

## ***Fourth Annual Retreat***

**for Special Envoys and High Representatives of the Regional  
Economic Communities (RECs)**

Changing Global Dynamic and the Future of Regional Mediation towards  
Peace and Constitutional and Democratic Governance in Africa



### **OUTCOME REPORT**

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## Acronyms

|                           |                                                                |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AES</b>                | Association of Sahelian States                                 |
| <b>AU</b>                 | African Union                                                  |
| <b>AUSSOM</b>             | African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia     |
| <b>ECOWAS</b>             | Economic Community of West African States                      |
| <b>EU</b>                 | European Union                                                 |
| <b>IGAD</b>               | Intergovernmental Authority on Development                     |
| <b>International IDEA</b> | International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance |
| <b>MISAHEL</b>            | African Union Mission to Mali and the Sahel                    |
| <b>RECs</b>               | African Regional Economic Communities                          |
| <b>UN</b>                 | United Nations                                                 |

## Executive summary

International IDEA convened the **Fourth Annual Retreat for African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Special Envoys and High Representatives** in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Senegal and with the support of the Governments of the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Norway from 14 to 16 September 2025 in Dakar, Senegal. The main objective of the Retreat, which gathered around a hundred participants, was to take stock of the impact of geopolitics, in particular the crisis of multilateralism and how this is affecting the work of RECs in addressing transitions and conflicts in their member states, as well as how attitudes and dynamics have changed since the Third Annual Retreat.

In terms of outcomes, the Retreat provided a **unique platform** for bringing together key stakeholders engaged in transitions across fragile and conflict-affected settings. It also contributed to **International IDEA's strategic realignment** of its initiatives toward a more regional approach through thoughtful and considerate engagement with RECs and regional mechanisms, while ramping up country support to selected coastal maritime states. In that regard, International IDEA plans to **support efforts to reposition MISAHEL as a central hub for Sahel stabilization, fostering proactive and coordinated responses over reactive crisis management**. International IDEA is grateful to the European Union and the Government of Switzerland which expressed their interest to support the next editions of the Retreat, alongside core support from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, enabling the **sustainability of the platform** and ensuring the **continuity of engagement** among stakeholders involved in transitions across fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Key recommendations from the Retreat include:

### ❖ **For RECs and their Mediators:**

- Renew their commitment to democratic norms and frameworks.
- Reconsider reliance on state sanctions and military solutions.
- Adopt a comprehensive approach to mediation that goes beyond institutional challenges to address the root causes of crises - particularly extreme poverty, youth unemployment and disenchantment, the marginalization and exclusion of women, and the lack of socio-economic development opportunities.
- Develop cross border mediation processes initiatives aimed at resolving disputes that span national borders, such as resource conflicts, territorial disagreements, ethnic tensions, and pastoralist mobility issues. They could build on traditional African conflict resolution practices, emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and interconnectedness, while addressing modern challenges like climate change, terrorism, and economic interdependence.
- Empower the youth and women as critical actors in stabilization, governance and development in fragile and conflict affected settings.

### ❖ **For international partners:**

- Remain engaged with fragile and conflict affected African countries by fostering inclusive dialogues and consensus building mechanisms at national and regional levels that respects sovereignty, Rule of law and Human rights.
- Prioritize Africa-Led Processes with coordinated diplomatic and financial backing.
- Increase efforts towards strengthening capacities of RECs and Regional Mechanisms, as well as their Mediators and special envoys, as key pillars of African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and African Governance Architecture (AGA).
- Leverage on *minilateral* and tiered mechanisms (like minded countries, friends and contact groups, troikas,...) to bridge geopolitical divides as well as facilitate information-sharing and incremental gains towards crisis resolution.
- Promote inclusive and participatory mediation with emphasis on Women and Communities.

## 1. Introduction

International IDEA convened the **Fourth Annual Retreat for African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Special Envoys and High Representatives** in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Senegal and with the support of the Governments of the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Norway from 14 to 16 September 2025 in Dakar, Senegal. The Retreat built on one of the key recommendations of the Third Annual Retreat held in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2024: the need to have an in depth and proactive reflection on the impact of the ongoing radical changes in multilateralism on mediation in complex constitutional and political transitions in Africa.

The Fourth Retreat therefore focused on the theme of **‘Changing Global Dynamic and the Future of Regional Mediation towards Peace and Constitutional and Democratic Governance in Africa’**. As in previous editions, this Retreat primarily sought to provide an open and reflective forum where senior officials from regional multilateral organizations and governments, constitution and peace building professionals, as well as key civil society figures could engage in strategic conversations on current developments and crises, and the challenges facing constitutional and democratic governance in Africa and the instability that accompanies it.

The main objective of the Retreat was to take stock of the impact of geopolitics, in particular the crisis of multilateralism and how this is affecting the work of RECs in addressing transitions and conflicts in their member states, as well as how attitudes and dynamics have changed since the Third Annual Retreat. The Retreat was designed to draw practical insights and to share experiences and lessons based on open, candid and honest reflections. The discussions were organized around three thematic and five country/region-specific high-level moderated panels. Several bilateral and closed-door meetings were also held on the sidelines of the Retreat, involving representatives from RECs, special envoys, and representatives from certain countries.

The convening brought together around a hundred participants, about 32 of whom were women. Participants included the former Prime Minister and current High Representative of the President of Senegal, Dr. Aminata Toure; the High Representative of the President of Senegal for International Relations, Prof. Abdoulaye Bathily; the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security Affairs, Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah; the Chief of Staff of the African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson, Ambassador Mohamed El-Amine Souef; the AU High Representative for Silencing the Guns, Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas; the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for the Sahel, Ambassador João Cravinho; the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Senegal, Mrs. Carmen Haagenars; the Assistant State Secretary, Head of Africa Division at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Philip Stalder; the Swiss Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Mr. Sylvain Astier; Mrs. Tamara Mona, Swiss designated Ambassador to Senegal; Mr Pietro Mona, Swiss designated Ambassador to Cabo Verde, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Mauritania; the Head of MISAHEL, Dr. Mamadou Tangara; the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) for West Africa and the Sahel, Ambassador Leonardo Simão; the EU Ambassador to Senegal, Mr. Jean-Marc Pisani; the Africa and West Asia Director of International IDEA, Dr Roba D. Sharamo; and the Secretary General of International IDEA, Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora who joined virtually.

The Fourth Annual Retreat occurred amid a dramatic acceleration of the shifts in the global governance framework, particularly since the turn of 2025. Notably, multilateral systems of governance face unprecedented challenges, arguably bordering on complete dysfunction. This crisis of multilateralism manifests itself in several ways: a decline in global cooperation and the effectiveness of international institutions—including their High Representatives and Special Envoys—power rivalries, and domestic political shifts. While some argue multilateralism can adapt through reform or regional cooperation, others see a permanent shift toward a multipolar and fragmented world order. The relative weakening of multilateral platforms has coincided with the intensification of geopolitical competition and unilateral efforts to exert influence and foster (often ad-hoc and highly transactional) partnerships. Due to its economic, climatic, natural resources, technological and socio-political potentials and vulnerabilities, Africa is arguably more exposed to the storms arising from these changing global dynamics. Indeed, the steep rise in the number of unconstitutional changes of government, instability, conflicts, entrenchment of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding amid disenchantment in the performance of democracy in the past decade, even in relatively stable countries, is no coincidence.



*Participants at the opening ceremony of the Fourth Annual Retreat for RECs Special Envoys and High Representatives, Dakar, Senegal, 14 September 2025. Credit: International IDEA*

As part of the global recession in multilateralism, RECs have struggled to maintain their influence, while actors, big and small, from outside of the continent are seeking and gaining access and influence. Some African states are also unilaterally pursuing their own interests outside of, and sometimes in a different direction from, continental and sub-regional collective platforms. External political and material support to RECs' agenda of regional integration, peace and security and broadly to constitutional and democratic governance has also steadily declined. Simultaneously, internal resistance to the vision and decisions of RECs—notably those focused on democracy, constitutional order and human rights—has expanded, with assertions of (absolutist) visions of sovereignty and anti-western/colonial sentiment (re)surging. In this regard, three west African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) have withdrawn from ECOWAS and formed the Association of Sahelian States (AES); and some countries have effectively suspended their membership from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

In many contexts, despite the existence of robust regional frameworks to govern the return to constitutional order, targeted countries that have undergone unconstitutional changes of government or are in conflict have come to dictate the terms and nature of the role of RECs, if at all they choose to engage. These multilateral actors are no longer able to impose the terms of return to constitutional order. In the ensuing vacuum, foreign actors, including non-democratic regimes, have sought to gain footprints and influence, particularly in the greater Sahel, Horn of Africa and Great Lakes regions. This poses challenges to the return to sustainable stability and transformative peace in relevant countries in these regions and in the rest of the continent, as well as for external democratic partners.

These developments call for a serious (re)assessment of the roles of RECs in the changing African and geopolitical dynamics and rejuvenation of their visions, assumptions, strategies and actions. The changes should also inform the vision, strategies and modes of engagement of international organizations (such as International IDEA) and partners (notably the EU and its member states). While the developments pose enormous challenges, they may also offer opportunities to think outside the box and find innovative ways to engage in contexts of constitutional transitions, including unconstitutional changes of government.

In view of these fundamental changes, in addition to reassessing the insights from and developments since the previous retreats, the Fourth Retreat focused on exploring the changing nature of the role of RECs in a global dynamic of multilateralism in crisis. It provided a platform for strategic conversations on the state and future of continental and sub-regional engagement to shape peace, stability, political settlements and effective and accountable governance in member states. It also assessed whether and how RECs should revitalize their vision, standards and modalities of engagement in promoting and defending regional integration and democratic constitutional governance.

This report presents the key outcomes and insights from the Retreat. The second section outlines shared understandings and broader outcomes that emerged from the Retreat discussions, while the third highlights insights from the thematic panels. The fourth section focuses on findings from the region- and country-specific panels. The report concludes with actionable recommendations to carry the Retreat's insights forward.

## 2. Key Outcomes



*Participants and speaker at the opening ceremony of the Fourth Annual Retreat for RECs Special Envoys and High Representatives, Dakar, Senegal, 14 September 2025. Credit: International IDEA*

The Retreat fostered a shared understanding that internal challenges within RECs, along with the involvement of external actors, including non-democratic regimes pursuing geopolitical interests, have weakened regional and continental legitimacy and capacity to manage crises and guide transitions toward peace and constitutional governance on the continent. The growing collapse in multilateralism—which has accelerated in the past twelve months in part due to the realignment of US foreign policy under President Trump—is further dwarfing already weak African voices in decisions affecting the world and the continent. The continent must therefore work to reinvigorate its regional integration agenda and ensure a robust role for RECs in shaping the emerging global order.

There was also a recognition that the countries concerned, especially in the Sahel, were unlikely to address the security challenges on their own, even with support from non-democratic external regimes, which also threatens the security interests of other countries in the relevant regions. This dual realization has spurred renewed efforts for RECs to address the concerns of incumbent military leaders and support countries facing security threats, while also pressing for clear roadmaps toward peace and a return to constitutional governance. In view of the linkages between security and governance challenges, addressing the issues requires both military support and institutional and political reforms. Accordingly, there is an increasing shift towards re-engagement after periods of tension, particularly between ECOWAS and members of the AES.

In addition, the Retreat led to the identification of the following **overarching outcomes**:

- ❖ **Unique platform:** The Retreat provided a much-needed and unique platform for bringing together key stakeholders engaged in transitions across fragile and conflict-affected settings, including representatives from international institutions and RECs. It also enabled over two dozen bilateral meetings, fostering connections among diverse actors, many of whom met for the first time. Participants expressed that the Retreat was invaluable for sharing experiences, networking, and discussing coordination strategies among actors with overlapping interest and mandates, benefiting from the Chatham House rules that enabled participants to speak more freely than in most other fora. International IDEA's role as a neutral convener was recognized as a significant advantage, allowing for more effective, flexible and agile engagement compared to other organizations, which face protracted legitimacy (UN), capacity (civil society organizations) and/or protocol issues (AU).
- ❖ **Strategic realignment:** The discussions held during the Retreat contributed to International IDEA's reflections on a strategic realignment of its initiatives. In particular, whereas discussions at the Third Retreat urged IDEA to support constitutional governance in the Sahel and Horn of Africa through direct national support in countries in transition, including AES countries, interlocutors at the Fourth Retreat urged a more regional approach through thoughtful and considerate engagement with RECs and regional mechanisms, while ramping up country support to selected coastal maritime states. This will enable International IDEA to monitor developments in transition and conflict-affected states, support regional efforts, and sustain relationships that allow for country-specific democracy support interventions when needed. Such efforts will be directed at enhancing the resilience, capacity and legitimacy of relatively competitive and open democratic systems, including coastal West African states, with a view to reduce the risk of their destabilization and abrupt crises, whether in the form of conflict or military coups, and respond effectively to the challenges they face, such as international crime, drug trafficking, expansion of terrorism, and migration. At the same time, it will contribute towards the prevention of a deterioration in

constitutional governance, stability and democracy in those countries where democratic governance is still in place but is fragile.

- ❖ **Support to AU Mission to Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL):** One concrete outcome of the retreat relates to a specific request for support to the office of the recently appointed Representative of the Chairperson of the AU Commission in Mali and the Sahel and Head of MISAHEL, Dr. Mamadou Tangara. To strengthen the effectiveness of his office, International IDEA plans to support Dr. Tangara in undertaking a strategic reassessment and adaptation of MISAHEL's strategic plan to the new contexts in Mali and Sahel countries. This will help reposition this institution as a central hub for Sahel stabilization, fostering proactive and coordinated responses over reactive crisis management.
- ❖ **Sustainability:** In recognition of the importance and added value of the Retreat, the EU and the Government of Switzerland expressed interest to support the next editions of the Retreat, alongside the core support from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The offer of support will enable the sustainability of the platform and ensure the continuity of much-needed engagement among stakeholders involved in transitions across fragile and conflict-affected settings. By establishing this partnership, International IDEA is committed to fostering continuous dialogue, and facilitate strategic coordination, knowledge sharing, and networking opportunities that can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of support to transition processes.

An important area for improvement identified during the Retreat relates to its format, which mainly focused on moderated panels, principally relying on the moderator to gather insights from the panelists. There were suggestions that the format of the deliberations could be enhanced to better facilitate more elaborate discussions and interactions among all the participants. International IDEA will discuss with strategic partners—including RECs, the EU, and the governments of the Netherlands and Switzerland—on ways to adjust the format to enable more effective exchange of ideas and experiences and enrich the overall value of future gatherings.

### 3. Insights from the thematic panels



*Participants in a plenary session at the Fourth Annual Retreat for RECs Special Envoys and High Representatives, Dakar, Senegal, 14 September 2025. Credit: International IDEA*

### **3.1. Panel 1: The Role of RECs in promoting peace and effective, accountable and constitutional governance under current dynamics of fading multilateralism and geopolitical changes**

The first panel examined the evolving roles, opportunities and challenges facing RECs in fostering peace, stability, effective and constitutional governance in Africa amidst declining global multilateral cooperation and dynamic geopolitical landscapes. The panelists were asked to assess their organization's responses to the current multilateral dynamics, and how these promote peace and effective governance in this challenging context.

Panelists highlighted the evolving challenges and opportunities faced by their organizations. Initially designed to tackle economic issues, RECs now face unprecedented challenges, including internal political instability, security crises, terrorism, armed conflicts, and climate pressures. These dynamics have raised critical questions about the effectiveness of RECs in fostering peace and governance, as citizens increasingly express loss of confidence in the legitimacy, independence and capacity of these institutions.

Panelists emphasized the urgent need to revive a sense of solidarity and belief in Africa's capabilities, advocating for a pan-African partnership that transcends national interests. While states are key actors in this process, civil society, businesses, and the people at large must promote the idea of integration, especially at moments where states have shown reluctance or even retreated from the goal. They highlighted the interconnectedness of challenges across the continent, noting that global events, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and the policies and actions of the Trump administration in the US, have direct implications for regional stability. The discussion underscored the importance of precision and comprehensiveness in governance discourse, warning that neglecting regions like the Sahel can lead to a vacuum that facilitates the entrenchment of terrorism and extremism. The panel cited the example of Libya, where the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, resulted in instability that allowed arms flow and terrorist networks to flourish in the Sahel.

The panel also addressed the compartmentalization of Africa in international relations, where the continent has struggled to maintain a unified posture on key shared interests, and where some external actors have sought to undermine African unity by treating RECs as a collection of separate entities rather than a cohesive whole. This fragmentation limits Africa's agency and ability to negotiate on equal footing with global powers. Participants called for a collective understanding of the challenges faced by African states and emphasized the need for a common approach to governance that prioritizes the legitimate aspirations of African citizens.

Acknowledging the fact that poverty and unemployment are key triggers of fragility, destabilization and illegal migration across African countries, the panelists stressed the importance of technology transfer to the continent and of recalibrating economic dynamics to create jobs and foster sustainable development. The discussion also pointed out the significant issue of exporting raw materials, which often leads to fewer job opportunities and economic stagnation. Additionally, participants urged for the effective implementation of existing governance norms and values, as well as operational documents and frameworks established by RECs (and the AU) instead of creating new ones. They emphasized the importance of adapting these frameworks to current realities.

### **3.2. Panel 2: Adaptive and innovative solutions in the engagement of RECs in the current geopolitical context**

The second panel explored and evaluated adaptive and innovative strategies that RECs—including their special envoys and high representatives—can employ to effectively engage in and support complex political transitions in African states, considering the challenges and opportunities presented by the current geopolitical landscape. The discussion aimed at identifying practical solutions, enabling exchange of good practices, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders to enhance the role of RECs in promoting stability, security, effective governance, and sustainable development during political transitions.

A central theme of the discussion was the urgent need for RECs to proactively reshape their roles in a multilateral context that often undermines African agency. Panelists emphasized that the guiding principles of RECs should focus on locally informed solutions to problems, advocating for a shift away from outsourcing conflict resolution to external mediators. In this regard, efforts to ensure the financial autonomy of RECs are crucial and can reduce vulnerabilities to geopolitical shifts and influence. In addition, an approach that emphasizes contextualized solutions is crucial, as it fosters ownership and accountability among African nations, particularly among younger populations who may feel disillusioned by real or perceived foreign interventions.

The panel highlighted several adaptive solutions that RECs can implement to enhance their effectiveness, including:

- establishing rapid mediation systems to respond swiftly to security crises;
- adopting a comprehensive approach to mediation that goes beyond institutional challenges to address the root causes of crises, particularly extreme poverty, youth unemployment and disenchantment, the marginalization and exclusion of women, and the lack of socio-economic development opportunities;
- developing cross border mediation initiatives aimed at resolving disputes that span national borders, such as resource conflicts, territorial disagreements, ethnic tensions, and pastoralist mobility issues. They could build on traditional African conflict resolution practices, emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and interconnectedness, while addressing modern challenges like climate change, terrorism, and economic interdependence;
- institutionalizing women and youth participation to mediation processes, leveraging on their ability to talk to all camps during crisis and in conflict affected situations as well as on their community-level engagement
- fostering vertical and horizontal approaches as well as coordination between RECs, member states and international partners to contribute to creating an environment conducive for more cohesive and responsive regional frameworks.

Panelists have noted with concern that the average duration of political transitions has significantly increased, from 9.5 months to 45 months, indicating a decline in the effectiveness of transitional actors to address the real concerns of citizens, instead leading to the capturing of power for the benefit of new exclusionary groups. Members of the panel and participants therefore emphasized the need for a renewed commitment to democratic norms, urging RECs to actively enforce protocols that can contribute to preventing incidences of unconstitutional changes of governments. This includes the imperative not only to condemn and reject unconstitutional changes of government, but also to

effectively promote the standards outlined in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, the ECOWAS additional protocol on democracy and good governance, and IGAD's project of a protocol on peace and governance, thereby reinforcing commitment to democratic governance across the various regions.

**3.3. Panel 3: How have international organizations and partners responded, and how should they respond, to the changing dynamics in geopolitical landscape, including in their support to the capacity and role of RECs in transitional contexts?**

The third panel sought to identify actionable insights for external policymakers and international organizations to navigate effectively complex geopolitical environments in accompanying African efforts to resolve complex political and constitutional transitions in Africa.

A significant insight was the recognition that the root causes of Africa's challenges, such as governance failures, economic instability, and security threats, are deeply intertwined. Panelists emphasized that seeking to impose democracy from outside is not only ineffective but can also exacerbate tensions. Instead, external actors must engage with African nations, including those with non-democratic regimes, fostering dialogue and continuous engagement that respects sovereignty while also insisting on compliance with regional, continental and international standards. This approach is crucial for seeking to maintain open channels of communication, including in contexts where civic space is shrinking.

The panel emphasized the need for international actors to support RECs which remain, despite their weaknesses (including financial limitations), crucial vehicles for advancing shared values and interests such as democracy and regional integration. Panelists highlighted the potential for the UN, EU, AU, and RECs to form strong coalitions to enhance governance and efficiency in Africa, combining the AU's legitimacy with the EU and UN's resources to support the implementation of commitments and address institutional challenges. Such support must consider the challenges resulting from prolonged political transitions that hinder effective regional and international engagement, the importance of sustaining dialogue, including by identifying potential reformers, supporting interventions that address the urgent needs of the population, and the risks of engaging exclusively with dissenting voices (e.g., civil society organizations) without addressing the broader political context.

The EU was highlighted as a pivotal player in this landscape, with a unique opportunity to strengthen the institutional capacity of RECs in a manner that aligns with shared interests and priorities of both Africa and Europe. This requires a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical context, particularly the influence of external powers like Russia and China, which complicates the dynamics in Africa and can undermine local governance efforts.

The discussion further underscored the need to resist imposing external narratives and to avoid double standards in discourse. The panelists pointed out that while the idea of 'African solutions to African problems' is often acknowledged when situations are considered favorable, it is dismissed in contexts of complex crises, leading to the creation of new and untested tools, and to the dominance of external actors in certain conflict and transition contexts. This inconsistency can hinder effective responses and perpetuate cycles of dependency. While recognizing the value of external support and accompaniment, African institutions should be given the primacy in dealing with problems afflicting the continent.

To navigate these complexities, the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, including the youth, women, businesses, and civil society actors was emphasized. The panel stressed that the content of transitions, rather than merely their duration, should be discussed, and that transitions are political processes for which agreements can only be reached over time.

## 4. Insights from the region/country-specific panels

The remaining panels focused on specific regions or countries: the coastal states (Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana and Senegal), Sudan, Somalia, Central Sahel and the Great Lakes.



*Participants in a plenary session at the Fourth Annual Retreat for RECs Special Envoys and High Representatives, Dakar, Senegal, 14 September 2025. Credit: International IDEA*

### 4.1. Coastal States

The first panel focused on ongoing reform efforts in Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, and Senegal, emphasizing that supporting these initiatives is crucial for laying the foundations and consolidating constitutional democracy, as well as security, stability and regional integration. In this regard, it was noted that support for democracy has actually increased in the four countries, despite some tolerance for potential military rule—particularly when there are perceptions of systemic abuse of power by incumbents. Nevertheless, some of these countries are particularly vulnerable to risks emerging from the Sahel, both in terms of insecurity and narratives around democracy. Accordingly, it was noted that, if they are to be resilient, democratic systems must deliver not only alternations in power but also participatory, accountable and effective governance. Such support should target state institutions but also political parties and civil society.

Experiences in The Gambia also highlight the importance of pursuing critical reforms while the appetite for them exists. While comprehensive reform processes may be necessary, these should not delay specific reforms in areas where there is broad political and public consensus. Large scale reform processes tend to take time and pressures for reform may fizzle out, especially as electoral calculations start to figure prominently.

Support to relatively democratic countries is also essential to reduce growing public despair and disillusionment with democratic processes and their ability to deliver security, basic services and shared growth. The success of these nations in addressing popular needs and demands through

democratic reforms can counter competing narratives that suggest that African countries need ‘strongmen’ to tackle their challenges.

In all cases, it was emphasized that reform processes can only be successful and consolidated where they are seen as fair, transparent and inclusive. In this regard, the effective involvement of civil society organizations is critical, particularly in fighting mis/disinformation—including attempts to present democracy as an ‘imported’ concept—and polarization along identity lines. External partners are also crucial in the success of these reform efforts. In particular, it was noted that the EU Global Gateway initiative can include support to governance and institutional strengthening, as well as enhancing focus on climate and social impact in the implementation of projects under the initiative. This can complement the EU Coastal Maritime Strategy as well as relevant initiatives related to governance reforms in these countries.

#### 4.2. Sudan

The second country-focused panel focused on the urgent need to promote and strengthen conditions conducive to peace and a return to constitutional order in Sudan. Despite initial optimism following a significant citizen uprising against a long-term dictator, Sudan has descended into a brutal conflict.

The ongoing violence has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe, with daily casualties and a lack of clarity regarding the fundamental reasons for the fighting. International sanctions have proven ineffective, and the current geopolitical climate has diverted the attention to other conflicts. The priority should therefore be the silencing of the guns through dialogue with military leaders. In this regard, participants highlighted the continued importance of the AU, RECs, and the UN in urging external proxies to cease inflaming the conflict. International IDEA was also encouraged to continue monitoring developments in Sudan and to support governance- and dialogue-related initiatives.

Panelists emphasized the critical lack of consultation with Sudanese citizens regarding how to address the crisis, creating a gap between what the population envisions for ending the conflict and the assumptions held by various actors involved. This disconnect highlights the urgent need to ensure that the voices of Sudanese citizens, including women and the youth, are heard in the peace process.

The panel further highlighted that the historical politicization and mismanagement of Sudan's diverse society and resources has exacerbated the conflict, while external interventions have inflamed tensions. Some civilian groups are also divided into factions supporting different military groups, leaving many without representation or access to basic needs.

Ultimately, the principal actors in the conflict are the Sudanese people themselves, and while external proxies play critical roles, the ultimate responsibility for both the conflict and its resolution rests with the Sudanese. The stakeholders must therefore seek to move away from a culture of hegemony and conflict towards more inclusive and consensual political imagination. Nevertheless, the discussion also underscored that the situation in Sudan extends beyond its borders, with implications such as refugee flows, the emergence of terrorist groups, and the flow of arms affecting neighboring countries. This makes the Sudanese crisis a regional issue, resulting from decades of neglect and lack of accountability, compounded by the diversion of attention to other conflicts and a general lack of concern for Sudan.

### 4.3. Somalia

The panel focused on how to promote reconciliation in Somalia and the completion of the political transition under a new federal constitution, starting from acknowledgement of recent calls by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to rejuvenate dialogues between the federal government, federal member states and diverse stakeholders. Panelists underscored that new disputes over the forthcoming elections scheduled for May 2026 have raised political tensions and undermined the conducive environment offered by existing dialogue mechanisms, particularly the informal National Consultative Council.

In addition, the threats posed by a resurgent Al Shabab continued to push authorities to militarize or securitize their approaches to deal with the group, even though small windows of opportunities were opening for mediation and dialogue with more moderate actors within the group. At the same time, panelists pointed out that the structure of a dialogue or mediated process with Al Shabab, which would be a separate national-led and owned process from dialogue between political and civilian actors, still needed to be articulated to gain traction and broader legitimacy. Considering the increasing likelihood of significant reductions in foreign funding for the AUSSOM and the restricted role of IGAD, which was engaged in Somalia from a Red Sea regional perspective, new avenues needed to be found and strengthened for Somali security forces to scale up their responsibilities while promoting democratic governance. The stakes of dialogue among the key civilian stakeholders to develop and implement a shared constitutional and democratic vision are therefore very high. In this regard, the importance of involving traditional leaders and local institutions, and generally adopting a bottom-up approach, was emphasized—as was done to narrow clan differences, contributing to the relative stabilization of Somaliland. In this regard, support from the AU, IGAD and other partners was identified as crucial.

In sideline discussions, AUSSOM called for increased support to complete its current mandate, recognizing this could be its final extension by the UN Security Council. Representatives from Somalia suggested that they would remain engaged with the Somalia federal government in the interest of peace and mutual development. Representatives from civil society identified avenues to approach moderate elements and mid-level commanders in Al Shabab to canvas prospects for a dialogue, while maintaining military pressure on the group. International IDEA offered to remain committed to supporting political and technical processes to ensure peaceful elections in 2026, the completion of constitutional review, and the development of democratic federal structures across the country. In this regard, International IDEA will continue to partner with stakeholders to develop new, responsive and flexible dialogue support mechanisms.

### 4.4. Central Sahel

The fourth panel focused on the nature and future of support for a return to constitutional governance in Central Sahel countries, namely Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Panelists emphasized the primacy of political dialogue and reconciliation, both within and outside these nations, grounded in cultural, sociological, and local realities. They highlighted the importance of border reconciliation and management to address the root causes of conflicts, stressing that all partners must collaborate effectively to achieve lasting peace. A key point was raised about the humanitarian urgency in the region, noting that humanitarian aid providers are fleeing AES countries while mobility corridors and

supply routes are being disrupted, leaving citizens in those countries increasingly isolated and suffocated.

The discussion underscored the necessity of restoring hope among the youth, women, the private sector, and the diaspora by revitalizing social services, state institutions, and education. Furthermore, the panelists stressed the importance of sustainability in addressing the crisis, advocating for long-term partnerships and ownership among all actors involved. They pointed out that mediation must be prioritized, as recent years have seen breakdowns in dialogue, and that this should involve not only the states concerned but also armed groups (potentially starting with intermediate leadership if direct discussions are not feasible), as well as all segments of society. ECOWAS was identified as a key actor for support, stressing that AES countries have left ECOWAS due to neglect, as their security concerns were overlooked while global attention focused on other crises.

Effective reengagement of ECOWAS with AES countries is critical in view of the regional implications of the crisis in the Sahel. This requires ECOWAS to recognize and support the needs of the countries, while also insisting on the importance of tangible movements towards return to constitutional order (i.e. without giving the military regimes a *carte blanche*). There is also a need to challenge the narrative that simply externalizes problems and blames outsiders for the troubles in the region. This necessitates looking inward to finding negotiated solutions and a realization that there is no military solution to the challenges. This may necessitate an integrated approach, also involving representatives of military leaders from across the region, and reconsidering ‘terrorist’ labels on some of the insurgent groups.

Coordination between the AU and ECOWAS was deemed essential, with a focus on subsidiarity and complementarity as pathways out of the current crisis. In particular, the revitalization of MISAHEL and the reform of ECOWAS’s additional protocols were identified as a starting point, along with a reconsideration of the use of state sanctions and a reassessment of the types of support regional organizations can provide. Panelists cautioned against viewing military solutions as the only answer, advocating instead for democratic decision-making processes that empower citizens to determine their future. Reducing the operational and financial resources of armed groups was also identified as a solution moving forward.

#### 4.5. Great Lakes

The last panel addressed the challenges and opportunities for constitutional governance in the Great Lakes region (encompassing the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and others). Panelists acknowledged the solidarity of African communities in supporting peace efforts in the region, while also expressing concern about the motivations behind the transactional framework of external involvement.

It was recalled that transactional diplomacy is not new in this region and refers to a pragmatic, deal-oriented approach to international relations and crisis resolution, where states exchange specific concessions—such as economic aid, security guarantees, or resource access—in return for policy changes or cooperation. This contrasts with value-based diplomacy by prioritizing short-term, mutual gains over long-term ideological alignment. In the Great Lakes region, ongoing crises include armed conflicts like the M23 rebellion in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (reportedly backed by Rwanda), massive displacement (over 7 million internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone), cross-border refugee flows, and resource-driven tensions over minerals like

coltan and gold. Recent developments, such as the June 2025 Democratic Republic of Congo-Rwanda peace agreement mediated by the United States and Qatar, highlight transactional elements like economic integration and security pacts as tools for de-escalation. While this approach has yielded breakthroughs, it faces sustainability challenges and risks exacerbating already deep inequalities between elites and ordinary citizens.

Participants observed that transactional diplomacy offers tangible incentives that can build momentum in a region plagued by mistrust and economic fragility. By linking peace to commerce and mutual benefits, it can address root causes like poverty and resource competition more directly than traditional multilateral talks. They also noticed that despite its appeal, transactional diplomacy often reinforces asymmetries, echoing colonial-era exploitation and undermining long-term trust in a region scarred by genocide, proxy wars, and failed states. Participants therefore stressed the importance of Africa asserting its autonomy in leading and funding conflict resolution initiatives and the need for proactive diplomacy and dialogue involving all segments of the population, including women, the youth and religious leaders.

The panel highlighted the diversity within the Great Lakes states, noting that while some countries, like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, face significant crises, others, such as Angola and Tanzania, offer different perspectives. It was emphasized that democracy must translate into structural and genuine solutions that address the aspirations of the population. Key challenges identified included poverty, humanitarian crises, landlocked geography, and the exploitation of natural resources, which often fuel conflict. Panelists called for regional leaders to recognize that development is essential for meeting the demands of their populations, advocating for regional integration and cooperation.

The discussion also pointed to important trends affecting constitutional governance and stability, including some leaders fostering mistrust through their belief that only they are fit to guide the people, and the shrinking of political and civic space which hinders the role of elections. Engaging with the AU requires a careful examination of regional frameworks and protocols that member states have agreed upon, which can serve as a foundation for dialogue. The panel underscored the need for security sector reform and the strengthening of state institutions to meet public expectations, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A significant opportunity lies in the growing public mobilization demanding accountability from their leaders, which can serve as a catalyst for peace and dialogue towards both democratic governance and regional integration, including through economic development corridors.

## 5. Conclusion

International IDEA recognizes the complexities associated with addressing the challenges outlined in this report and looks forward to upcoming initiatives that will strengthen our shared objective of promoting peace, stability and democratic governance across the continent. The following sections offer a series of actionable recommendations for taking the Retreat findings forward, directed towards RECs (section 5.1.) as well as international actors, including International IDEA and donors (section 5.2.).



*Participants at the closing ceremony of the Fourth Annual Retreat for RECs Special Envoys and High Representatives, Dakar, Senegal, 14 September 2025. Credit: International IDEA*

### 5.1. Recommendations for RECs

- ❖ **Renew commitment to democratic norms**, including the enforcement of protocols that prohibit unconstitutional changes of government. This includes condemning and rejecting such changes, while effectively promoting the standards outlined in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, the ECOWAS additional protocol on democracy and good governance, and the IGAD protocol on peace and governance.
- ❖ **Reconsider the reliance on state sanctions and military solutions**, emphasizing democratic processes that allow citizens to shape their future, and **engage constructively with States under military leadership**, balancing support with pressure for democratic transitions. Frame assistance to these countries as essential for their survival and the broader regional security.
- ❖ **Revive a sense of solidarity and belief in Africa's capabilities** by advocating for a pan-African partnership that transcends national interests. Proactively reshape the role of RECs in a multilateral context, **focusing on locally informed solutions** and advocating for a shift away from outsourcing conflict resolution to external mediators.
- ❖ **Redesign governance systems** to enhance political inclusion, credible elections, and inter-party collaboration, while effectively implementing and **adapting existing regional governance frameworks** to current realities.

- ❖ **Empower the youth and women** as central actors in stabilization, governance, and development, fostering a collective understanding of the challenges faced by African states and prioritizing the legitimate aspirations of their citizens.
- ❖ **Promote technology transfer and recalibrate economic strategies** to create jobs, reduce poverty, and foster sustainable development, while reducing dependence on raw material exports to prevent economic stagnation.
- ❖ **Incorporate cross-border perspectives in mediation strategies** that extend beyond national boundaries, establishing rapid mediation systems to respond swiftly to crises. **Adopt a comprehensive approach to mediation** that addresses root causes such as poverty, youth unemployment, and the marginalization of women.
- ❖ **Foster vertical and horizontal coordination** between the AU, RECs, member states, and international partners, and **enhance coordination between the AU and RECs**, prioritizing subsidiarity and complementarity, including revitalizing MISAHEL and reforming ECOWAS protocols.

## 5.2. Recommendations for International Partners

### *For international IDEA*

- ❖ **Engage in a strategic realignment of initiatives**, shifting from a primary emphasis on direct national support in countries in transition to a more regional approach through thoughtful and considerate engagement with RECs and regional mechanisms.
- ❖ Direct efforts to **enhance the resilience, capacity and legitimacy of relatively competitive and open democratic systems** with a view to reducing the risk of their destabilization and abrupt crises and respond effectively to new challenges.
- ❖ **Support the office of the Representative of the Chairperson of the AU Commission in Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL)**, assisting in the strategic reassessment of MISAHEL to reposition it as a central hub for Sahel stabilization.
- ❖ **Support joint AU and IGAD efforts** to promote peaceful resolution of conflicts in Somalia and Sudan.
- ❖ **Engage with partners and stakeholders for the next Annual Retreat early** with a view to modifying its format to provide more opportunities for interactive discussions.

### *For donors*

- ❖ **Secure adequate financing** to support regional mediation efforts and transition processes.
- ❖ **Ensure financial autonomy of RECs** to reduce vulnerabilities to geopolitical shifts and influence.
- ❖ **Enhance coordination with international partners** to avoid conflicting strategies and strengthen support to RECs.

### *For all international actors*

- ❖ **Remain engaged with African countries**, including those with non-democratic regimes, **fostering dialogue that respects sovereignty** while insisting on compliance with regional, continental, and international standards. At the same time, **support democratic countries** in addressing popular needs and demands and reduce growing public despair and disillusionment with democratic processes.

- ❖ **Strengthen coordination mechanisms** when supporting RECs by aligning strategies and actions across external partners to avoid duplication or conflict. Clear communication is essential to minimize tensions and ensure that external support effectively contributes to RECs objectives.
- ❖ **Form partnerships with RECs** to enhance governance and efficiency in Africa, supporting the implementation of commitments and addressing institutional challenges. In doing so, **prioritize African-led solutions** and ensure African institutions have primacy in addressing the continent's challenges.
- ❖ **Engage diverse stakeholders**, including the youth, businesses, and civil society, focusing on the content of political transitions rather than just their duration, and shift from purely multilateral approaches to allow flexible, inclusive engagement of multiple actors over time. Democratic systems must deliver not only alternations in power, but also participatory, accountable and effective governance to be resilient.