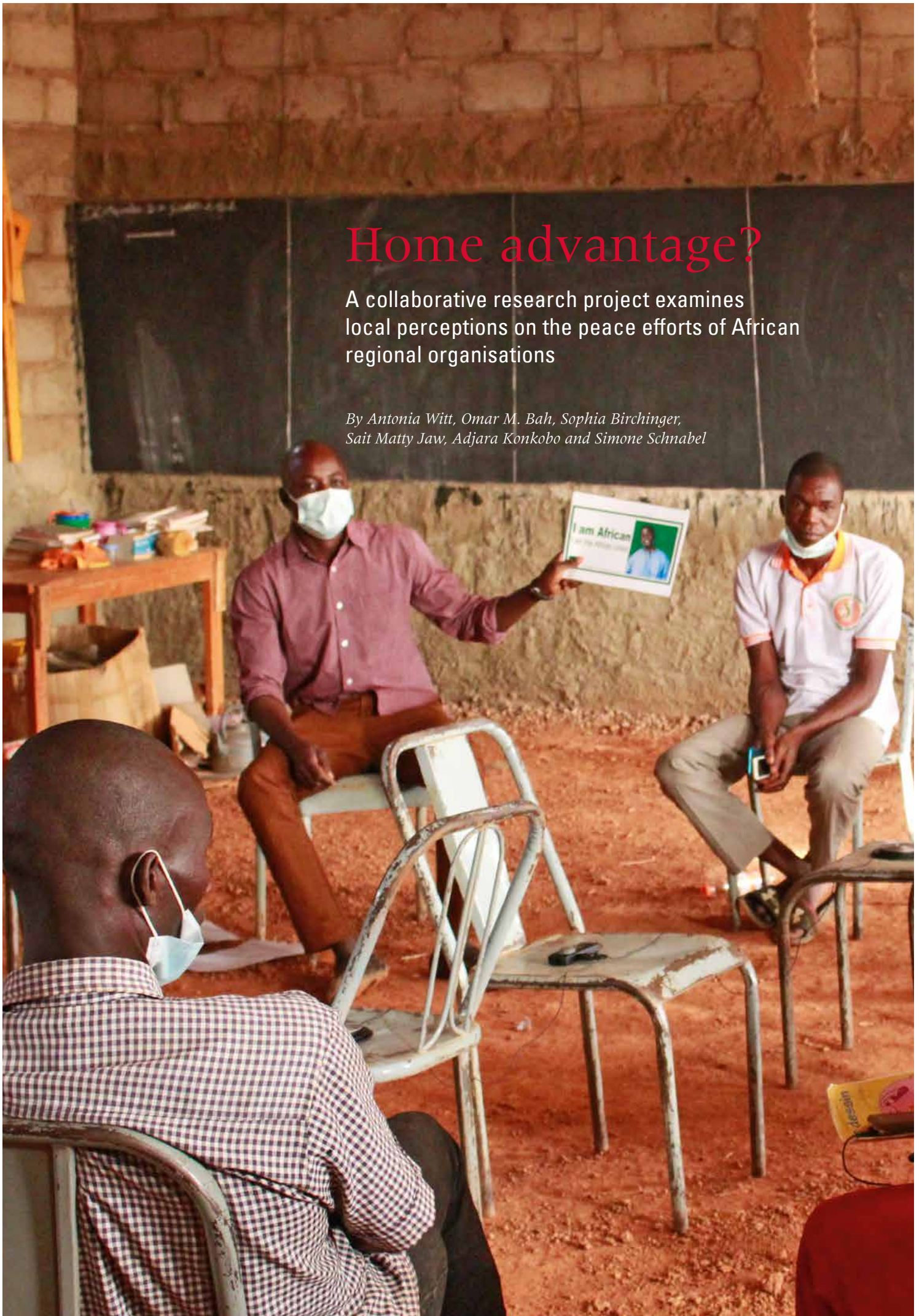


Home advantage?

A collaborative research project examines local perceptions on the peace efforts of African regional organisations

By Antonia Witt, Omar M. Bah, Sophia Birchinger, Sait Matty Jaw, Adjara Konkobo and Simone Schnabel



Whenever there is a coup d'état in African countries, regional organisations are called upon to restore democracy – and they often succeed. But what do local people think about their interventions? A transnational team of peace and conflict researchers are exploring this topic.

In 2021, there were five successful coups in Africa, more than at any time since the late 1990s: in Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Burkina Faso, the governments were overthrown by the military. In Chad, after the death of the president, power simply passed to his son, which as a “non-democratic change of government” also counts as a coup. Prior to that, the decline in coups since the early 1990s was partially thanks to the efforts of African regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Both organisations have adopted regulations condemning coups and excluding governments that come to power by non-constitutional means from their organisations. Such governments lose their voting rights and are isolated internationally. What’s more: anti-coup norms give both organisations a mandate to ensure the “restoration of constitutional order” in the event of a coup, through mediation and negotiations, sanctions or – if necessary – through the threat or use of force. This is because coups not only have an impact on the political and social order in the affected countries, they are also a threat to peace and security in the entire region.

Since the establishment of the African Union in 2001, such regional efforts to restore constitutional order have been undertaken in 15 African countries. They reflect the growing responsibility assumed by African actors for peace and security on the continent. But how do citizens in the affected countries perceive these interventions? How do they evaluate them? And what expectations do they have of African regional organisations and their role in peaceful conflict resolution? We are investigating these questions using collaborative research methods

in a project funded by the German Research Foundation (see p. 33). We are looking at how interventions by AU and ECOWAS are perceived locally in Burkina Faso (2014/15) and The Gambia (2016/17). In both countries, AU and ECOWAS intervened as a result of political crises: in Burkina Faso, President Blaise Compaoré, who had ruled the country for 27 years, was overthrown by a broad social movement in 2014. In The Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, the then president, refused to acknowledge his defeat in the 2016 presidential election. While AU and ECOWAS tried to restore constitutional order in Burkina Faso above all through mediation, negotiations and sanctions, the regional intervention in The Gambia was also supported by a military presence that eventually forced Jammeh to relent.

Why local perceptions are important

“Perceptions”, that means interpreted experiences. Essentially, perceptions are subjective, but they have a social effect at the same time as they shape the behaviour of individuals and collectives. The term is deliberately used in its plural form to stress the diversity and complexity of local perceptions.

Although there is an increased scientific interest in African regional organisations and their activities for peace and security, the question of how these are perceived locally has not

Left: Moderator Dr Amado Kaboré from the Institut des Sciences des Sociétés with participants of a focus group in Djikôfê, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

Below: Meeting of a focus group in Kanifing in the metropolitan region Greater Banjul Area, The Gambia.





picture alliance/Reuters, Vincent Bado

On 24 January 2022, the President of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré, was arrested. In front of the Guillaume Ouédraogo military camp, people gather to show their support for the army and are sent away by soldiers.

More information about the project

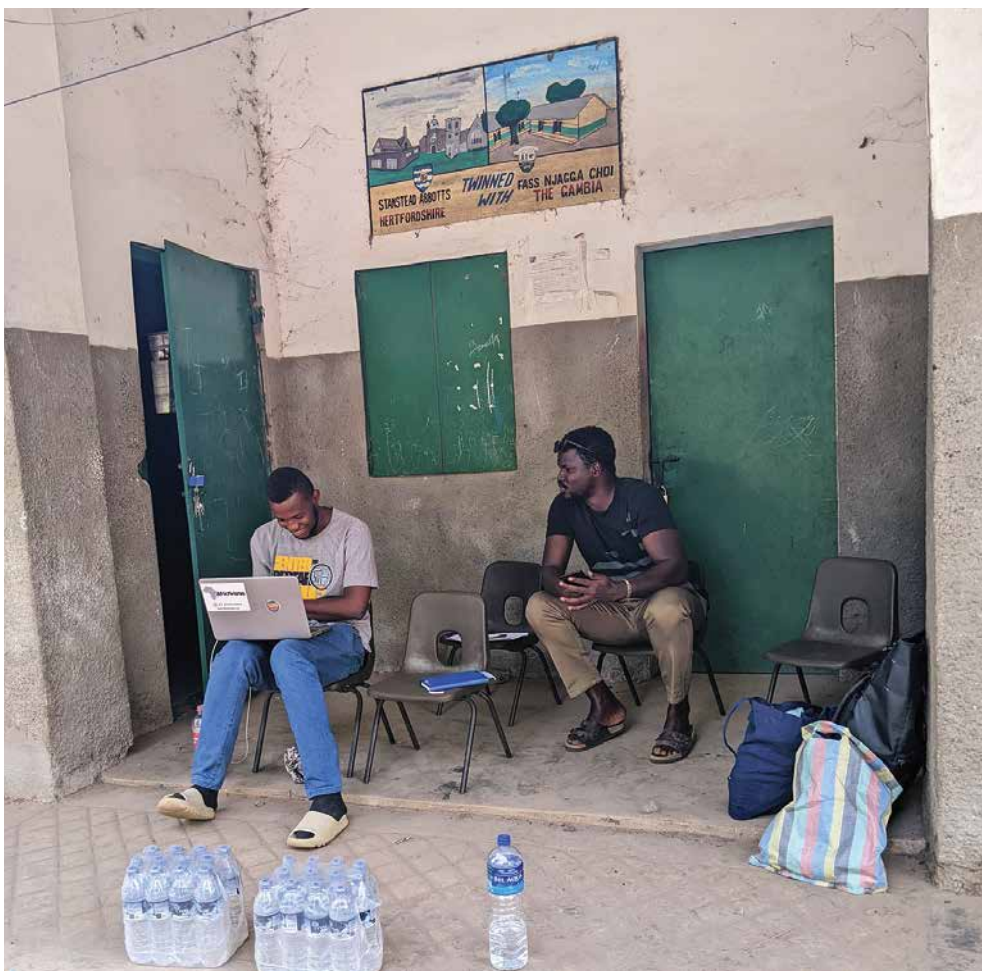
<https://www.hsfk.de/forschung/projekte/projekt/lokale-wahrnehmungen-regionaler-interventionen-au-und-ecowas-in-burkina-faso-und-gambia>

yet been systematically explored. This blind spot is hardly comprehensible, since it has been sufficiently demonstrated in interventions by other actors, such as those of the United Nations or individual states, that there are considerable differences between the goals of international intervention efforts and those of the local population. Local perceptions are therefore key to understanding divergent notions of peace, security and order, as well as the conflicting nature of interventions. They also indicate how sustainable international peace efforts are, since without the approval and support of the local population such efforts are unlikely to be successful.

This blind spot in research to date reflects the colonial view of African institutions and actors that still prevails today. African regional organisations are often dismissed as ineffective by external actors. They are regarded as “paper tigers” whose policies have little effect on the lives of African citizens – which also makes it unnecessary to investigate how their interventions are perceived locally. At the other extreme, overly optimistic views of African regional organisations assume that they have a kind of “home advantage”, enjoy greater local acceptance and promote locally adapted solutions, particularly in the context of peace efforts – unlike global actors such as the United Nations.

IN A NUTSHELL

- African regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been working since 2001 to restore constitutional order following political or constitutional crises in their member states.
- A collaborative research project has looked at the perceptions and acceptance of these efforts among the population in Burkina Faso and The Gambia. This area was previously a blind spot in research.
- The findings are complex, but they show that there are high expectations of the actions undertaken by intra-African organisations – although the experiences of these actions are not entirely positive.
- Interestingly, different population groups report different perceptions: in Burkina Faso, it is the elites who are particularly critical of the regional organisations; in The Gambia, by contrast, the general population is dissatisfied, while the political elites perceive the interventions as successful.



Left: Research assistant Baboucarr Fatty and Sait Matty Jaw during field research in Banjul, The Gambia.

Below: Simone Schnabel, moderator Dr Amado Kaboré, Adjara Konkobo and research assistant Abdoul Wahab Semde discuss their field research in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.



Developments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, where there have recently been repeated public protests against the ongoing efforts of AU and ECOWAS to restore constitutional order, show that this is not always the case. Are African regional organisations then seen much more critically at local level than is generally assumed by research?

Controversial and acknowledged at the same time

On the basis of more than 20 focus groups and over 150 interviews that we conducted between January 2020 and April 2022 in various cities and rural areas in Burkina Faso and The Gambia, we can provide an empirically substantiated, more nuanced answer to this question.

Firstly, our research shows that local perceptions differ greatly from one another. The same interventions are experienced and interpreted very differently by various social groups and individuals. In both countries, AU and ECOWAS are perceived as biased, arrogant and dominated by heads of state and their interests. By contrast, others show considerable appreciation for the successful resolution of the political crises and the restoration of “normal life”. From these local perceptions, it is clear that both organisations are at the same time more controversial and more acknowledged in local perceptions than often assumed.

Collaborative research

The research project “Local perceptions of regional interventions: AU and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso and The Gambia” is being carried out by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from Germany, Burkina Faso and The Gambia. Both case studies are being conducted by a research tandem in which Burkinabè, Gambian and German scientists are jointly shaping the entire process from data collection to publication of the results. In this way, the project tests new forms of collaborative knowledge production with the aim of dismantling global hierarchies in knowledge production in and about Africa. The empirical core of the project is several months of joint field research, in which the research tandems are together conducting focus group discussions and interviews. Research tandems make the positions of individual researchers visible, allow a mutual reflection of interpretations and assumptions, and promote a deeper understanding of the conditions for scientific work in different contexts.

Literature

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Secondly, it turns out that many people, despite clearly expressed criticism, have very high and often clearly formulated expectations of both organisations and want a stronger and more consistent commitment to peace, democracy and development in their member states. Paradoxically, these expectations are often at odds with the way people experience the two organisations in practice. Ultimately, the hope of better regional organisations that could help to compensate for the deficiencies of state order remains uncontested.

Thirdly, our research shows that the significant differences in *how* regional interventions are perceived and evaluated are closely linked to a person's individual position in local political and social power structures. In both countries, there is a clear difference in how elites perceive the interventions and, by contrast, perceptions of the broad population, which is largely excluded from political and economic power. Depending on the group, people have very different experiences with regional interventions as well as very different ideas of what would resolve conflicts effectively in their country. The difference between the two countries is surprising: in Burkina Faso, it is above all the elites who express strong criticism of the peace efforts of AU and ECOWAS and regard both organisations primarily as clubs of heads of state. In The Gambia, on the other hand, it is primarily the population living in areas with ECOWAS military presence that is most critical of regional peace efforts, while the political elites – in these areas too – see the Gambian experience primarily as a sign of successful regional conflict management.

Practical relevance

Our findings show that African regional organisations are by no means mere "paper tigers", as it is often claimed. Rather, due to their interventions these organisations have a local presence and are locally effective, that is, having a political effect. If they were not effective, there would be neither different experiences with regional peace efforts nor different perceptions of these efforts. In view of the wave of resistance that AU and ECOWAS are currently experiencing in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, the results of our research provide relevant insights for both organisations: only if they take the manifold perceptions and experiences of local people seriously will they be able to develop sustainable solutions in the long term. Our findings also once again underline how important it is not only to listen to those who shout the loudest but also, and above all, to give a voice to those often regarded as insignificant for international and regional politics. ●



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