United Nations
Office of the Special Adviser
on Africa

PROMOTION of DURABLE PEACE

through sustainable development in Africa

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

The present report concludes a four-year thematic series on the root causes of conflict, focused on politics and governance, social issues, justice and security, and livelihoods. It particularly focuses on a central and recurring concern identified across these domains: the persistent absence of the State in many regions, which serves as a significant driver of conflict and insecurity on the continent. This absence refers not merely to the physical withdrawal of State presence, but to critical and systemic deficits in State functionality – including in delivering development, providing essential services, protecting human rights, upholding the rule of law and maintaining State legitimacy.

The report highlights the dangers of a weakening social contract in many African countries, where the State's limited capacity to meet public needs – particularly among marginalized groups facing significant inequalities – has generated resentment and mistrust. Coupled with perceptions of exclusion and limited rights, this environment has created fertile ground for non-State actors, particularly armed groups, to exploit institutional vacuums. In some cases, this breakdown of the social contract has resulted in a more perilous crisis of governance, including the recent rise in unconstitutional changes of government on the continent. As such, strengthening the institutional capacity of States to deliver sustainable development represents a high-impact strategy to address root causes of conflict.

The report concludes that achieving durable peace in Africa is inextricably linked to sustainable development. However, sustainable development cannot be achieved without sustainable financing, which in turn depends on a State's ability to assert control over economic and financial flows. Such control is only possible with strong, capable, accountable institutions. These interconnected pillars underscore the State's central role in restoring and maintaining the social contract. In this way, strengthening State capacity and effectiveness is not only a technical imperative, but a foundational condition for re-establishing the social contract in Africa and advancing peace, stability and prosperity on the continent.

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Workers sorting out coffee beans on coffee farm. © Adobe Stock

Introduction

Egypt - Arab Youth Write The Untold Stories of Women on Wikipedia

The present report builds upon the annual report of the Secretary-General on the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa.

In 2021, a decision was made to adopt a multidimensional approach, with each annual report examining a specific cluster of conflict drivers: (1) politics and governance; (2) social issues; (3) justice and security; and (4) livelihoods. Since 2021, the reports have completed this four-part cycle, exploring various themes including: public service delivery; the historical roots of political, legal and administrative challenges; unemployment and decent work; the rule of law and access to justice.

The present report, which concludes the series, highlights two recurring themes. First, sustainable development has consistently emerged as a prerequisite for durable peace in Africa; however, translating development into meaningful peace dividends requires it to be deep and inclusive, ensuring opportunities and services reach all segments of society. Second, the reports have repeatedly illustrated the consequences of weak or absent State institutions, underscoring how limited State presence and capacity, particularly in underserved or marginalized areas, can fuel instability, erode trust and enable conflict.

The State

Governments across Africa face formidable challenges. A stark contrast exists between immense needs – including approximately 34 per cent of the population of Africa living in extreme poverty, a widening infrastructure gap and substantial deficits in education and health – and the often-limited capacity of States to respond. While development in Africa is already financed to a large extent by its own resources, high levels of inefficiency in public spending cost the continent billions each year across sectors such as education, infrastructure and health, representing a combined annual loss of nearly 2.9 per cent of the continent's GDP.[1] Domestic resource mobilization remains weak and debt burdens continue to rise, further narrowing fiscal space. Access to external finance is also constrained, largely due to outdated, dysfunctional and unjust global financial architecture. In addition, approximately 85 per cent of the population lives in or shares land borders with a conflict-affected country, intensifying spillover risks.

Global shocks are compounding fiscal fragility and straining overstretched institutions, leaving many governments struggling to meet rising public demands. The OECD projects a 9–17 per cent drop in global official development assistance (ODA) in 2025, with African countries facing a sharper 16–28 per cent decline, driven by announced cuts from four major providers – France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States – all of which reduced ODA in 2024 and are set to do so again in 2025. This marks the first time in history that all four have made consecutive annual cuts. Beyond 2025, the outlook remains uncertain, with ODA projected to fall back to 2020 levels by 2027, hitting the poorest countries and vital services hardest. Compounding these pressures, seismic shifts in the trade policies of major economies, including tariff-induced global uncertainty, prompted the African Development Bank to

1 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General: Financing for development in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic: primacy of domestic resource mobilization, A/76/888 (2022).

downgrade its growth outlook for both 2025 and 2026 relative to initial forecasts.[2]

This is not a temporary shock, but a new structural reality, underscoring the need to rethink financing for African development. Rather than a short-term disruption, these dynamics represent a systemic shift. Without a corresponding paradigm shift in the Financing for Development framework, sustainable financing – and thus sustainable development – will remain out of reach.

The widening gap between State capacity and societal needs/expectations lies at the heart of the continent's peace, security and development challenges.[3] The social contract on the continent has been increasingly strained, with many States struggling to deliver public goods and services, uphold human rights – including economic, social and cultural rights – and meet demands for just, inclusive and accountable governance. Since 2014, almost 40 per cent of African countries (accounting for nearly half the continent's population) have experienced backsliding in overall governance. Over 60 per cent have seen deterioration in security and the rule of law, while about 50 per cent have seen reductions in areas related to participation, human rights and inclusion (see Figure 1).[4]

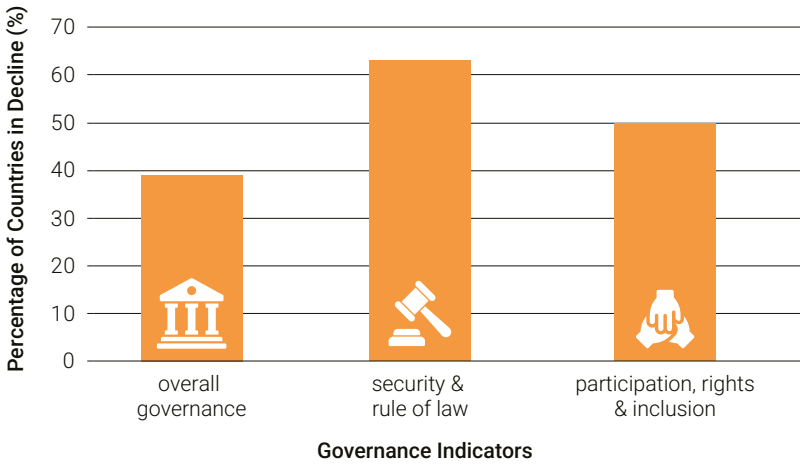
Figure 1: Governance backsliding 2014–2023: percentage of African countries in decline

Decline in overall governance

Decline in "Security & Rule of Law"

Decline in "Participation Rights & Inclusion"

More than half of African countries have experienced backsliding in at least one category



Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

2 OECD, "*Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term*", (2025) https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/full-report.html; African Development Bank, *African Economic Outlook 2025: Making Africa's Capital Work Better for Africa's Development* (2025), www.afdb.org/en/documents/african-economic-outlook-2025.

3 ECA, "Renewing the social contract to reduce poverty and inequality in Africa", Policy Brief No. ECA/23/030 (2023) https://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/49859/b12036626.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

4 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Index Report* (2024), https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf.

This fracture must be viewed through the lens of the "social contract", understood as three interdependent elements: (a) societal expectations of the State; (b) State capacity to provide services, including security, and to raise revenue from its population and territory to provide these services; and (c) will of the elite to direct State resources and capacity to fulfil social expectations.[5] In Africa, this dynamic is further shaped by a rich landscape of traditional institutions, including customary and religious authorities, which, while outside the formal Western conceptualization of "the State", play a critical role in governance, reflecting overlapping sources of legitimacy and complex power relations.

Historical legacies and elite dynamics continue to constrain inclusive governance. The fragility of many African social contracts today has to be understood against a backdrop of complex historical legacies and unfair international finance and trade systems that played the guarantor role of ensuring that the colonial would evolve into the neo-colonial. Colonial rule emphasized extraction, centralization and control, leaving institutions poorly designed for inclusive governance. These legacies were compounded in the 1980s and 1990s by externally driven structural adjustment programmes which, in prioritizing privatization, liberalization and fiscal austerity, slashed public sector employment and investments in sectors such as education and health, ultimately undermining essential State functions and dismantling necessary tools of resilience. In many instances, post-independence political and economic elites operated within – and at times reinforced – these constrained institutional frameworks, entrenching elite capture, patronage networks and uneven access to resources, all strong features of the neo-colonial phase. These dynamics often substituted narrow elite bargains for broad-based social compacts, perpetuating exclusion, deepening inequality and eroding trust in the State. These choices undermined state-building efforts, leaving States vulnerable to recurring cycles of fragility and contestation.[6]

Absence of the State

"Absence of the State" does not generally mean a complete lack of governance but refers instead to critical gaps in the State's functional presence – including in delivering essential public services, ensuring equitable development and maintaining legitimacy. These gaps are not only geographical – where remote or underserved areas fall outside the reach or attention of government – but also structural, shaped by enduring horizontal inequalities. In many contexts, the State may be present in form but absent in function, rendering it effectively absent to affected populations.[7]

Recent data underscores the magnitude of this absence. The World Governance Indicators show that overall performance in government effectiveness and political stability on the continent has stagnated or declined, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.[8] The Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows parallel trends, with steep declines in conflict-affected countries[9] (see Figures 2 and 3).[10] The COVID-19 pandemic further strained public institutions, worsening fiscal stress and exposing entrenched dysfunction in public sector institutions. It also revealed the shortcomings of a development cooperation model ill-suited to respond to systemic crises.[11] This dual exposure illustrated both the weakness of domestic institutions and the risks of externally driven approaches, underscoring the need to strengthen African capacity alongside reform of the global financial and development architecture.

5 World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report: Understanding Social Contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2021), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/547201623986209783/pdf/Africa-Social-Contract-Report-Understanding-Social-Contracts-in-Sub-Saharan-Africa.pdf.

6 Mkandawire, T. (2010). "Aid, Accountability, and Democracy in Africa." *Social Research*, , vol. 77, no. 4 (2010); Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report: Understanding Social Contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2021), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/547201623986209783/pdf/Africa-Social-Contract-Report-Understanding-Social-Contracts-in-Sub-Saharan-Africa.pdf.

7

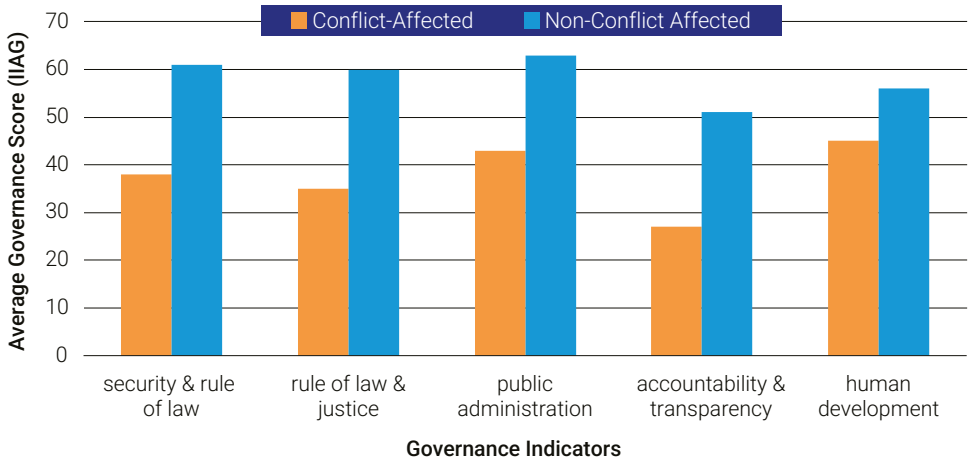
8 Deng, Francis, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*, Brookings Institution (1995).

9 "Conflict-affected African States" comprises African countries on the World Bank's 2024 list of fragile and conflict-affected situations.

10 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance* (2024), https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf.

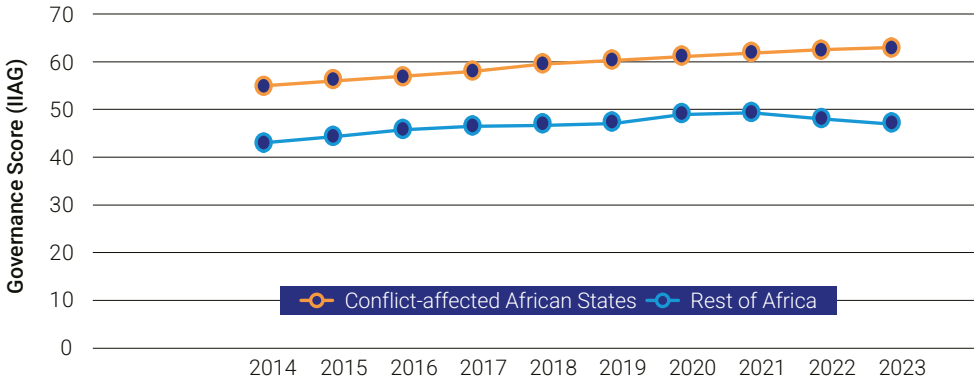
11 United Nations, "Policy Brief: impact of COVID-19 in Africa", (2020), https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Policy-brief-Impact-of-COVID-19-in-Africa.pdf; UNDP & Southern Voice, *COVID-19 and the Crisis of Governance: The impact of the Pandemic on Peace, Justice and Inclusion (SDG 16)* (2022).

Figure 2: Comparison of "Absence of the State" indicators (2023)



Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

Figure 3: Trends in governance performance: security & rule of law (2014–2024)



Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

Perceived and experienced corruption – both a product and cause of poor governance and weak institutions – remains a defining feature of this functional absence. It impedes structural transformation, diverts scarce resources from essential services and undermines democratic governance by weakening public trust in the State's ability to act in the citizenry's best interests. While eliminating corruption is a common campaign pledge, Africa continues to rank as the most corrupt region globally: in the most recent Corruption Perceptions Index, 44 of 49 African countries scored below the midpoint, with sub-Saharan Africa averaging 33 out of 100.[12] Decades of democratic reform have not translated into stronger accountability; on the contrary, democratic

12 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024* (2024), https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2024_Report_Engl.pdf.

reforms without strong institutions have often entrenched corruption under new banners of multiparty politics, widening the gap between citizens and the State.[13] This paradox – that more than thirty years of democratic rule have not reduced corruption but rather seen it persist and, in some cases, intensify – underscores the gap between global narratives of democratic progress and the lived experience of many Africans.

Afrobarometer survey data from 39 countries shows that a majority (58 per cent) of Africans say that corruption increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the preceding year. Since 2014/2015, 12 countries have recorded double-digit increases in perceived corruption, while more than two-thirds of citizens report that "some" or "a lot" of the resources intended to address the COVID-19 pandemic were lost to corruption. Bribery remains widespread: among citizens who sought selected public services, substantial proportions report having to pay a bribe to obtain police assistance (36 per cent), to avoid problems with the police (37 per cent), to get a government document (31 per cent), or to receive services at a public medical facility (20 per cent) or a public school (19 per cent). Two-thirds (67 per cent) say their government is doing a poor job of fighting corruption and only one in four (26 per cent) believe it is safe to report corruption without fear of retaliation.[14] When such corruption becomes normalized, it corrodes not only governance but also the very social contract on which legitimacy depends.[15]

In this way, the absence of the State is not merely about physical presence but about the erosion of capacity, legitimacy and trust. These conditions weaken governance and create fertile ground for conflict to emerge and flourish.

How absence of the State feeds conflict

The limited presence and capacity of the State has been a major driver of conflict and insecurity in several African countries, weakening the social contract and eroding public trust. In a growing number of contexts, a troubling, often cyclical pattern emerges: **absence fuels resentment, which in turn creates fertile ground for replacement.**

From absence to resentment: governance deficits and collective grievances

Public discontent in Africa has surged as unmet expectations collide with persistent governance failures. In several African countries, the State's failure to provide services, justice and socioeconomic opportunities in ways that respect and advance the full spectrum of human rights has fuelled growing public discontent and protest. Over the past 20 years, there has been an exponential increase in mass protests contesting failing social contracts, with marked acceleration since the early 2010s. Between 2013 and 2023, Africa experienced the world's highest increase in anti-government protests, rising 23.8 per cent annually – more than double the global average – for a cumulative surge of 746 per cent (see Figure 4).[16]

Particularly large and sustained mobilizations have occurred since 2019 across the countries at different levels of economic development and under varied political regimes, including, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Sudan. Whereas demonstrations in earlier decades often lasted only days or weeks, recent cases – in Malawi, Sudan, Togo and Guinea, for example – have endured for many months, signalling deeper disillusionment.[17]

Technology has amplified this shift. Social media has played a key role in organizing, amplifying and sustaining these movements. Recent research covering 15 years of African protest data finds that mobile phones lower coordination costs and make mobilization easier during periods of economic downturn, when grievances are sharpest.[18] Protest movements have spanned a wide range of grievances, from #EndSARS in Nigeria to #StopGBV in South Africa. Many are driven by frustration over livelihoods: rising costs, unemployment and poor public services – conditions often attributed to government mismanagement, corruption and inequitable development.[19] Governments' limited or repressive responses have, in many cases, only deepened unrest.

13 Gyimah-Boadi, E., "Africa's Waning Democratic Commitment", Journal of Democracy, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2015).

14 Afrobarometer, "Amid rising corruption, most Africans say they risk retaliation if they speak up", Dispatch No. 743 (2023).

15 Ake, Claude, *Democracy and Development in Africa,* Brookings Institution (1996).

16 World Bank, Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st Century (2024), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099080303042442715/pdf/IDU143e8beba17307142d319f8b1504c365946ed.pdf [Utilizing data from the ACLED database, which defines a "protest" as "an in-person public demonstration of three or more participants in which the participants do not engage in violence", and "violent demonstration" as "when demonstrators engage in violence and/or destructive activity", *see* ACLED, Codebook (2024)], https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2024/10/ACLED-Codebook-2024-7-Oct.-2024.pdf; World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa*, Africa's Pulse Vol. 31 (2025), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3bbc4659-de1e-472c-9d23-d67eb8364f1d/content.

17 Ibid.

18 Manacorda, M. & Tesei, A., Liberation Technology: Mobile Phones and Political Mobilization in Africa, Econometrica: Mar, 2020, Volume 88, Issue 2.

19 World Bank, , *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa,* Africa's Pulse Vol. 31 (2025), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3bbc4659-de1e-472c-9d23-d67eb8364f1d/content.

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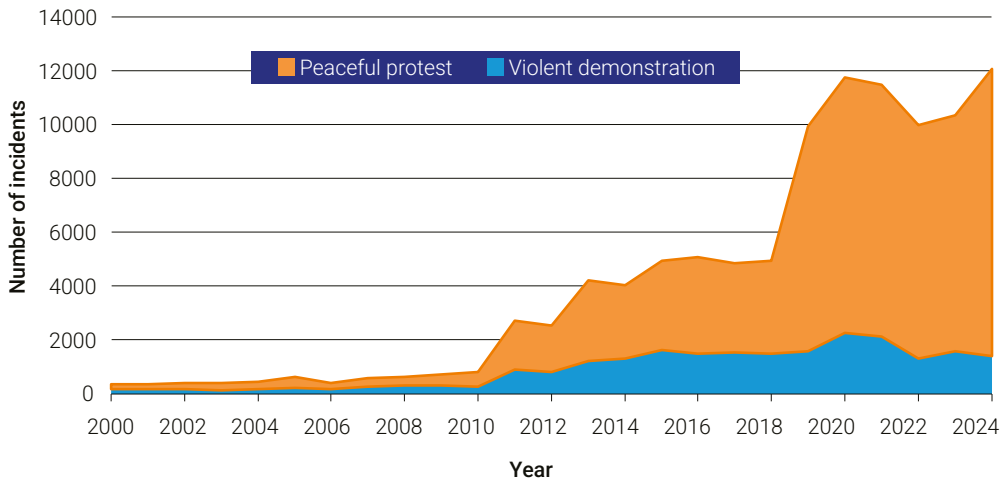
Figure 4: Protests and demonstrations in Africa (2000–2024)



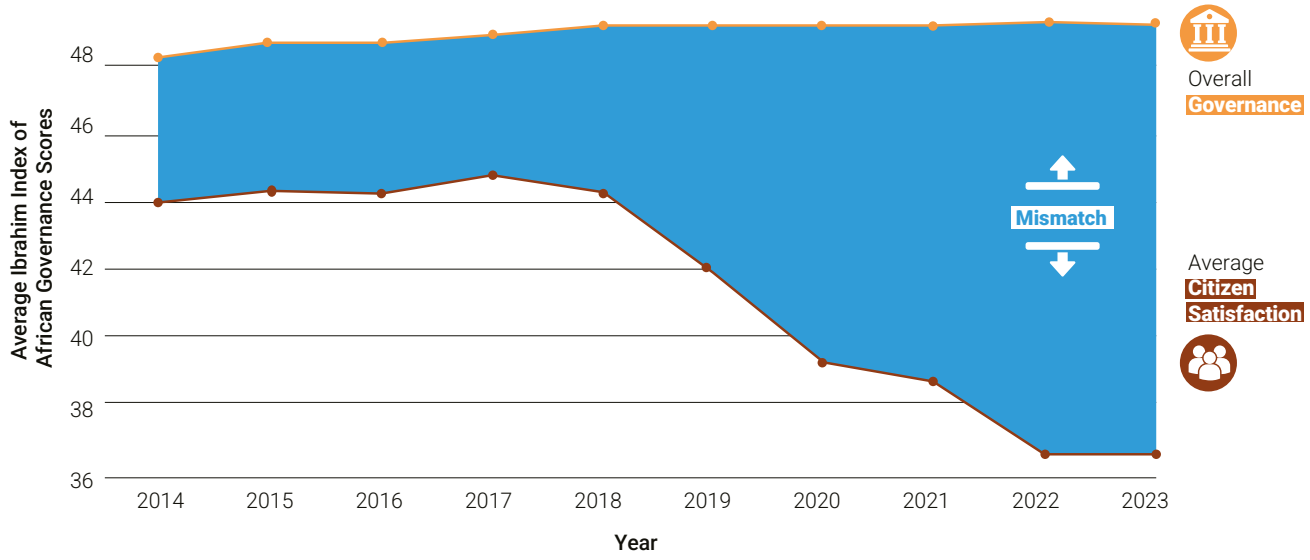
Source: OSAA staff calculation based on World Bank data.

While protest can signal civic engagement, its surging frequency is a stark reflection of a weakened social contract and growing disillusionment with governance. It underscores a widening gap between citizens' expectations and the State's capacity, or willingness, to deliver.

Recent governance data reinforce this trend: the 2024 Ibrahim Index shows that, over the past decade, public perception indicators have declined more steeply than the corresponding performance indicators – especially for economic opportunity, security and safety, and social protection (see Figure 5).[20]

20 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance* (2024), https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf.

Figure 5: Mismatch between governance performance and citizen satisfaction (2014–2023)



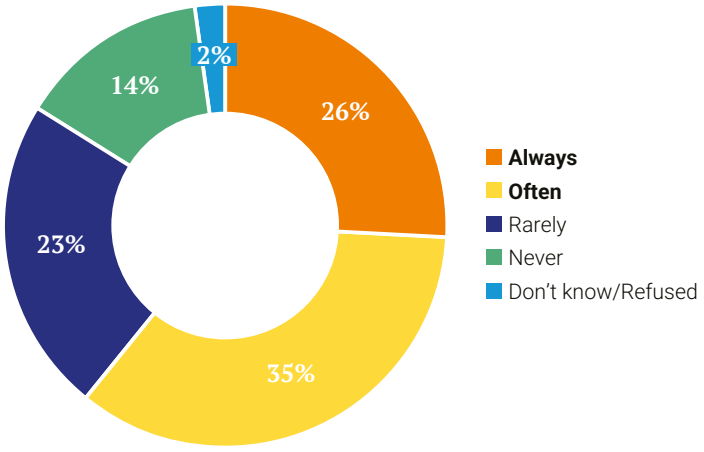
Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

Disillusionment is especially acute among marginalized groups – including women, youth, rural populations and ethnic minorities – who are often excluded from public services, economic opportunities and political participation. Surveys across 39 African countries reveal that over 60 per cent of citizens believe people are "often" or "always" treated unequally under the law, rising to 65 per cent among the poorest (see Figure 6).[21] Despite constitutional guarantees, systemic barriers persist, undermining trust and fuelling grievance-driven mobilization. The cumulative effect of State absence in contexts of horizontal inequality is growing marginalization, particularly in rural, remote or border areas where State presence is weakest. Poverty often overlaps with perceived discrimination or neglect, intensifying grievances. While grievances do not always lead to violence, empirical evidence shows multiple pathways from group-based inequality to collective grievances and conflict.[22]

Figure 6: Perceptions of unequal treatment under the law

Respondents were asked:

"In your opinion, how often, in this country, are people treated unequally under the law?"



Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from Afrobarometer.

21 Afrobarometer, "Social cohesion: an African collage of imperfect tolerance and cautious trust (2024) www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad871-social-cohesion-an-african-collage-of-imperfect-tolerance-and-cautious-trust/.

22 World Bank, "Five years after pathways: evolving research on inequality, grievance, and inclusion" www.pathwaysforpeace.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Noah%20Rosen_Five%20Years%20After.

Extremist groups, in particular, exploit both lived experiences and perceptions of injustice, exclusion and marginalization.

Numerous studies on drivers of violent extremism have found a strong relationship between perceived grievances and violent extremism. Discrimination and marginalization fuel both citizen grievances against the State and ethno-religious tensions and can be exploited by extremist groups to legitimize propaganda and aid recruitment.[23] A study of Afrobarometer data from 4,008 districts in 35 African countries found that poverty is far more likely to contribute to violence where local institutions are weak or where group grievances exist.[24]

This dynamic often fuels a "conflict trap", as violence exacerbates inequality, creating fertile ground for further conflict.[25] Sustainable peace, therefore, means addressing the governance deficits and inequalities underlying these grievances.

From resentment to fertile ground for replacement

De facto replacement: non-State armed groups

Limited State presence and persistent governance failures have enabled the rise of diverse non-State armed groups – including extremist, rebel and criminal groups. In areas where the State lacks legitimacy or capacity, such groups gain footholds by addressing grievances, enforcing order, or delivering rudimentary services.

Extremist groups, in particular, exploit both lived experiences and perceptions of injustice, exclusion and marginalization. A 2023 UNDP study of over 2,000 individuals across eight African countries – including over 1,000 former extremist group members – found that 32 per cent joined due to grievances linked to weak State presence, such as unequal resource distribution, corruption and inadequate access to justice, especially in areas far from capitals.[26] As some violent extremist groups expand their areas of control, they increasingly resemble proto-states. Al-Shabaab, for example, operates as both an insurgency and a proto-state power, controlling and governing wide swathes of Somalia. Although such entities are often oppressive and partial "States", they maintain a quasi-monopoly over coercive force in their areas of control and enforce their "laws" with a degree of effectiveness.[27]

This evolution is intensified by centre–periphery dynamics. This is commonly seen in the Sahel-wide dynamics of state disintegration, where institutions and services increasingly appear to be confined to urban and peri-urban zones. As violence escalates, state administration, local elected bodies and security forces often withdraw to capitals and medium-sized cities. Beyond security positions at the edge of these enclaves, rural areas have become inaccessible or are governed through violence, whether by proxy groups aligned with the State or by armed actors fighting it.[28]

In the Lake Chad subregion, Boko Haram began as a local religious movement mobilizing around deficits in State welfare provision and local grievances.[29] In recent years, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has also consolidated its presence in the Basin, with both groups exploiting State fragility in ungoverned territories around Lake Chad, aligning with local leaders and leveraging inter-communal tensions for recruitment.[30]

23 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery, Policy paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S., & Winterbotham, E., *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*, (2015).

24 Tollefsen, Andreas Forø, "Experienced poverty and local conflict", Conflict Management and Peace Science, vol. 37, No. 3 (2020).

25 Sirianne Dahlum, et al, "The conflict–inequality trap: how internal armed conflict affects horizontal inequality", United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Background Paper No. 2-2019 (2019), https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr19bp-conflictinequalitytrapfinal.pdf.

26 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2023).

27 UNDP, *Dynamics of Violent Extremism in Africa: Conflict Ecosystems, Political Ecology, and the Spread of the Proto-State* (2023).

28 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2023).

29 Bukarti, B. A., *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons from the Rise of Boko Haram*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2021), https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/violent-extremism-sub-saharan-africa-lessons-rise-boko-haram; Babatunde, O. A. "The Recruitment Mode of the Boko Haram Terrorist Group in Nigeria", *Peace Review*, 30(3), 382–389 (2018) https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1496998.

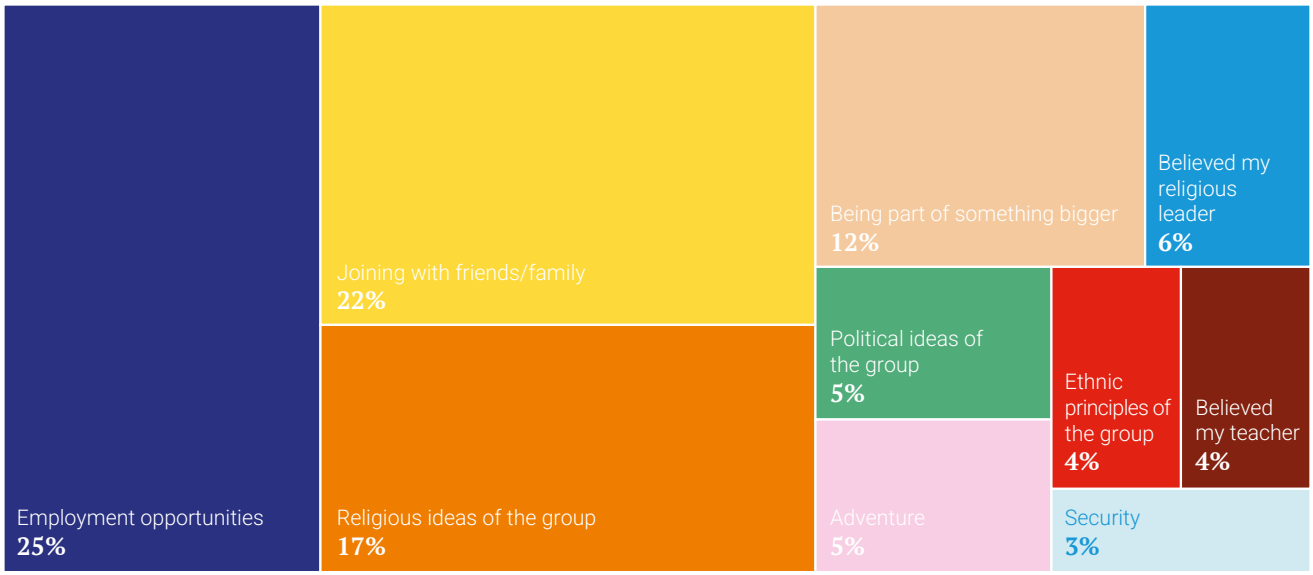
30 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2023)

Aerial photo showing the disparity between a poor township and a rich suburb. © Adobe Stock

Terrorism and violent extremism thrive in remote, marginalized and border regions marked by limited State presence and systemic exclusion. Groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, ISWAP and Jama'a Nusrat Ul-Islam Wa Al-Muslimin (JNIM) exploit these conditions to claim legitimacy as providers of security, livelihood and social order. High poverty and youth unemployment, coupled with actual and perceived discrimination and human rights abuses, create fertile ground for recruitment. Al-Shabaab targets coastal areas with youth unemployment far above the national average, while Boko Haram thrives where socioeconomic mobility is most constrained.[31] In West Africa, porous border zones with weak State presence facilitate the movement of fighters, weapons and illicit goods, heightening spillover risk.

Recruitment strategies often target the unemployed and underemployed, with financial incentives playing a central role. The 2023 UNDP study found that hope for employment was the single most cited motivation among voluntary recruits, cited by one in four voluntary recruits (see Figure 7). The Sahel starkly illustrates how extremist groups exploit weak state presence, entrenched grievances and chronic underdevelopment. Climate shocks, demographic pressures and lagging progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDG – see Figure 8) increase fragility and accelerate radicalization.[32] These structural drivers are often compounded by "tipping points" – specific incidents such as human rights abuses or the death or detention of a friend or relative.[33]

Figure 7: Primary reasons for joining an extremist group



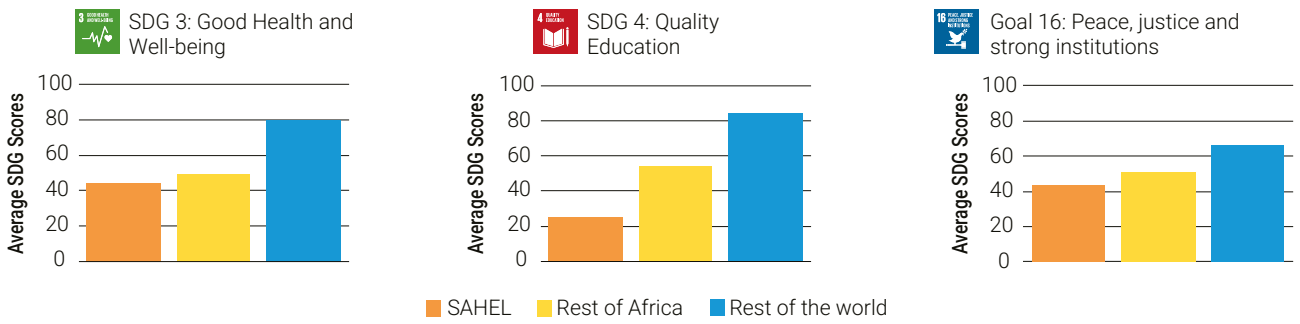
Source: UNDP, Journeys to Extremism: Pathways to Recruitment & Disengagement (2023).

31 Izzi, Valeria, "Promoting decent employment for African youth as a peacebuilding society", International Labour Organization, Evidence Synthesis Paper Series No. 4/2020 (2020), www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_744700.pdf.

32 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/

33 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2023).

Figure 8: Sustainable development goal achievement in the Sahel, the rest of Africa and the rest of the world (2023)



Source: Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024.

The proliferation of non-State armed groups across Africa demonstrates the consequences of fractured social contracts. Many groups have exploited geographic and functional State absence not only to recruit but also to position themselves as alternative governance structures. In the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISWAP have gained influence and tried to seek legitimacy by providing services the State has failed to deliver, such as education, healthcare, water access and dispute resolution, often enforced through violence, human rights abuses and coercion.[34]

In Somalia, some continue to view Al-Shabaab as a more reliable provider of justice than the State, turning to its courts over a "slow and corrupt" judicial system.[35] Al-Shabaab has extended its influence by offering law enforcement and justice mechanisms rooted in local customs.[36] In the Lake Chad Basin, State absence has created a security vacuum, fostering arms proliferation and enabling Boko Haram to acquire weapons through illicit markets. Vigilante groups have also emerged in response to absent State security.[37] Furthermore, non-State armed groups in control of territory often exploit natural resources – such as gold, livestock and agriculture – while levying illicit taxes, eroding State authority and revenues.[38] This entrenches a cycle in which limited State presence facilitates non-State control, making recovery of legitimacy and sovereignty increasingly difficult. Finally, lack of trust in institutions, restrictions on civil liberties, and ethnic or religious marginalization, have all been shown to be significant drivers of violent extremism.[39]

Ineffective counterterrorism responses, particularly those involving ethnic profiling, excessive force, or discriminatory practices, often worsens these dynamics. Rather than reducing threats, such measures deepen resentment and fuel the very grievances that extremist groups exploit,

34 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy paper No. 74, www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; African Union and UNDP, "The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on governance, peace and security in the Sahel", Regional Brief (November 2020); International Crisis Group, "Facing the challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa province", Report No. 273/Africa (2019); UNIDIR, *Boko Haram: Mapping an Evolving Armed Constellation*, https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/UNIDIR_Boko-Haram_Mapping_an_Evolving_Armed_Constellation.pdf (2024).

35 Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), (2022); De Waal, A. (2019). "Almost everything we're told about Al-Shabaab isn't true". World Peace Foundation. Available at https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/almost-everything-were-told-about-al-shabaab-isnt-true/.

36 United Nations Somalia, *Progress Towards the 2030 Agenda in Somalia: A Companion to the United Nations Common Country Analysis 2020* (September 2020).

37 United Nations and Lake Chad Basin Commission, " Weapons and Ammunition Dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin – A study by the United Nations Department of Peace Operations and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in partnership with the Lake Chad Basin Commission" (2022), Weapons-and-Ammunition-Dynamics-in-the-Lake-Chad-Basin-FINAL.pdf.

38 United Nations, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Concerns over the Use of Proceeds from the Exploitation, Trade, and Trafficking of Natural Resources for the Purposes of Terrorism Financing* (2022), www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2022/Jun/cted_cft_trends_alert_june_2022.pdf.

39 Afrobarometer, *Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery*, www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; Affa'a-Mindzie, M. (2013). Strengthening the rule of law and human rights in the Sahel. Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 2(2).

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perpetuating instability.[40] Comprehensive solutions ultimately require inclusive development strategies that tackle underlying socioeconomic drivers of extremism that are, at the same time, accompanied by effective, calibrated, rights-based, counterterrorism and security-enhancing measures that protect communities and reduce the threat of non-State armed groups.

Actual replacement: unconstitutional changes of government

Since 2020, a diverse range of African countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Sudan – have experienced unconstitutional changes of government. While contexts vary, these events have often been driven by a complex mix of internal and external factors including state failure, economic hardship, ethnic tensions and geopolitical competition over natural resources. Amid this complexity, certain recurring themes stand out. Many have faced a persistent erosion of the social contract, marked by widespread disillusionment with democratic institutions and governance failures. Affected countries consistently rank low on governance indices, facing challenges like economic stagnation, inequality, insecurity and institutional breakdowns, where State institutions progressively lose capacity and legitimacy.[41] These include weakened public administrations unable to deliver services, judicial systems eroded by corruption or politicization, parliaments sidelined or dissolved and so on, all of which result in governance gaps that undermine confidence in State authority and deepen instability.[42]

In this sense, coups are not simply abrupt interruptions of democratic order, but reflections of the deep crisis of legitimacy in systems that many citizens view as neither democratic in substance nor accountable in practice. A 2023 UNDP study of 5,000 citizens across coup-affected countries found that frustration with government performance – particularly around economic exclusion, insecurity and corruption – was a key proximate driver of public support for military takeovers.

Longitudinal data show a broader decline in civic trust, particularly among youth, who increasingly view democracy as failing to improve their lives.[43] Prior to unconstitutional changes of government, citizens in affected countries reported high perceptions of corruption, waning confidence in State institutions and State failure to curb violence, perceptions that worsened in the 5–10 years preceding unconstitutional changes (see Figure 9). Crucially, the same survey reveals that in Mali and Burkina Faso, nearly 80 per cent of respondents reported positive expectations in the immediate aftermath of coups for improvements in governance, security and public services – signalling how coup leaders effectively captured popular hopes for tangible transformation. The public support for these changes of government reflects the extent of disillusionment with prevailing governance models and the desire for alternatives that promise security, dignity, and justice.[44]

40 Afrobarometer, *Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery*, Policy paper No. 74, www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; Ngari, A., & Reva, D., *How ethnic and religious discrimination drive violent extremism*. Africa in the World Report 4, Institute for Security Studies (2017), https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2018/06/aitwr-4-1.pdf.

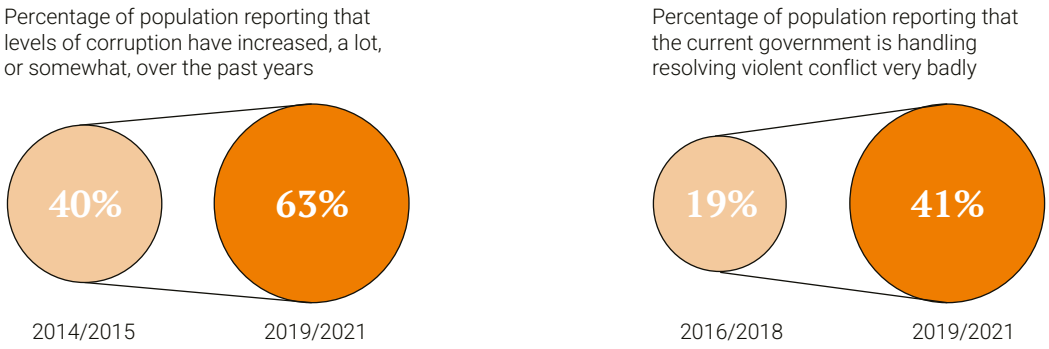
41 UNDP, *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (2023), www.undp.org/africa/publications/soldiers-and-citizens.

42 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance* (2024), https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf; Cilliers, Jakkie, *Governance: Thematic Futures*, ISS African Futures (2025), https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/12-governance/.

43 Ibid.

44 UNDP, *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (2023), www.undp.org/africa/publications/soldiers-and-citizens.

Figure 9: Increased negative perceptions of government prior to unconstitutional change of governance



Source: Afrobarometer data (round 6, round 8) (http://www.afrobarometer.org).

Devastating consequences of this chain reaction

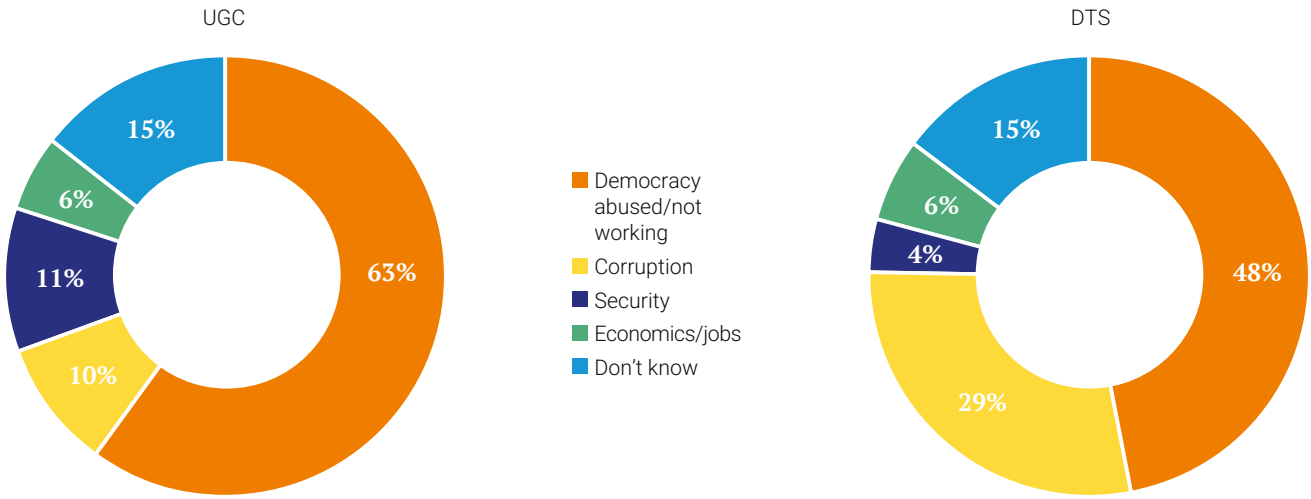
Democracy in peril: in the last decade, public support for democratic governance has dropped sharply across Africa. Afrobarometer data show declines of up to 36 percentage points in some countries. In several countries, democratic ideals are now supported by less than half the population, with approval rates falling to as low as 39 per cent.[45] This erosion parallels growing dissatisfaction with national trajectories: two-thirds of respondents across 39 countries (2021–2023) believe their countries are headed in the wrong direction and nearly 60 per cent are dissatisfied with how democracy is functioning. Widespread perceptions of corruption have further eroded trust in government, particularly among youth.[46]

Particularly concerning is growing public acceptance of military intervention. Afrobarometer surveys indicate that a slight majority of adults in 39 countries consider it justifiable for the military to assume power when elected leaders are perceived to abuse their authority – a stark indicator of weakened confidence in democratic governance. This disillusionment is especially pronounced in countries that have experienced recent unconstitutional changes of government. A UNDP survey of 8,000 citizens across Africa – including 5,000 from Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan – found that 63 per cent of those open to alternatives to democracy believed that democracy had been "abused" or "was not working" (see Figure 10).

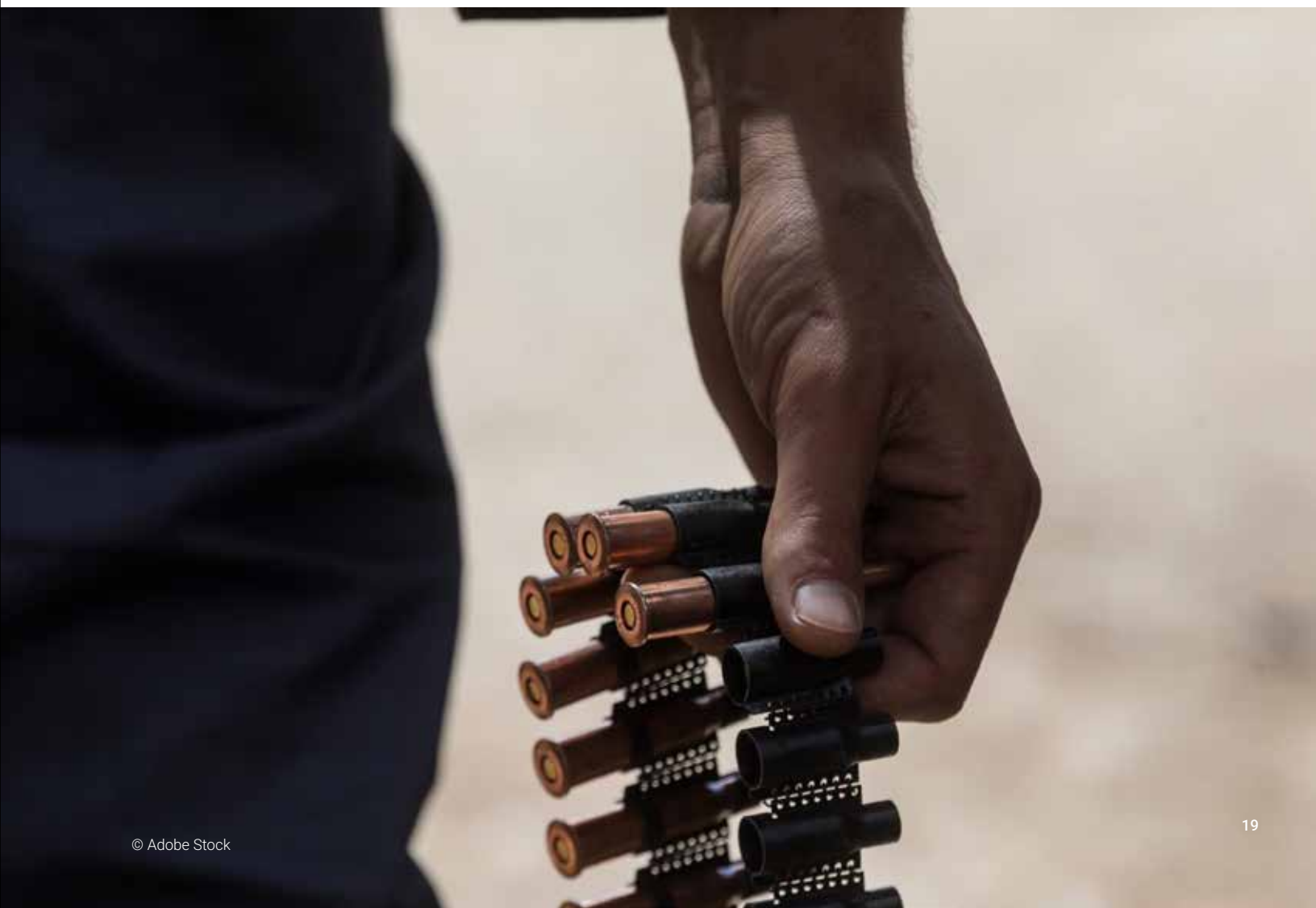
45 Afrobarometer, "Data set for 39 countries: round 9 (2021/2023)", available at www.afrobarometer.org.

46 Ibid.

Figure 10: Reasons for support for non-democratic forms of government in countries recently experiencing unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) vs countries recently experiencing democratic transition



Source: UNDP, Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa (2023).



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In countries recently experiencing unconstitutional changes of government, almost half of the respondents said non-democratic governments may be better or that the system type does not matter – a troubling indicator of waning faith in democratic governance.[47]

The expanding footprint of terrorism in Africa: once isolated insurgencies have evolved into entrenched regional crises, with violence spreading into previously unaffected countries in West Africa. This expansion has been fuelled by external factors, notably the proliferation of Da'esh and Al-Qaida affiliates and the uncontrolled flow of arms following the Libya conflict. In 2024, Africa recorded the highest number of terrorism-related deaths for the eighth consecutive year, accounting for 8 of the 10 deadliest terrorist attacks globally and 17 of the 20 most fatal incidents. The Sahel region alone represented more than half of all deaths from terrorism worldwide in 2024 – up from just 1 per cent of global deaths in 2007. Terrorism deaths in the Sahel have risen almost ten-fold since 2019, driven by weak governance and compounded by, inter alia, global jihadist influence, transnational criminal networks, ethnic tensions and ecological stress.[48]

Conflict economies and humanitarian devastation. The convergence of terrorism and organized crime – from drug trafficking to illegal mining and cattle rustling – has entrenched conflict economies that cannot be eradicated through security approaches alone.[49] As both cause and consequence of weakened State authority, these dynamics undermine fragile institutions and obstruct efforts to re-establish State presence. In the Sahel, the escalation of conflict over the past decade, including a surge in the number of attacks on civilians by armed groups, has crippled delivery of healthcare, education and sanitation. Militant attacks have forced the closure of more than 4,000 schools and hundreds of health centres. Insecurity has also fuelled cross-border displacement and inter-communal violence, contributing to the highest levels of global population displacement – both internally displaced persons and refugees – since the Second World War, with Africa bearing a large share of that burden.[50]

Furthermore, the risk of "conflict spillover" is significant. The proximity of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, the Gambia, Guinea and Senegal to rapidly escalating instability in neighbouring countries makes them vulnerable to violent extremism's spread. For organizations such as JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), coastal West Africa offers strategic and financial incentives: access to ports, opportunities for piracy, illicit revenue streams.[51] In 2024, Togo recorded its worst year for terrorism since the inception of the Global Terrorism Index, underscoring the rapid spread of extremism beyond traditional hotspots. Yet, despite these grave threats, local communities across Africa continue to display extraordinary resilience, pioneering innovative approaches to sustaining everyday peace in conditions of profound uncertainty.

Security-development trade-offs: in response to rising insecurity, many African governments and their partners have prioritized military interventions at the expense of development investments, particularly in the Sahel (see Figure 11). Spending on securitized and reactive approaches continues to rise, crowding out already underfunded but urgently needed development efforts, despite strong evidence of their cost-effectiveness.

Experience has repeatedly underscored the limitations and risks of security-only responses to violent extremism, yet militarized approaches have remained the dominant strategy in Africa. Within the region, resources have increased for multi-country military coalitions tasked with counter-terrorism operations, while the international counter-terrorism architecture has expanded through new dedicated mechanisms – despite limited evidence that such responses alone contribute to sustainable peace, security, or stability. Indeed, after more than a decade of security-heavy interventions backed by vast international investment, violent extremist groups have expanded their reach and impact markedly in the Sahel and beyond.

From 2010 to 2023, military spending across Africa increased significantly, while Government expenditure on education fell and health spending remained stagnant, not in line with demographic growth. In 2021, African military expenditure was approximately $39 billion – 7 per cent higher than in 2018 and 16 per cent above 2011 levels; military spending averaged 1.6 per cent of GDP.[52] The Sahel saw the steepest

47 UNDP, *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (2023), www.undp.org/africa/publications/soldiers-and-citizens.

48 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index* (2025).

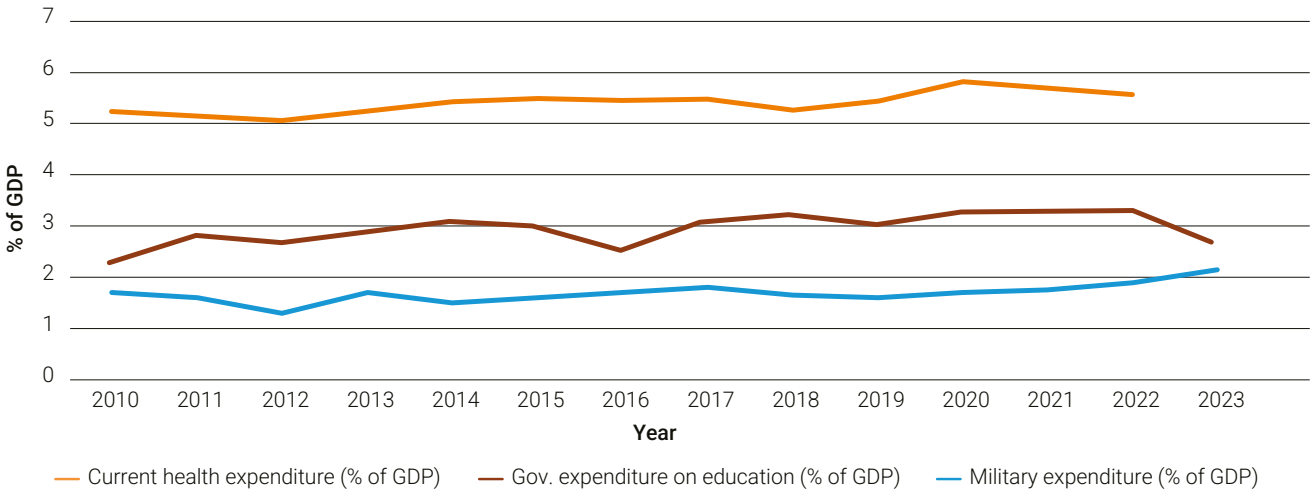
49 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index (2024)*; IEP, *Global Terrorism Index* (2025).

50 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", (2021), *www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/pp74-violent_extremism_in_and_near_the_sahel-afrobarometer-7july21.pdf*; *UNDP, Journey to Extremism* (2023).

51 Afrobarometer, *Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery*, Policy Paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/.

52 African Development Bank, *Security, Development and Investment: a Diagnostic Assessment* (2022).

Figure 11: Security-development trade-offs in the Sahel Region



Source: UNDP, Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa (2023).

increases: Mali (+339 per cent), Burkina Faso (+238 per cent) and Niger (+288 per cent). Simultaneously, military outlays in the G5 Sahel averaged $1.2 billion annually between 2014 and 2019, 2.5 times the 1998–2013 average.[53] Although security is a core responsibility of the State, insecurity has worsened across several regions amid rising military expenditure, underscoring the need for holistic strategies that address root causes through both development and security measures.[54]

These figures underscore a critical truth: no amount of military spending can address the underlying development-related causes of conflict, particularly in the absence of institutions that uphold justice and protect human rights, including economic rights. Instead, this results in a self-perpetuating cycle – development challenges fuel insecurity, which prompts increased military spending, diverting resources from addressing structural drivers of conflict. Instead, this results in a self-perpetuating cycle – development challenges fuel insecurity, which prompts increased military spending, diverting resources from addressing structural drivers of conflict.

The high returns of prevention: in contrast, investments in peacebuilding and prevention have consistently demonstrated high returns. Recent estimates show that, in countries not recently affected by violence, each dollar spent on prevention yields between $26 and $75 in savings. In countries with recent violence, the returns can reach as high as $103 per dollar spent.[55] In regions at risk of violent extremism, preventive spending has reduced State losses by 2–8 per cent of GDP annually. Doubling peacebuilding expenditure between 2017 and 2027 in the 31 most conflict-affected countries – many of which are in Africa – could have yielded an estimated $2.94 trillion in savings from avoided conflict-related losses.[56] These figures make clear that sustainable peace is far less costly to build than to repair.

Fractured trust and the fraying social contract: at the heart of these crises lies a profound erosion of trust between African citizens and their governments. Afrobarometer surveys (2021–2023) reveal declining trust in formal institutions and elected leaders across the continent (see Figure 12). Majorities continue to trust religious leaders, the military and traditional authorities, while trust in elected officials and formal State institutions have plummeted (Figure 13).

Multiple studies confirm that low institutional trust (including lack of trust in security forces, justice systems and the legitimacy and efficacy of political institutions, as well as discrimination and marginalization) correlates strongly with political violence, unrest and radicalization.[57]

53 Nijifen, I. & Anemann, A., "Military expenditures and human capital development in sub-Saharan Africa: a system GMM approach", *Development Studies Research*, Volume 10, No. 1 (2023); African Development Bank, *Security, Development and Investment: a Diagnostic Assessment* (2022).

54 World Bank, *Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st Century* (2024).

55 Mueller, Hans, *et al*, "The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Perspective", International Monetary Fund Working Paper vol. 2024, No. 256 (2024), https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400293832.001 ("[P]revention encompasses a set of policies, programs, and projects that help strengthen institutions, promote inclusive economic growth, and support local community development").

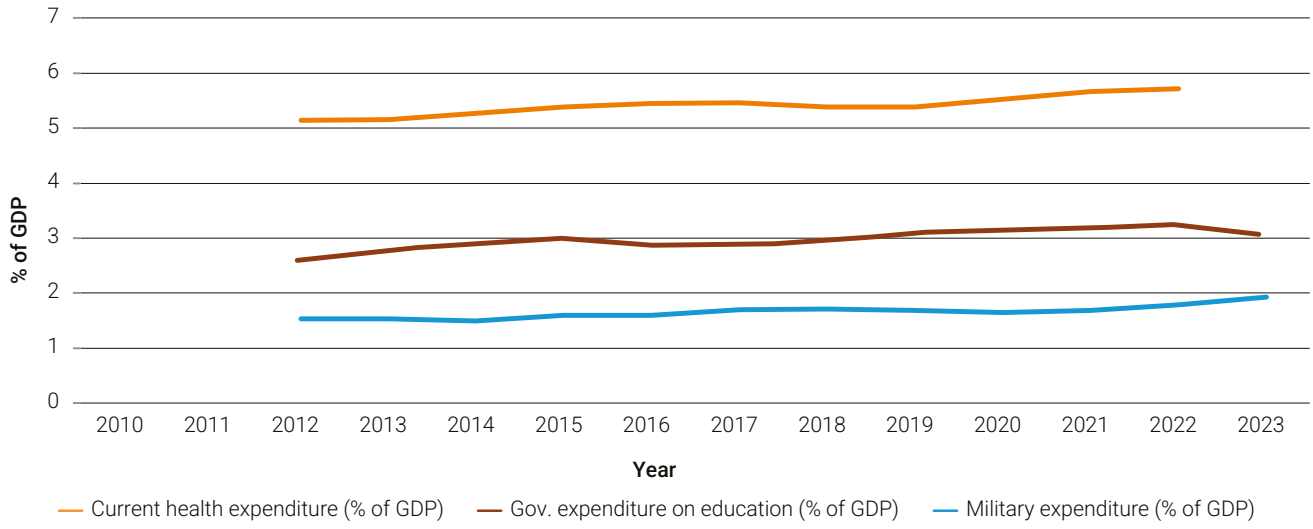
56 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism* (2023).

57 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy Paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/.

This decline also undermines State capacity to function effectively across multiple domains: it reduces citizens' willingness to obey laws, comply with taxation, or support public programmes; weakens participation in democratic processes such as voting and community engagement; erodes cooperation with police and justice institutions; and diminishes acceptance of government policies, even those aimed at improving welfare. Research shows that citizens who distrust institutions are less likely to respect the rule of law or cooperate with security services, thereby weakening the States monopoly on legitimate force.[58] At the same time, distrust decreases democratic participation: Afrobarometer surveys across 39 countries reveal that trust in electoral commissions is closely linked to voter turnout, while distrust correlates with abstention and political disengagement.

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of poor governance and deepening distrust.[59] Where institutions are perceived as corrupt or ineffective, citizens disengage not only fiscally but civically, undermining collective action and weakening the very mechanisms needed for reform. For instance, studies have found that when citizens view courts or the police as untrustworthy, they are less likely to report crimes, cooperate with investigations, or use formal justice mechanisms, fuelling parallel – and sometimes violent – dispute resolution systems.[60]

Figure 12: Change in popular trust in the president, parliament and courts in Africa



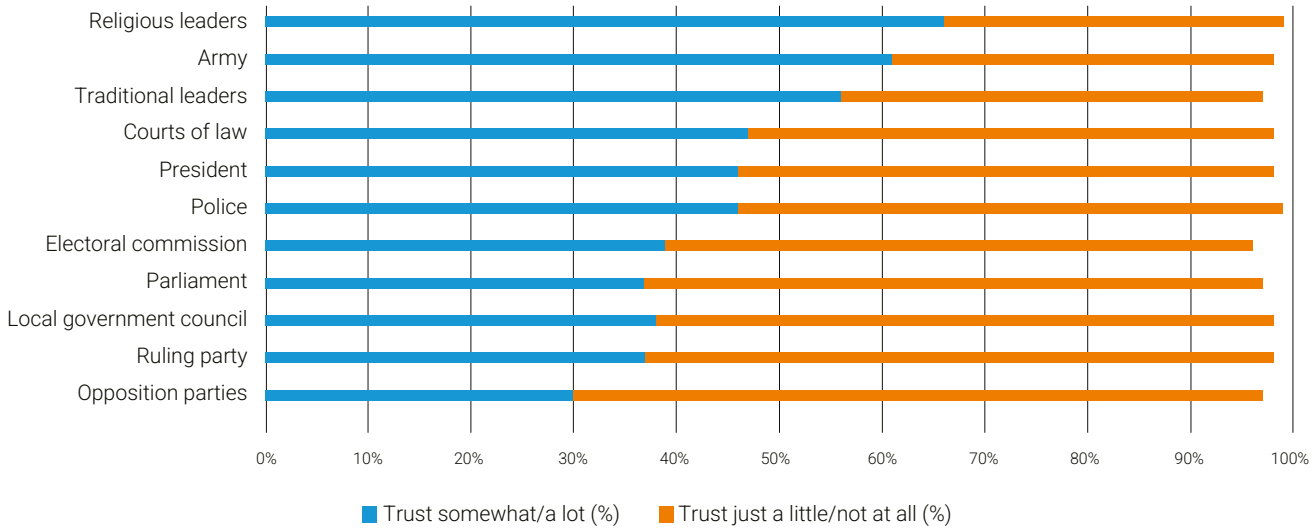
Source: OSAA Staff calculation based on Afrobarometer survey data from 30 African Nations.

58 Levi, M., et. al, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimating Beliefs", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 53, Issue 3 (2009).

59 Afrobarometer, "Across Africa, public trust in key institutions is weakening", Dispatch No. 891 (October 2024), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad891-across-africa-public-trust-in-key-institutions-and-leaders-is-weakening/.

60 Muraoka, T. & Rosas, G., "Does Economic Inequality Drive Voters' Disagreement about Party Placement?", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 65, Issue 3 (2020); Baldwin, K. & Winters M., "How Do Different Forms of Foreign Aid Affect Government Legitimacy? Evidence from an Informational Experiment in Uganda", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 55 (2020).

Figure 13: Popular trust in institutions and leaders



Source: OSAA staff calculation based on data from Afrobarometer.

The way forward: rebuilding the State through development ownership

The absence or weakness of the State in many African contexts has created a cycle of disenfranchisement, distrust and, increasingly, the performance of some State functions by non-State armed groups and other non-State actors, fuelling persistent conflict. Durable peace cannot be achieved by addressing symptoms while neglecting a vital root cause: the failure of the State to fulfil the social contract.

Ultimately, the social contract cannot be restored through external intervention; it requires nationally owned and Africa-led development that rebuilds capacity and legitimacy and fulfils human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. While external support can complement national efforts – particularly in conflict-affected and fragile settings – only development responses owned by African States can restore trust, reinforce authority and achieve lasting results.

Central to this effort is a renewed focus on governance reform that empowers States to deliver services and ensure protection for their people. This includes expanding administrative reach and strengthening national institutions, including institutional capacity for human rights protection and promotion. Without these measures, the social contract will continue to fray and the State's role will remain vulnerable to usurpation, escalating security risks.

Strategic interventions for State re-legitimization

Strengthening fiscal capacity as a foundation for peace: fiscal strength is not merely an economic objective – it is a precondition for peace. States that can reliably raise and manage revenues are more capable of delivering services, sustaining core institutions and responding to crises. Empirical data confirms that higher fiscal balances, even accounting for country-specific factors, are consistently associated with reduced conflict risk and severity.[61] In fragile contexts, fiscal capacity is a resilience indicator – cushioning shocks, sustaining services and deterring security threats.

Amid tightening credit, rising debt and external shocks, control over economic and financial flows is critical. Domestic resource mobilization (DRM) is essential not only for revenue, but for restoring fiscal sovereignty and anchoring the social contract. Beyond taxation, DRM encompasses a broad set of measures, including improved natural resource governance, enhanced public expenditure management and curbs on trade mispricing, which is an often-overlooked source of significant revenue leakage. For instance, strengthening oversight of extractive industries has enabled some African countries to raise revenues and strengthen accountability.[62] Likewise, through fair and

61 IMF, "*The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Perspective*", (2024), https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400293832.001.

62 IMF, *Boom, Bust, or Prosperity? Managing Sub-Saharan Africa's Natural Resource Wealth* (2013), www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/dp/2013/dp1302.pdf; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Mineral Resource Governance in Botswana" (2024), www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-02/mineral-resource-governance-in-botswana.pdf.

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transparent taxation, governance can become a negotiated relationship, fostering responsive, accountable states. In some conflict-affected areas on the continent, reliance on local taxes has enabled communities to successfully demand inclusive and accountable institutions, rebuilding civic trust.[63]

Africa collects, on average, less than 15 per cent of GDP in domestic tax revenues – well below the global average – despite statutory tax rates broadly comparable to advanced economies.[64] But DRM remains constrained in many African countries not primarily because citizens resist paying taxes but because vast resources are lost before they ever reach the treasury. Illicit financial flows average $88.6 billion annually, draining Africa of more each year than it receives in official development assistance. From 1970 to 2018, over $2 trillion was lost, much through trade mispricing and profit-shifting by multinationals. Inefficiencies in public expenditure and redundant tax incentives add another $116 billion in annual losses. [65]

With up to 85 per cent of employment being informal in Africa, tax systems lean heavily on indirect taxes, such as VAT, which directly increase prices and reduce household purchasing power. Formal sector workers often carry the heaviest burdens, while wealthier elites and multinational corporations evade contribution through profit-shifting and tax avoidance. This imbalance deepens the sense of injustice, creating a vicious cycle. Afrobarometer surveys confirm that where corruption and inequity are perceived to dominate, willingness to pay taxes falls. In Kenya, for example, recent tax protests underscored that resistance to taxation is less about rejecting obligation and more about rejecting unfairness.[66]

While fiscal discipline matters, how it is achieved is critical. Raising taxes in contexts of poor services, low trust and economic hardship risks triggering unrest and bolstering support for non-State armed groups. Similarly, evidence indicates that sharp expenditure cuts – particularly those exceeding approximately 1 per cent of GDP – have been found to worsen conflict.[67]

Optimizing resources and improving spending quality can expand fiscal space and rebuild confidence. Nearly half of public investment in sub-Saharan Africa is lost due to poor execution, compared to 34 per cent in other developing regions.[68] Strengthening financial accountability and improving public spending efficiency can reinforce the State's capacity and legitimacy without triggering further grievances. A comprehensive approach underpinning a domestic resource mobilization strategy within the African context must therefore ensure the quality of public expenditure, combat illicit financial flows, tax evasion

63 World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report* (2021).

64 World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa,* Africa's Pulse Vol. 31 (2025), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3bbc4659-de1e-472c-9d23-d67eb8364f1d/content.

65 United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, *Solving Paradoxes of Africa's Development: Financing, Energy and Food Systems* (2024), www.un.org/osaa/sites/www.un.org.osaa/files/files/Reports/2023/2023-nepad-report/2023-nepad-report_en.pdf.

66 Afrobarometer, "Kenyans' doubts about tax system predate 2024 crisis" (2025), www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AD993-Kenyans-doubts-about-tax-system-predate-2024-crisis-Afrobarometer-4june25.pdf.

67 Mueller, Hans, *et al*,, "The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Perspective", International Monetary Fund Working Paper vol. 2024, No. 256 (2024), https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400293832.001.

68 Ibid.

and tax avoidance and rationalize fiscal incentives, all of which constitute urgent measures for Africa to control its own economic and financial flows.[69] Breaking this cycle requires not only technical fixes but structural reforms that close loopholes, curb illicit financial flows and rebalance tax systems toward progressivity, visibly linking revenues to equitable public services that restore trust in the social contract.

Harnessing traditional institutions and norms: the important traditional institutions of Africa – many of which predate and coexist with formal State structures – have too often been overlooked in global governance considerations, despite their enduring role in promoting justice, cohesion and accountability at community level. Traditional leaders, religious leaders, customary and informal justice systems and community networks all sustain services and cohesion, especially where State presence is limited.

Customary and informal justice systems remain primary channels for conflict resolution for millions of Africans, offering accessible, affordable, culturally relevant justice. This reality is partially attributable to the continent's colonial history, which often involved the implementation of dual judicial systems, with indigenous customary law governing various aspects of the lives of indigenous Africans. Today, the influence of formal State judicial structures remains limited across much of the continent, with stark imbalances in the ratio of judges to inhabitants and the availability of legal professionals in many African countries.[70]

In conflict-affected regions, over 71 per cent of the population relies on traditional leaders for justice, a figure that rises to more than 80 per cent in such countries as Burundi, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Even in African countries that are not conflict-affected, 59 per cent of people prefer traditional leaders for legal disputes. The prevalence of these systems highlights their crucial role and the need for their integration into broader justice frameworks to meet local justice needs. With the cost of providing formal justice systems in low-income countries estimated at $13 billion annually, alternatives like customary and informal justice systems are vital to preventing a prolonged denial of justice to Africa's most vulnerable people.[71]

Similarly, traditional social protection systems – including, inter alia, communal resource-sharing, kinship networks, reciprocal labour systems, mutual aid societies and informal savings and credit groups – are critical lifelines for many vulnerable communities. They function as safety nets when formal welfare systems are absent or insufficient, providing food, care for the elderly or infirm, assistance after natural disasters and so on. Because formal social protection coverage is often patchy or non-existent in remote and border areas, indigenous social protection systems act not only as buffers against poverty and crisis, but also as stabilizers of social trust.[72]

The interaction between social protection gaps and conflict is profound. Communities deprived of formal support often turn to non-formal or customary systems; when these are strained by repeated shocks – drought, price inflation, conflict displacement, etc. – the pressure can lead to grievance and social unrest, or provide openings for non-State armed groups who offer protection or aid. In several African countries, over 60 per cent of households without formal safety nets say they rely primarily on family or community to cope with shocks and that where these systems have eroded (due to displacement or conflict), the risk of localized violence increases.[73]

Violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited the absence or weakness of formal justice and social protection systems in certain areas. Contextual data from Mali and Somalia illustrate the perception, held by some, of the role of violent extremist groups as service providers in justice provision. In Mali, a significant proportion of voluntary recruits highlighted the appeal of violent extremist groups in mediating local conflicts (70 per cent). Similarly, in Somalia, 58 per cent acknowledged the role of violent extremist groups in providing justice.[74] Al-Shabaab's shadow courts in Somalia and jihadist groups' mobile adjudications in Mali illustrate how perceived efficiency, even if coercive, can win legitimacy when State systems are viewed as corrupt or ineffective.

Similarly, where public welfare systems fail to provide safety nets, extremist and armed groups can fill the vacuum by distributing food, offering rudimentary healthcare and providing income opportunities. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, these community-based mechanisms have often determined whether households cope or collapse during shocks, from drought to displacement. Yet when these traditional systems are weakened by prolonged crises, violent groups can exploit unmet needs to build loyalty, often blending coercion with selective welfare provision. In Somalia, for instance, Al-Shabaab has coupled

69 United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General: Financing for development in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic: primacy of domestic resource mobilization*, A/76/888 (2022).

70 Waleed Haider Malik and Clara Lahoud Maghani, *Voices of the Vulnerable: Promoting Access to Justice in Sub-Saharan Africa*, World Bank (2023).

71 IDLO, *Diverse Pathways to People-Centred Justice* (2023); World Bank, "Increasing access to justice".

72 UN-OSAA, *Indigenous Social Protection Schemes* (2024).

73 Ibid.

74 United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa,* A/79/226; S/2024/550 (2024).

its court systems with taxation and redistribution schemes, presenting itself as both judge and provider.[75]

Integrating customary and informal justice and social protection institutions into national governance strategies can extend State reach by building on existing sources of legitimacy and trust. A study covering 131 countries (1984–2004) found that popular trust in the justice system and recognition of the legitimacy of the law reduce both the opportunity and willingness to engage in political violence, lowering the likelihood of terrorist events.[76] In addition, strengthening nationally-owned social protection systems – while recognizing and integrating indigenous mechanisms – has been shown to reduce conflict risk by cushioning shocks, protecting livelihoods and rebuilding trust in the State as a guarantor of basic welfare.[77]

Promoting transparency, participation and accountability: citizens' belief in the legitimacy and efficacy of political institutions is a critical safeguard against conflict. Low trust in government correlates with higher levels of political violence and can prompt withdrawal of public support for core institutions as well as disengagement from society and civic life.[78] Restoring trust in the State requires more than service delivery; it demands visible, effective and trustworthy governance. Digital tools such as e-procurement platforms, digital financial management tools and online service portals have helped countries to enhance accountability, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency.

Improvements in data availability and transparency, made possible largely by pressure from civil society and the international community, have transformed the political landscape in the past two decades, opening opportunities for civil society to engage in evidence-based policy debates and hold governments to account. Transparency and accountability policies and multi-stakeholder initiatives have been central to good governance reforms, particularly in extractive industries and financial management. Yet, as the case of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) illustrates, the theory of change behind such policies – that disclosure alone can trigger reforms and strengthen State capacity – often proves shallow or performative, even if notable successes have been achieved.[79]

Transparency nonetheless plays a powerful role in reshaping incentives and curbing corruption. Public access to government data, such as budgets, contracts and other fiscal information, empowers citizen oversight, reduces opportunities for embezzlement, patronage and collusion and increases the risks and reputational costs of misconduct. Transparency has been shown to limit budget manipulation, curb political favouritism in resource allocation and reduce regulatory capture by entrenched interests – particularly when paired with robust accountability and justice mechanisms, such as independent anti-corruption bodies or judicial recourse.[80]

Afrobarometer and the Ibrahim Index show that most Africans support public access to government information.[81] Survey data reveal that citizens who believe they can easily obtain such information are more likely to trust public officials and less likely to perceive them as corrupt.[82] Furthermore, research shows that transparency strengthens democratic participation: when people believe that their voices matter and public resources are managed fairly, they are more likely to reject violence and engage in peaceful democratic processes.[83] As such, digitization and other transparency measures feed both civic engagement and social cohesion, both of which constitute foundations for durable peace.

75 Institute for Development Studies, *Reimagining Social Protection*, IDS Bulletin, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2024).

76 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; Choi, S. W, Fighting terrorism through the rule of law? Journal of Conflict Resolution, 54(6), 940-966 (2010).

77 Devereux, Stephen & Sabates-Wheeler, Rachel, "Transformative Social Protection", Institute for Development Studies, Working Paper 232 (2004), www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=files/dmfile/Wp232.pdf.

78 Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: Citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy paper No. 74 (2021), www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp74-violent-extremism-africa-citizen-perspectives-sahel-epicenter-and-periphery/; Kessels, E., & Nemr, C. "Countering violent extremism and development assistance: Identifying synergies, obstacles, and opportunities", Global Center on Cooperative Security (2016)

79 World Bank, Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa (2024), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099080303042442715/pdf/IDU143e8beba17307142d319f8b1504c365946ed.pdf.

80 World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa,* Africa's Pulse Vol. 31 (2025), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3bbc4659-de1e-472c-9d23-d67eb8364f1d/content.

81 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *Ibrahim Index of African Governance* 2024 (2024).

82 Ibid.

83 Clubb, Gordon, *et. al*, "Transparent Communication in Counter-Terrorism Policy: Does Transparency Increase Public Sup port and Trust in Terrorism Prevention Programmes?" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 37, No.4 (May-June 2024), https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/212153/1/Transparent_Communication_in_Counter-Terrorism_Policy_Does_Transparency_Increase_Public_Support_and_Trust_in_Terrorism_Prevention_Programmes_.pdf; United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace, Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (2018), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstreams/e5a72639-4925-5247-9c8b-2152d4963aca/download.

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Reorienting development support to prioritize State capacity: a fundamental shift is needed in how development support is conceived and delivered in Africa. Decades of donor-driven, project-based aid has often prioritized short-term gains over long-term institution-building. In doing so, they have sometimes undermined effective governance by creating parallel systems, bypassing State institutions and country systems and eroding public trust. Development cooperation has become increasingly fragmented, with emphasis placed on discrete, externally driven projects rather than support for national development plans. This approach has constrained governments' ability to deliver public goods and services at scale and weakened the very institutions needed for sustainable development and durable peace.[84]

These administrative challenges have been exacerbated by recent shifts in the global aid landscape, including significant recent reductions in donor funding, a proliferation of donors and a surge in the number of aid agencies: some African countries are now working with over 250.-The result has been increased aid fragmentation, with a 35 per cent drop in average project size since 2000, raising transaction costs and complicating coordination. Furthermore, funding is increasingly earmarked and delivered outside State budgets. Today, 80 per cent of projects are managed by non-governmental actors, weakening national ownership and limiting alignment with national priorities.[85]

When external actors deliver services directly, without working with and through the national and subnational levels of government, they risk weakening both sides of the State–citizen relationship. On the one hand, the State is sidelined, losing visibility and authority as the primary provider of public goods. On the other hand, donor inflows can reduce incentives for governments to mobilize domestic revenues or remain accountable to citizens for how resources are allocated. This weakens the feedback loop of the social contract: citizens demand less and governments feel less pressure to deliver.[86] Moreover, the dominance of donor priorities can redirect State responsiveness away from domestic constituencies and towards funders, subordinating national strategies and the needs of their own people to externally defined goals. This undermines domestic ownership, weakens democratic oversight and entrenches aid dependency. Evidence from across the continent shows that heavy reliance on aid often correlates with reduced civic and legislative scrutiny.[87]

Development is indeed essential for peace, but it is equally essential who delivers that development. To be transformative, aid must do more than deliver outcomes: it must also foster nationally led, people-centred institutions that can deliver those outcomes effectively, equitably and accountably. Rebuilding trust means enabling States to lead, not just benefit from, development. Development partners must shift from being primary implementers to become facilitators: supporting national systems, reinforcing institutions and investing in mechanisms that deepen citizen-State engagement. This requires rebalancing entrenched power asymmetries so that national governments can exercise genuine ownership, defining priorities and leading development agendas aligned with the needs of their people. Only by restoring the State's central role can the social contract be renewed and sustained progress be achieved.

84 World Bank, *Aid Circumvention: The Elusive Dream of Putting Countries in the Driver's Seat* (2024), https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/4d9f3d42dedc0bb5eb452fb-f887ec0c5-0410012024/related/Aid-circumvention-final-10-02-24.pdf.

85 Ibid.

86 World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report* (2021).

87 Ibid.

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African Women Leaders Network - Launch events at UNHQ

Conclusions

State-led development, through institutions that are legitimate, accountable and based on human rights and the rule of law, is the surest path to restoring the social contract and achieving durable peace.

As the multilateral system strains, Africa must lead with its strengths. The continent holds vast resources – human, institutional, natural and financial – to drive transformative change. To realize this potential, Africa and its partners must invest in resilient, inclusive African-led development.

State-led development, through institutions that are legitimate, accountable and based on human rights and the rule of law, is the surest path to restoring the social contract and achieving durable peace. This requires an integrated approach: sustainable development must be underpinned by sustainable financing; such financing depends on the ability of States to control economic and financial flows; and such control is only viable where institutions are strong and accountable. Together, these elements form the foundation on which the social contract can be rebuilt. This requires a paradigm shift: development cooperation must strengthen country systems; endogenous governance institutions must be respected and integrated; and fiscal and administrative capacity must be built not for efficiency alone but for legitimacy, trust and the equitable benefit of all citizens. Only then can peace become truly durable and development genuinely sustainable.

In this regard, the following recommendations are made:

African governments should consider:

a. Recalibrating national development strategies to reinforce State legitimacy by ensuring that development initiatives are delivered through national systems and designed to deepen the social contract between citizens and the State and strengthen trust in the government, centring on inclusive governance, the rule of law, participatory planning, human rights and equitable service delivery and paying particular attention to women, youth and marginalized groups.

b. Strengthening domestic resource mobilization systems by developing and implementing integrated national financing frameworks to identify and deploy financing for transformative development levers, including energy, food systems and digital technologies. This should go beyond considerations of raising taxes and include concerted efforts to ensure progressive tax systems, improve expenditure management, increase savings and identify underutilized tax resources, including taxation of the digital economy; this should be complemented by measures designed to tackle illicit financial flows, tax evasion and tax avoidance.

c. Strengthening fiscal foundations through accountability and efficiency by prioritizing measures that expand fiscal space without undermining public trust, such as improving the progressivity of tax systems, curbing wasteful spending and leakages, improving budget execution, strengthening debt management, addressing trade mispricing, implementing transparent frameworks for natural resource governance and enhancing financial oversight mechanisms;

d. Leveraging digital public infrastructure to enhance transparency and trust by scaling up e-governance tools, open data platforms and digital identity systems to facilitate access to services, improve fiscal management and promote civic participation in public decision-making;

e. Integrating traditional governance institutions into national systems by formally recognizing the role of customary leaders, community-based justice mechanisms and informal social protection networks in public service delivery and conflict resolution, particularly in underserved regions, while also ensuring their compliance with human rights norms and standards;

f. Adopting comprehensive national strategies to address the root causes of violent extremism and non-State armed groups influence, by integrating inclusive, people-centred development approaches with calibrated, rights-based security and counterterrorism measures. Such strategies should prioritize the expansion of State presence through the delivery of essential services, economic opportunity and justice – particularly in underserved and conflict-affected regions – while also ensuring the State's ability to provide security and to ensure that State agents' actions are professional, accountable and avoid further alienating affected communities, including through strengthened cross-border collaboration between affected countries.

Development partners are encouraged to:

a. Reorient development cooperation towards long-term institution- and capacity-building, moving away from fragmented, project-based aid to sustained support for national governance, institutions, public servants, fiscal systems and public sector reform.

b. Support the integration of traditional and informal institutions into national development efforts, including through technical assistance, research and funding for platforms facilitating coordination between customary actors and formal state institutions, while also ensuring respect for human rights norms and standards.

c. Invest in digital governance and civic technology ecosystems by providing resources and expertise for the development of interoperable systems that promote open government, improve accountability and expand access to inclusive public services.

d. Align financing with national priorities and incentives for State-citizen accountability, including through joint planning and monitoring frameworks that promote transparency, mutual accountability and nationally defined performance indicators, as well as by delivering development assistance through strong domestic country systems.

The multilateral system should:

a. Place the strengthening of State capacity and legitimacy in the core mandate of development assistance in Africa, ensuring that priority is consistently given to strengthening national public institutions and systems across all programming areas;

b. Promote recognition and integration of the plurality of governance in Africa, including by supporting policy dialogues and knowledge exchanges that elevate the contributions of community-based service providers, traditional authorities and customary justice systems, to the extent that they comply with international human rights law ;

c. Scale up support for digital public infrastructure as a governance enabler, including through pooled funding and capacity development for, inter alia, e-procurement platforms and digital fiscal management tools;

d. Strengthen coordination mechanisms that elevate African ownership, including through joint sector reviews, national development compacts and South-South cooperation platforms and initiatives, while ensuring that externally-funded programmes include clear transition plans for full national leadership and reinforce locally driven, inclusive approaches that uphold dignity and rights.

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