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From the New Partnership for Africa's Development to Agenda 2063: progress in the implementation of sustainable development in Africa and international support: causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa

Security Council
Eightieth year

Promotion of durable peace through sustainable development in Africa**

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 79/264, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on persistent and emerging challenges to the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa, including the root causes of conflict and conditions to promote sustainable development, as well as on the approach and support of the United Nations system.

The report marks the conclusion of a four-year thematic series on the root causes of conflict which examined the following topics: politics and governance; social issues; justice and security; and livelihoods. In the present report, the Secretary-General highlights the common thread among these drivers: the persistent absence of effective State authority in many regions, which serves as a significant driver of conflict and insecurity. This absence refers not only to the physical withdrawal of State presence but also to critical gaps in State functionality, including in delivering services, protecting human rights and upholding the rule of law and State legitimacy.

In the report, the Secretary-General also 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 significant resentment and mistrust. Coupled with perceptions of exclusion and limited rights, such environments have created fertile ground for non-State actors, in particular armed groups, to exploit institutional vacuums. This type of erosion has contributed to various governance crises, including unconstitutional changes of government. Strengthening the institutional capacity of States to deliver

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sustainable development can therefore be a high-impact strategy to address the root causes of conflict.

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, which requires strong, capable and accountable institutions. These interconnected pillars underscore the State's central role in restoring and maintaining the social contract. Strengthening State capacity and effectiveness is not only a technical imperative but also a foundational condition for advancing peace, stability and prosperity on the continent.

I. Introduction

1.   The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 79/264, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to monitor and to report annually on persistent and emerging challenges to the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa, including the root causes of conflict and conditions to promote sustainable development, as well as on the approach and support of the United Nations system.

2.   In 2021, a decision was made to adopt a multidimensional approach, with each annual report focused on one of the following clusters of conflict drivers: politics and governance; social issues; justice and security; and livelihoods. These reports have addressed public service delivery, the historical roots of governance challenges, employment and the rule of law.

3.   The present report, which concludes the series, highlights two recurring themes. First, sustainable development is essential for durable peace in Africa. However, for development to translate into meaningful peace dividends, it must be deep and inclusive, ensuring that opportunities and services reach all segments of society. Second, as the reports have repeatedly illustrated, the consequences of weak or absent State institutions underscore how a limited State presence and capacity, particularly in marginalized areas, fuels instability, erodes trust and enables conflict.

II. The State

4.   Governments across Africa face formidable challenges. A stark contrast exists between immense needs – including the fact that approximately 34 per cent of the African population lives in extreme poverty, the existence of substantial deficits in education and health, and a widening infrastructure gap – and the often-limited capacity of States to respond. Public spending remains low, domestic resource mobilization is weak and debt burdens continue to rise, further narrowing fiscal space. Access to external finance is also limited, which is largely due to an 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. While grappling with global economic disruptions, many Governments are left struggling to meet rising public demands with overstretched institutions.[1]

5.   In this context, the social contract in Africa has been increasingly strained, with many States facing growing challenges in delivering public goods and services, promoting and protecting human rights – including economic, social and cultural rights – and meeting demands for just, inclusive and responsive governance. The widening gap between public needs and State capacities lies at the heart of the peace, security and development challenges facing the continent.[2] These challenges are reflected in a marked deterioration in governance across key domains. Since 2014, almost 40 per cent of African countries (home to almost half the continent's population) have experienced backsliding in overall governance. Over 60 per cent of African countries have seen reductions 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 I).[3]

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[1] African Development Bank, *African Economic Outlook* (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 2024).
[2] Economic Commission for Africa, "Renewing the social contract to reduce poverty and inequality in Africa", Policy Brief No. ECA/23/030 (Addis Ababa, August 2023).
[3] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Index Report* (2024).

Figure I
Governance backsliding 2014–2023: percentage of African countries in decline
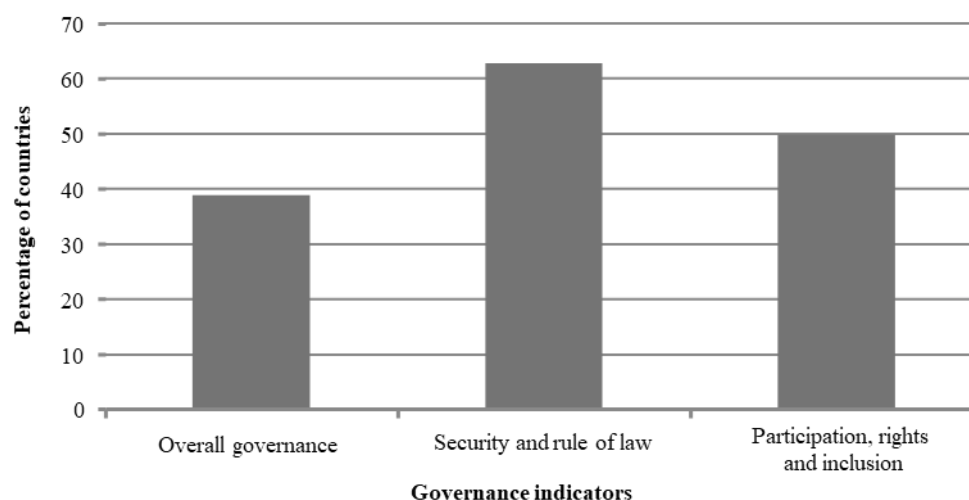
Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa based on data from the
Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

6.   This fracture must be viewed through the lens of the social contract, which is understood as comprising three interdependent elements: (a) societal expectations of the State; (b) State capacity to provide services, including security, and to raise revenue from the population and territory to provide these services; and (c) the will of the elite to direct State resources and capacity to fulfil social expectations.[4] In Africa, this dynamic is further shaped by a rich landscape of traditional institutions, including customary and religious authorities, which, while excluded from the formal Western conceptualization of the State, play a critical role in governance, reflecting overlapping sources of legitimacy and complex power relations.

7.   In addition to contemporary governance challenges, the fragility of many African social contracts at present must be understood against a backdrop of complex historical legacies. Colonial rulers were focused on extraction, centralization and control, leaving behind institutions that were not designed to ensure inclusive governance. Such legacies were compounded in the 1980s and 1990s by externally driven structural adjustment policies that, by prioritizing privatization, liberalization and stabilization measures (sometimes referred to as fiscal austerity measures), slashed public sector employment and investment in sectors such as education and health, thereby undermining State functions and resilience. In turn, post-independence political and economic elites often operated within – and at times reinforced – constrained institutional frameworks, preserving systems of exclusion that eroded trust in the State.

III.   Absence of the State

8.   The notion of the absence of the State does not generally refer to a complete lack of governance, but rather 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 all levels of government) but

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[4] World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report: Understanding Social Contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C., June 2021).

also structural, shaped by enduring horizontal inequalities. In many areas, the State may be present in form but absent in function and thus considered by affected populations to be effectively absent.

9.   Recent data underscore the magnitude of this absence. The worldwide governance indicators reveal that overall performance in terms of government effectiveness and political stability on the continent has stagnated or declined.[5] The Ibrahim Index of African Governance reflects similar findings, with steep declines in conflict-affected countries[6] (see figures II and III). These trends are echoed in fragile and conflict-affected contexts globally.[7] The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic placed additional strain on public institutions, worsening fiscal stress and exposing entrenched weaknesses in public sector management.[8]

Figure II
Comparison of indicators pointing to the absence of the State, 2023
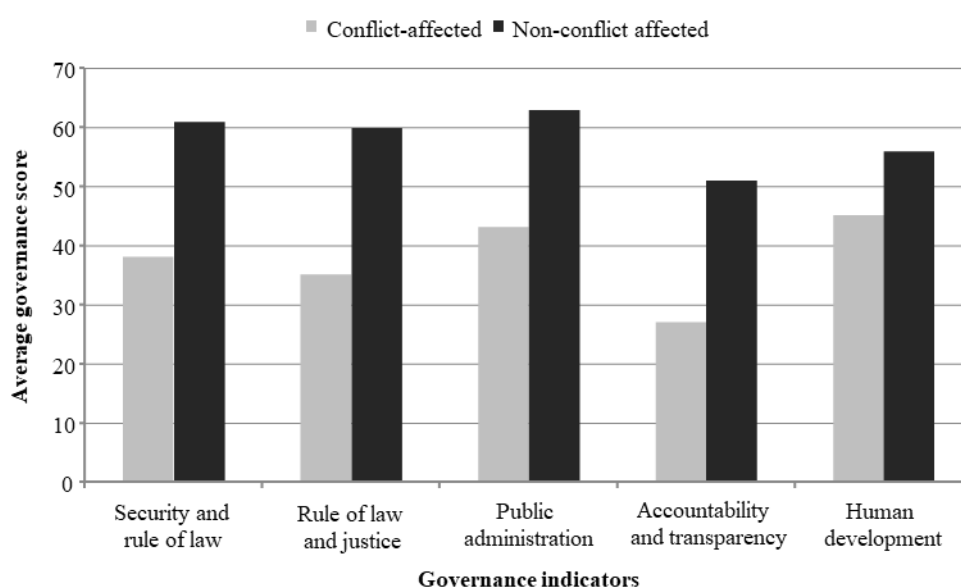
Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

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[5] Deborah Isser and others, "Governance in sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st century: four trends and an uncertain outlook", Policy Research Working Paper No. 10713 (World Bank, 2024).

[6] "Conflict-affected African States" comprises all African countries included on the 2024 list of fragile and conflict-affected situations compiled by the World Bank.

[7] Mo Ibrahim Foundation*, 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance*; and Paul Coral and others, *Fragility and Conflict: On the Front Lines of the Fight against Poverty* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2020).

[8] United Nations, "Policy brief: impact of COVID-19 in Africa", May 2020.

Figure III
Trends in governance performance: security and rule of law, 2014–2024
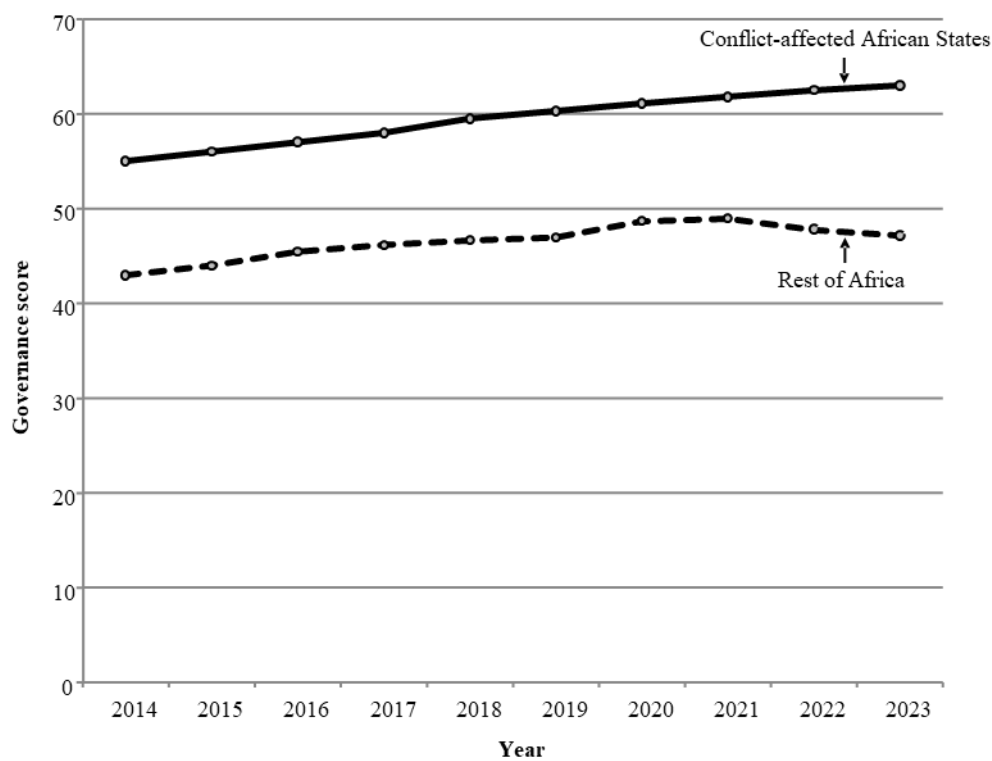
Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa based on data from the
Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

10. Perceived and experienced corruption remains a widespread governance challenge across Africa, weakening both State effectiveness and legitimacy. On average, across 39 countries, a majority (58 per cent) of people surveyed said that they believed that corruption had increased "somewhat" or "a lot" during the previous year. Since 2014/2015, 12 countries had recorded double-digit increases in perceptions of worsening corruption, while over two thirds of citizens said they believed that "some" or "a lot" of the resources earmarked for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic were lost to corruption. Among citizens who had sought selected public services during the previous year, a substantial number reported that they had had to pay a bribe to obtain police assistance (36 per cent), to avoid problems with the police (37 per cent), to obtain 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). It is clear that corruption not only erodes trust in government but also deepens systemic inequality.[9]

11. The consequences of this functional absence of the State extend far beyond simple governance failures. They also create and aggravate conditions in which conflict flourishes.

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

IV. How the absence of the State feeds conflict

12. 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 instances, a troubling and often cyclical pattern has emerged, wherein the absence of the State has fuelled resentment, which, in turn, has created fertile ground for its replacement.

### A. From absence to resentment: governance deficits and collective grievances

13. In several African countries, the State's failure to provide basic services, protect human rights, deliver justice and ensure socioeconomic inclusion has fuelled growing public discontent and protest. Social media has played a key role in the organization and amplification of these protests, which have occurred across diverse political and economic contexts, signalling widespread frustration and declining trust. 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 (see figure IV).[10]

14. While shaped by local or national dynamics, these protests have spanned a range of grievances, from calls to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad accused of police brutality in Nigeria to the push to stop gender-based violence in South Africa. Many protests were driven by frustration over livelihoods owing to rising costs, unemployment and poor public services. Citizens frequently attributed these conditions to government mismanagement, corruption and inequitable development, highlighting how limited opportunities and injustice erode State legitimacy.[11] In several cases, the failure of governments to respond meaningfully has only deepened unrest.

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[10] See Deborah Isser and others, "Governance in sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st century". According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data codebook published in 2023, a protest event is defined as "an in-person public demonstration of three or more participants in which the participants do not engage in violence", and a violent demonstration sub-event occurs "when demonstrators engage in violence and/or destructive activity". International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa*, Africa's Pulse vol. 31 (Washington, D.C., April 2025).

[11] World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa*.

Figure IV
**Protests and demonstrations in Africa (2000–2024)**
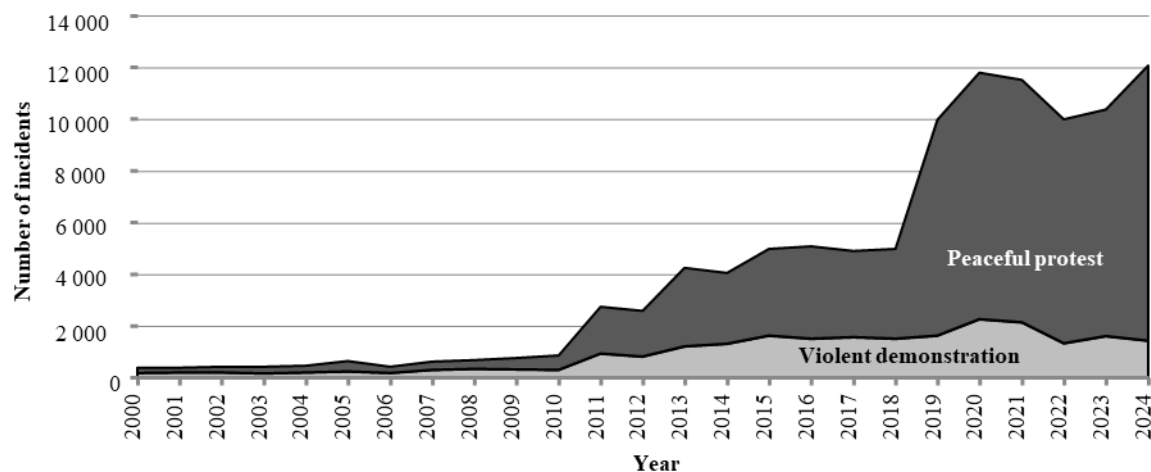
Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data website.

15.   While protests can signal civic engagement, their surging frequency is a stark reflection of a weakened social contract and growing disillusionment with governance. They underscore a widening gap between citizens' expectations and the State's capacity – or willingness – to deliver. Recent governance data reinforce this trend. Data included in the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance show that, in the past decade, public perception indicators have declined more steeply than their corresponding performance indicators, especially in terms of economic opportunities, security and safety, and social protection (see figure V).[12]

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[12] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance*.

Figure V
Mismatch between governance performance and citizen satisfaction, 2014–2023
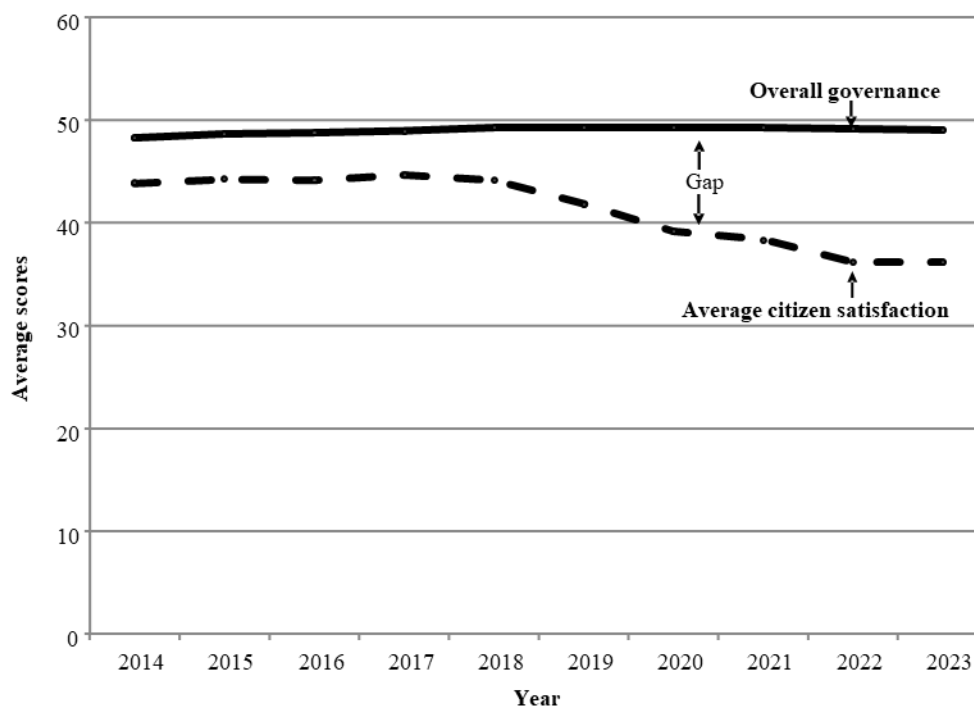
Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa based on data from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

16. Disillusionment is especially acute among marginalized groups, including women, young people, rural populations and ethnic minorities, which are often excluded from public services, economic opportunities and political participation. Surveys across 39 African countries revealed that over 60 per cent of citizens believed that people were "often" or "always" treated unequally under the law, with this perception rising to 65 per cent among the poorest groups.[13] Despite constitutional guarantees, systemic barriers persist, undermining trust and fuelling grievance-driven mobilization.

17. The cumulative effect of State absence in contexts of horizontal inequality is growing marginalization, particularly in rural, remote and border areas where State presence is weakest. Poverty often overlaps with perceived discrimination or neglect, intensifying grievances.

18. While grievances do not always lead to violence, empirical evidence shows multiple pathways from group-based inequality to collective grievances and conflict.[14] A study of Afrobarometer data from 4,008 districts in 35 African countries found that poverty was far more likely to contribute to violence in situations where local institutions were weak or where group grievances existed.[15] This dynamic often fuels a so-called conflict trap, as violence exacerbates inequality, creating a breeding

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[13] Afrobarometer, "Social cohesion: an African collage of imperfect tolerance and cautious trust", Dispatch No. 871 (October 2024).

[14] Noah Rosen, "Five years after pathways: evolving research on inequality, grievance and inclusion" (World Bank Group, March 2023).

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

ground for further conflict.[16] Sustainable peace requires addressing the governance deficits underlying these grievances.

B. From resentment to fertile ground for replacement

1. De facto replacement: non-State armed groups

19.   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, some groups have cultivated support by addressing grievances, enforcing order or delivering rudimentary services.

20.   Extremist groups, in particular, exploit experience and perceptions of injustice, exclusion and marginalization. A study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2023 of over 2,000 individuals across eight African countries, including over 1,000 former members of extremist groups, found that 32 per cent of them had joined such groups due to grievances linked to a weak State presence, such as unequal resource distribution, corruption and inadequate access to justice, especially in areas far from capitals.[17]

21.   Terrorism and violent extremism often take root in remote, marginalized and border regions marked by limited State presence and exclusion. Groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin exploit these conditions to gain legitimacy as providers of security, livelihoods 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 where youth unemployment rates are much higher than the national average, while Boko Haram thrives in areas where socioeconomic mobility is most constrained.[18] In West Africa, the spillover risk has grown, particularly in border zones with a weak State presence. Terrorist groups have exploited such areas to move fighters, weapons and illicit goods.

22.   Recruitment strategies often target unemployed and underemployed persons, with financial incentives playing a central role. The above-mentioned UNDP study found that hope for employment was the top driver of recruitment, as cited by one in four voluntary recruits. The Sahel region offers a stark illustration of how extremist groups exploit weak State presence, entrenched grievances and chronic underdevelopment. Climate shocks, demographic pressures and lagging progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (see figure VI) increase fragility and accelerate radicalization.[19] These structural drivers are often compounded by so-called tipping points: specific incidents, such as human rights abuses or the death or detention of a friend or relative.[20]

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[16] Sirianne Dahlum and others, "The conflict-inequality trap: how internal armed conflict affects horizontal inequality", United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Background Paper No. 2-2019 (November 2019).

[17] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (February 2023).

[18] Valeria Izzi, "Promoting decent employment for African youth as a peacebuilding society", International Labour Organization, Evidence Synthesis Paper Series No. 4/2020 (May 2020).

[19] Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa: citizen perspectives from the Sahel epicenter and periphery", Policy paper No. 74 (July 2021).

[20] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*.

Figure VI
Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Sahel, the rest of Africa and the rest of the world, 2023
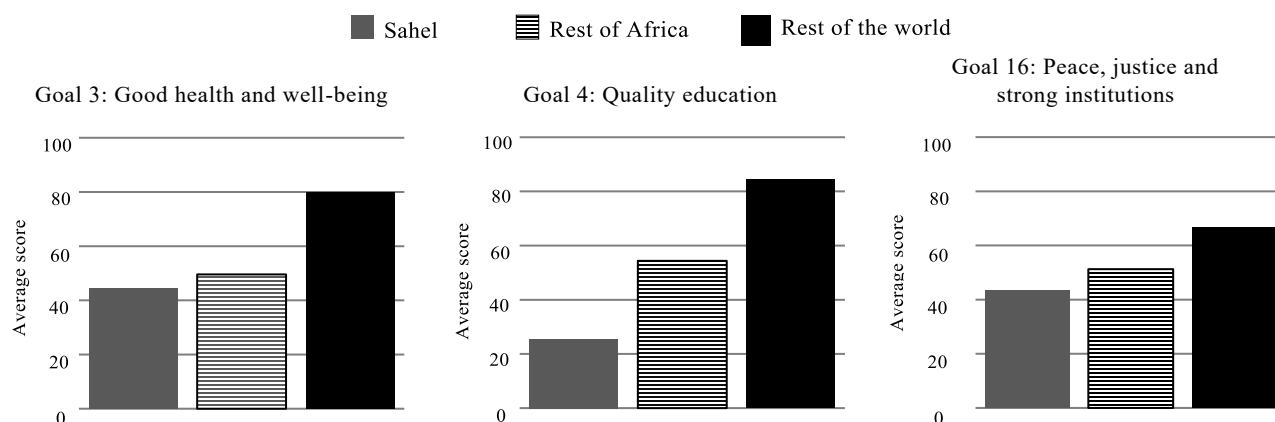
Source: Jeffrey Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune and Grayson Fuller, *The SDGs and the Summit of the Future: Sustainable Development Report 2024* (Dublin, Dublin University Press, 2024)

23. The proliferation of non-State armed groups across Africa demonstrates the consequences of fractured social contracts. Many groups have exploited geographical and functional State absence not only to recruit but also to act as alternative governance structures.

24. In the Sahel, Horn of Africa and Lake Chad basin, groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province have gained influence and tried to seek legitimacy by providing services that the State has failed to deliver, such as education, healthcare, access to water and dispute resolution, often through violence, human rights abuses and coercion.[21] Al-Shabaab has extended its influence by offering law enforcement and justice mechanisms rooted in local customs.[22] 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.[23] Furthermore, non-State armed groups in control of territories often exploit natural resources, such as gold, livestock and agriculture, while levying illicit taxes, eroding State authority and revenues.[24] This dynamic entrenches a cycle in which the limited State presence facilitates non-State control, making recovery of legitimacy and sovereignty increasingly difficult.

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[21] Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa"; 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 (May 2019); and Vincent Foucher, "Boko Haram: mapping an evolving armed constellation" (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, September 2024).

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

[23] United Nations and Lake Chad Basin Commission, "Weapons and ammunition dynamics in the Lake Chad basin" (2022).

[24] United Nations, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Concerns over the Use of Proceeds from the Exploitation, Trade and Trafficking of Natural Resources for the Purpose of Terrorism Financing* (2022).

25. Ineffective counter-terrorism, particularly when involving ethnic profiling or excessive or discriminatory use of force, often worsens these dynamics. Rather than reducing threats, such measures deepen resentment and fuel the very grievances that are exploited by extremist groups, thereby perpetuating instability. [25] Ultimately, comprehensive solutions require inclusive development strategies that tackle the underlying socioeconomic drivers of extremism and that are, at the same time, accompanied by effective, calibrated and rights-based counter-terrorism and security-enhancing measures, in order to protect communities and reduce the threat by non-State armed groups.

2. Actual replacement: unconstitutional changes of government

26. Since 2020, various African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, the Niger and the Sudan, have undergone unconstitutional changes of government. While contexts differ, these events have often been driven by a complex mix of internal and external factors, including security breakdowns, economic hardship, ethnic tensions and geopolitical competition over natural resources. Amid these complexities, certain recurring themes stand out. Many of these countries have faced a persistent erosion of the social contract, marked by widespread disillusionment with democratic institutions and governance failures. The affected countries consistently rank low on governance indices owing to challenges such as economic stagnation, inequality, insecurity and institutional breakdown. [26]

27. A study conducted by UNDP in 2023 of 5,000 citizens across affected countries found that frustration with government performance, in particular in the areas of economic exclusion, insecurity and corruption, was a key proximate driver of support for military takeovers. [27]

28. Longitudinal data show a broader decline in civic trust, particularly among young people, who increasingly view democracy as failing to improve their lives. Citizens in the affected countries report high perceptions of corruption, State failure to curb violence and waning confidence in State institutions – perceptions that worsened in the 5 to 10 years preceding unconstitutional changes. Military juntas have capitalized on this disillusionment, describing themselves as corrective forces and promising to restore order. While public support is often short-lived, it signals a worrying erosion of democratic legitimacy. [28]

C. Devastating consequences of this chain reaction

1. Democracy in peril

29. In the past decade, public support for democratic governance has dropped sharply across Africa. Afrobarometer surveys 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. This erosion parallels growing dissatisfaction with national trajectories: two thirds of respondents across 39 countries (2021–2023) believe that their countries are headed in the wrong direction and nearly 60 per cent are dissatisfied with how democracy is

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[25] Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa".
[26] UNDP, *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* (July 2023).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

functioning. Widespread perceptions of corruption have further eroded trust in government, particularly among young people. [29]

30. Growing public acceptance of military intervention is particularly concerning. 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 survey conducted by UNDP of 8,000 citizens across Africa, including 5,000 from Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and the Sudan, found that 63 per cent of those who were open to alternatives to democracy believed that democracy had been "abused" or "was not working". In countries that had recently experienced unconstitutional changes of government, almost half of the respondents said that non-democratic governments might be better or that the system type did not matter – a troubling indicator of waning faith in democratic governance. [30]

2. Expanding footprint of terrorism in Africa

31. In 2024, Africa recorded the highest number of terrorism-related deaths for the eighth consecutive year. The continent accounted for 8 of the 10 deadliest terrorist attacks globally and 17 of the 20 most fatal incidents. What began as isolated insurgencies has evolved into a regional crisis, 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 by arms flows since the conflict in Libya. The convergence of terrorism and organized crime – from drug trafficking to illegal mining and cattle rustling – has created entrenched conflict economies that cannot be eradicated through security approaches alone.[31] As both the cause and the consequence of weakened State authority, these dynamics undermine fragile institutions and obstruct efforts to re-establish a State presence.

3. Security-development trade-offs

32. In response to rising insecurity, a number of African Governments and their partners have prioritized military interventions, often at the expense of development investments, particularly in the Sahel (see figure VII). From 2010 to 2023, military spending across the continent increased significantly, while government expenditure on education fell and health spending remained stagnant. While guaranteeing the security of the population remains a key function of any Government, in a context of scarce resources, underinvestment in sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment deepens drivers of instability. Ensuring security is a core responsibility of the State, but 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.[32]

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

[30] UNDP, *Soldiers and Citizens*.

[31] Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2024* (Sydney, Australia, 2024) and *Global Terrorism Index 2025* (Sydney, Australia, 2025).

[32] Deborah Isser and others, "Governance in sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st century".

Figure VII
Security-development trade-offs in the Sahel region
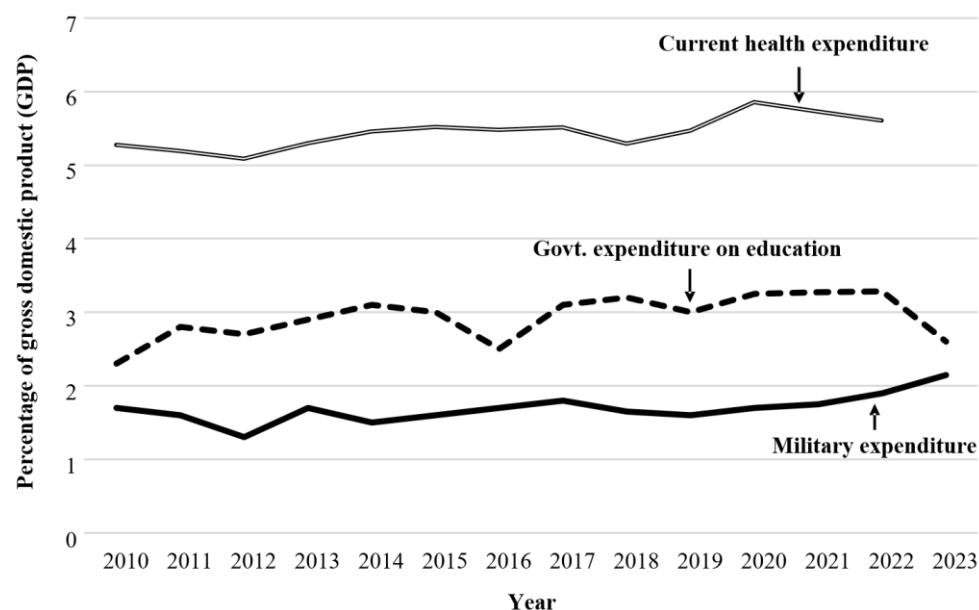
Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa based on data from the World Bank World Development Indicators database.

33. 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, protect human rights and foster economic opportunities. Instead, such military spending results in a self-perpetuating cycle: development challenges fuel insecurity, which prompts increased military spending, diverting resources away from addressing the structural drivers of conflict.

34. In contrast, investment in peacebuilding and prevention has consistently demonstrated high returns. Recent estimates show that, in countries that have not been recently affected by violence, every $1 spent on prevention yields between $26 and $75 in savings. In countries that have been recently affected by violence, the returns can reach as high as $103 per $1 spent.[33] In regions that are at risk of violent extremism, preventive spending has reduced State losses by between 2 and 8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) annually. The doubling of 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.[34]

4. Fractured trust and the fraying social contract

35. At the heart of these crises lies a profound erosion of trust between African citizens and their Governments. Afrobarometer surveys conducted in the period 2021–2023 revealed declining trust in formal institutions and elected leaders across the continent (see figure VIII). Most citizens continue to trust religious leaders, the military and traditional authorities, while trust in elected officials and formal State institutions has plummeted (see figure IX). Multiple studies have confirmed that low institutional trust correlates strongly with political violence, unrest and

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[33] Hannes Mueller and others, *The Urgency of Conflict Prevention: A Macroeconomic Perspective*, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Working Paper vol. 2024, No. 256 (December 2024).

[34] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*.

radicalization. [35] Low institutional trust also undermines the State's capacity to function effectively, creating a vicious cycle of poor governance and deepening distrust. [36]
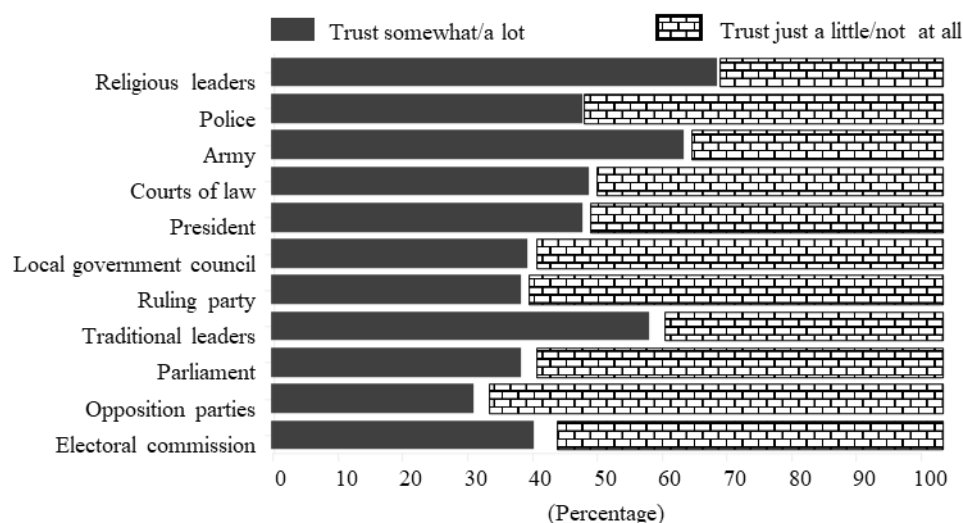
Figure VIII
Change in popular trust in the President, Parliament and courts in Africa
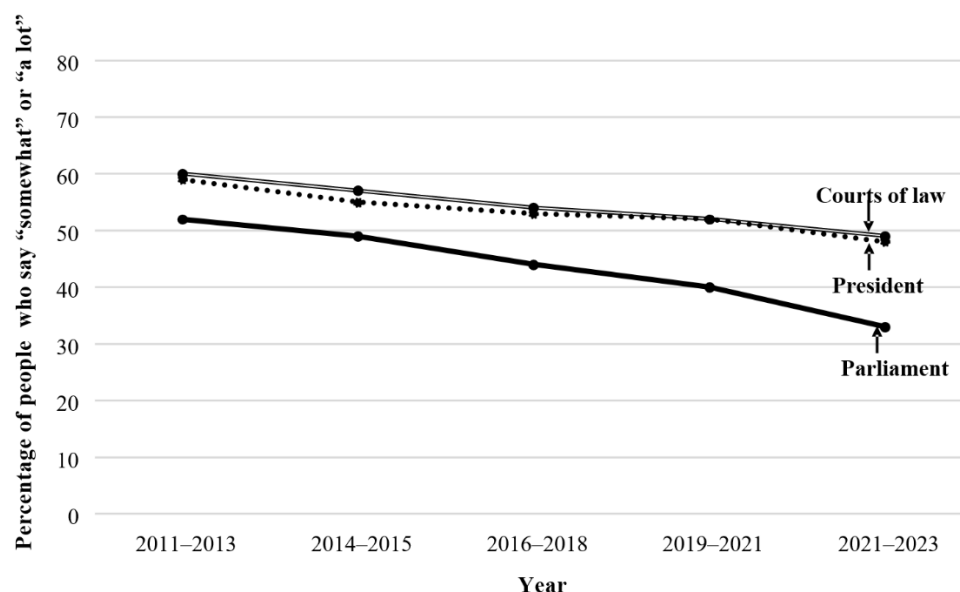
Source: Afrobarometer.

Figure IX
Popular trust in institutions and leaders

Source: Calculations by the Office of the Special Adviser based on data from Afrobarometer.

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[35] Afrobarometer, "Violent extremism in Africa".

[36] Afrobarometer, "Across Africa, public trust in key institutions and leaders is weakening", Dispatch No. 891 (October 2024).

V. The way forward: rebuilding the State through development ownership

36. The absence or weakness of the State in many African contexts has created a cycle of disenfranchisement and distrust and, increasingly, led to 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 simultaneously neglecting a vital root cause, namely, the failure of the State to fulfil the social contract.

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

38. Central to this effort is a renewed focus on governance reform that empowers States to deliver services and ensure the protection of their people. This focus must include the expansion of administrative reach and the strengthening of 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.

VI. Strategic interventions for State relegitimization

A. Strengthening fiscal capacity as a foundation for peace

39. 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 confirm that higher fiscal balances, even when accounting for country-specific factors, are consistently associated with reduced conflict risk and severity.[37] In fragile contexts, fiscal capacity is an indicator of resilience, cushioning shocks, sustaining services and deterring security threats.

40. Amid tightening credit, rising debt and external shocks, control over economic and financial flows is critical. Domestic resource mobilization is essential not only for revenue but also for restoring fiscal sovereignty and anchoring the social contract. Beyond taxation, domestic resource mobilization 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, by strengthening oversight of extractive industries, some African countries have been able to raise revenues and strengthen accountability.[38] Likewise, through fair and 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

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[37] Hannes Mueller and others, *The Urgency of Conflict Prevention*.

[38] Charlotte J. Lundgren, Alun H. Thomas and Robert C. York, *Boom, Bust, or Prosperity?: Managing Sub-Saharan Africa's Natural Resource Wealth* (Washington, D,C., IMF, 2013); and Xichavo Alecia Ndlovu and Christopher Vandome, "Mineral resource governance in Botswana", International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Stockholm, 2024).

enabled communities to successfully demand inclusive and accountable institutions, rebuilding civic trust.[39]

41. Domestic resource mobilization remains constrained by low public trust in many African countries. Despite tax rates that are comparable with those of developed countries, average domestic revenue collection on the continent is below 15 per cent of GDP.[40] Compliance is low, due not only to perceptions of mismanagement, corruption and weak service delivery, but also to structural factors, such as informality and poverty. This creates a vicious cycle in which mistrust and economic exclusion drive evasion, further weakening State capacity and the social contract.[41] Recent experiences across the continent demonstrate the difficulty of proceeding with tax base expansion efforts in contexts of hardship and mistrust. Breaking this cycle requires stronger State capacity and more responsive public services.

42. 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. This risk is compounded when tax systems are regressive, relying on indirect taxes like value added tax, and thus perceived to be disproportionately burdening the poor while wealthier elites and multinational corporations evade taxation through profit shifting and tax avoidance. Similarly, evidence indicates that sharp expenditure cuts, particularly those exceeding approximately 1 per cent of GDP, can worsen conflict.[42]

43. Optimizing resources and improving spending quality can help to expand fiscal space and rebuild confidence. Nearly half of public investment in sub-Saharan Africa is lost due to poor execution, compared with 34 per cent in other developing regions.[43] Strengthening financial accountability and improving public spending efficiency can reinforce the State's capacity and legitimacy without triggering further grievances.

B. Harnessing traditional institutions and norms

44. Important traditional African institutions, many of which predate or 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 the community level. Traditional leaders, religious leaders, customary and informal justice systems and community networks sustain services and cohesion, especially where the State presence is limited.

45. Customary and informal justice systems remain the primary conflict resolution channels for millions of Africans, offering accessible, affordable and culturally relevant justice. In areas affected by conflict, over 71 per cent of the population relies on such systems. Even in stable areas, 59 per cent of the population prefers to turn to them for legal matters.[44] Similarly, informal social protection, ranging from communal resource-sharing to family support, remains critical in areas where formal

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[39] World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report*.
[40] World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa*.
[41] Fabio Comelli and others, *Navigating Fiscal Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa: Resilient Strategies and Credible Anchors in Turbulent Waters*, Departmental Paper No. 2023/007 (Washington, D.C., IMF, 2023).
[42] Hannes Mueller and others, *The Urgency of Conflict Prevention*.
[43] Ibid.
[44] International Development Law Organization, *Diverse Pathways to People-Centred Justice: Report of the Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice and SDG16+* (Rome, 2023); and Erica Bosio and Ana Palacio Jaramillo, *Increasing Access to Justice in Fragile Settings* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2023).

systems are lacking. [45] Integrating these institutions, to the extent that they are compliant with international human rights law, into national governance strategies can extend State reach by building on existing sources of legitimacy and trust.

C. Promoting transparency, participation and accountability

46. Restoring trust in the State requires not only service delivery but also 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.

47. Transparency plays a powerful role in reshaping incentives and curbing corruption. Public access to government data, such as budgets, contracts and other fiscal information, enables 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 favoritism 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 and/or judicial recourse. [46]

48. Afrobarometer surveys and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance show that most Africans support public access to government information. Survey data reveal that citizens who believe that they can easily obtain such information are more likely to trust public officials and less likely to perceive them as corrupt. [47] Furthermore, research shows that transparency strengthens democratic participation. When people believe that their voices matter and that public resources are managed fairly, they are more likely to reject violence and engage in peaceful democratic processes. [48] Accordingly, digitization and other transparency measures serve to bolster both civic engagement and social cohesion, which are foundations for durable peace.

D. Reorienting development support to prioritize State capacity

49. A fundamental shift is needed in how development support is conceived and delivered in Africa. Decades of donor-driven and project-based aid have often prioritized short-term gains over long-term institution-building, often undermining 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 and externally driven projects rather than on support for national development plans. This approach has constrained Governments' ability to deliver public goods and services at scale and has weakened the very institutions needed for sustainable development and durable peace. [49]

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[45] United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, *Indigenous Social Protection Schemes as Building Blocks for Extending Social Protection in Africa* (2024).

[46] World Bank, *Improving Governance and Delivering for People in Africa*.

[47] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance*.

[48] Gordon Clubb, Graeme A. M. Davies and Yoshiharu Kobayashi, "Transparent communication in counter-terrorism policy: does transparency increase public support and trust in terrorism prevention programmes?", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 37, No.4 (May–June 2024); and United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2018).

[49] World Bank Group, *Aid Circumvention: The Elusive Dream of Putting Countries in the Driver's Seat* (October 2024).

50. These challenges have been exacerbated by recent shifts in the global aid landscape, including recent significant reductions in donor funding amid a proliferation of donors and a surge in aid agencies – some African countries work with over 250 such agencies – all of which constitute significant challenges for administrative systems. Aid fragmentation has increased, with a 35 per cent drop in average project size since 2000, raising transaction costs and complicating coordination. Furthermore, more funding is earmarked and delivered outside of State budgets. Today, 80 per cent of projects are managed by non-governmental actors, weakening national ownership and limiting alignment with national priorities.[50]

51. 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. The State is sidelined and loses visibility and authority as the primary provider of public goods. However, 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.[51]

52. In addition, the dominance of donor priorities can redirect State responsiveness away from domestic constituencies. States may become more responsive to funders than to their own people, subordinating national strategies 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.[52]

53. Development is indeed essential for peace, but equally essential is the determination of who delivers development. To be transformative, aid must do more than deliver outcomes; it must also foster nationally led and people-centred institutions that can deliver effectively, equitably and accountably. Rebuilding trust requires enabling States to lead, and not simply benefit from, development. Development partners must shift from being primary implementers to being enablers by supporting national systems, reinforcing institutions and investing in mechanisms that deepen citizen-State engagement. Such a shift requires rebalancing entrenched power asymmetries so that national Governments can exercise genuine ownership, define priorities and lead development agendas that are aligned with the needs of their people. Restoring the State's central role is the only way for the social contract to be renewed and for sustained progress to be achieved.

VII. Conclusions

54. Africa stands at a pivotal juncture. The continent is navigating a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape marked by shifting international priorities and tightening resources. As the multilateral system becomes increasingly strained, Africa must capitalize on its strengths. The continent holds vast human, institutional, natural and financial resources, which can help to drive transformative change. To realize this potential, Africa and its partners must invest in resilient and inclusive African-led development.

55. State-led development, through institutions that are legitimate, accountable and based on human rights and the rule of law, is the surest path towards restoring the social contract and achieving durable peace. This approach requires a paradigm shift, in which development cooperation strengthens country systems, endogenous

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[50] Ibid.
[51] World Bank, *Africa Social Contract Report*.
[52] Ibid.

governance institutions are respected and integrated, and fiscal and administrative capacities are built not only for efficiency but also for legitimacy, trust and the equitable benefit of all. Only then can peace become truly durable and development genuinely sustainable.

VIII.   Recommendations

56.   **African Governments should consider:**

(a)   **Recalibrating national development strategies to reinforce State legitimacy by ensuring that development initiatives are delivered through national systems and are designed to deepen the social contract between citizens and the State and to strengthen trust in the Government, with inclusive governance, rule of law, participatory planning, protection of human rights and equitable service delivery at the core, paying particular attention to women, young people 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 taxation strategies to include potential flows through institutional mechanisms such as pension funds and private sector investment;**

(c)   **Strengthening the accountability and efficiency of fiscal foundations by prioritizing measures that expand fiscal space without undermining public trust, such as by 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 identification 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 the influence of non-State armed groups, by integrating inclusive, people-centred development approaches with calibrated, rights-based security and counter-terrorism measures. Such strategies should prioritize the expansion of State presence through the delivery of essential services, economic opportunities and justice, particularly in underserved and conflict-affected regions, while also ensuring the State's ability to provide security and to ensure that the actions of its agents are professional, accountable and of such a nature as to avoid further alienating affected communities, including through strengthened cross-border collaboration with affected countries.**

57.   **Development partners are encouraged to:**

(a)   **Reorient development cooperation towards long-term institution- and capacity-building, moving away from fragmented, project-based aid towards**

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 that enable 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 systems.

58.   The multilateral system should:

(a)   Place the strengthening of State capacity and legitimacy within the core mandate of development assistance in Africa to ensure the consistent prioritization of strengthening national public institutions and systems across all programming areas;

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

(c)   Scale up support for digital public infrastructure as a governance enabler, including through pooled funding and capacity development for, among other things, 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 and inclusive approaches that uphold dignity and rights.

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