift in condemning military coups but has largely failed to address constitutional coups, where leaders manipulate legal frameworks to extend their tenure indefinitely. This selective enforcement undermines its legitimacy as a Pan-African institution and exposes the contradiction between its commitment to democratic norms and

its reluctance to challenge entrenched regimes. In this regard, the paper by Jean Yves Ndzana Ndzana investigates this failure, showing how the AU's inconsistent stance weakens its commitment to democratic principles and citizen engagement. His analysis illustrates how the AU's governance mechanisms have increasingly prioritised regime stability over democratic accountability. Without structural reforms that strengthen enforcement mechanisms, including clear and consistent penalties for constitutional manipulation, the paper argues that the AU risks enabling rather than preventing authoritarian consolidation across the continent.

The shortcomings of Pan-African institution-building are also evident in regional integration initiatives, where political expediency often takes precedence over strategic coordination. Sylvanus Wekesa's paper on Somalia's admission to the East African Community (EAC) highlights the challenges of expanding regional blocs without adequate institutional alignment. While economic cooperation is widely seen as essential for long-term stability and development, governance and security risks are still significant. Wekesa's analysis raises concerns about Somalia's preparedness to engage in regional economic and political structures. He argues that while integration could create new economic opportunities, it also carries risks that may heighten existing tensions within the bloc. Such cases underscore the broader weakness of regional institutions in ensuring that new members align with governance and economic standards before full accession. The EAC, like other regional organisations, often prioritises expansion over consolidation, creating uneven integration processes that ultimately undermine rather than strengthen regional cooperation.

Migration policies offer another illustration of the widening gap between Pan-African ideals and institutional practice. While free movement has been a core component of the AU and RECs' Pan-African vision, African states have increasingly adopted restrictive migration policies that contradict their commitment to these visions. Ruvimbo Hazel Shayamunda's paper emphasizes that many African governments have prioritized border security over recognizing migration as an economic asset and a tool for development. Shayamunda demonstrates the militarisation of African migration governance, where border controls and restrictive policies undermine regional labour mobility and economic cooperation. This securitisation-first approach aligns African migration policies with European priorities, often at the expense of Africa's economic and mobility needs. Rather than promoting free movement, which could foster regional integration and economic growth, these policies reinforce exclusionary frameworks that limit the potential for long-term development across the continent.

Intra-African trade also reflects these contradictions in economic policy. Protectionist policies often undermine the potential benefits of regional agreements. The case of Nigeria and Benin illustrates the limits of such agreements when national economic interests are misaligned. Abel B.S. Gaiya analyzes the impact of Benin's dependence on informal trade economies on the effectiveness of Nigeria's import-substitution policies. While Nigeria attempts to restrict imports to boost local industry, Benin exploits gaps in trade enforcement, weakening formal industrialisation efforts. Gaiya argues that border closures and restrictive policies have failed to achieve the desired economic outcomes, instead reinforcing informal economies rather than integrating them into formal structures. His proposal for a quasi-bilateral industrial policy between Nigeria and Benin challenges protectionist approaches, advocating for a more pragmatic strategy that includes informal traders in regional industrial frameworks. This case study highlights broader concerns about the viability of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) if national trade policies continue to conflict with continental economic goals.

Beyond these economic policies, inadequate infrastructure exacerbates the challenges to economic integration and undermines the efforts of the continent. Although tariff reductions and trade agreements seek to enhance intra-African commerce, the insufficient investment in transport infrastructure contributes to higher transaction costs, resulting in more expensive and inefficient trade within Africa. Justine Luwedde examines how inadequate road and rail networks, coupled with poor regulatory coordination, restrict the movement of goods and capital across the continent. Her analysis emphasises that trade facilitation must extend beyond policy commitments to address logistical and infrastructural constraints that prevent the full implementation of AfCFTA. Without major investments in transport corridors and harmonised regulatory policies, the economic benefits of trade agreements will remain limited to paper commitments rather than real economic transformation.

A final, but critical, intervention in this special issue challenges the gendered structures of Pan-African policymaking. Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusion, Pan-African governance remain overwhelmingly dominated by male elites, limiting the transformative potential of its policies. Toni Haastrup introduces the concept of "Man-Africanism," a critique of how Pan-African institutions have systematically excluded women and grassroots feminist movements from policymaking processes. The exclusion of gendered perspectives not only weakens governance outcomes but also reinforces structural inequalities that limit economic participation and human security. Haastrup argues that meaningful Pan-African reform must integrate feminist perspectives into governance, economic,

and security policies, ensuring that policymaking prioritises human security, economic justice, and participatory democracy over state-centred militarisation. The absence of feminist analysis in many Pan-African frameworks reflects a deeper resistance to structural transformation, reinforcing hierarchical governance rather than dismantling it.

Each contribution in this special issue critically challenges the status quo of Pan-African policymaking. The contributors expose the deep contradictions within contemporary governance, economic, and security frameworks. They critique the gap between Pan-African ideals and the practical realities of implementation. The papers stress that the widening gap between policy commitments and on-the-ground realities calls for profound structural reforms. Regional institutions must prioritise democratic accountability, economic cooperation, and human security. This requires a fundamental shift away from state sovereignty and narrow political interests. A truly transformative Pan-Africanism must move beyond elite rhetoric. It must focus on creating enforceable policies that promote inclusivity, dismantle entrenched power structures, and reflect the lived realities of African people. Reimagined in this way, Pan-Africanism can fulfil its historical promise of self-determination and economic sovereignty. It has the potential to emerge as a pragmatic, people-centred framework for structural transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Mulugeta is the Director of the Centre for Pan-African Studies at the Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS University of London. He holds a PhD from the University of Sheffield.

Contact: dg30@soas.ac.uk