



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

The Governance Trap : How Donor Dependency Undermines the African Union's "Silencing the Guns" Agenda



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Introduction

Africa has long borne the tragic costs of protracted conflict: human suffering, disrupted development, and fractured trust in governance.¹ In response, African leaders conceived a bold vision: "Silencing the Guns," a flagship initiative within Agenda 2063 aiming to end wars, violent conflict, and human rights abuses by 2030 (AU, n.d.). Yet, as the timeline progresses, the gap between aspiration and reality has widened. Progress remains uneven, and relapses into conflict are common across many regions.

One of the least emphasized but most potent obstacles to this agenda is the continent's financial dependence on external donors for its peace and security architecture. Without financial and strategic autonomy, the African Union (AU) often finds itself constrained, shifting from a continental driver of peace into a vehicle for donor-driven priorities.²

This report posits a core argument: donor dependency is not merely a logistical limitation but a political and governance trap that harms

African ownership of peace. When priorities are set through the mechanism of extrinsic funding, the AU suffers from diminished legitimacy, fractured institutional cohesion, and peace missions that are vulnerable to donor capriciousness.

To defend this argument, this report proceeds as follows: First, it establishes the composition of the AU peace agenda and the organizational hurdles inherent in its current funding framework. Second, it analyzes how donor dependency distorts priorities, creates institutional vulnerability, and fuels legitimacy deficits.³ Third, it illustrates these dynamics through two case studies: Somalia (AMISOM/ATMIS) and the Sahel region. Fourth, it argues that development-led, self-financed peace strategies are necessary to reassert agency and ensure sustainability. Finally, the report formulates specific policy recommendations for the AU, its member states, and international partners.

The AU's Peace Architecture and the Challenge of Financing

The Peace Fund: Hopes vs. Reality

The African Union Peace Fund (AUPF) is the region's envisioned instrument to guarantee that peace and security activities are funded by African leadership and under African management. Based on the legal framework found in Article 21 of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, the Fund is designed to sponsor mediation, preventive diplomacy, institutional capacity building, and peace support activities (AU, 2024).⁴

Nevertheless, the full operationalization of the Fund has faced significant delays. Member states' contributions remain irregular and often insufficient to carry out core functions; the trustee and governance systems have struggled to consolidate; and the AU's fiscal maneuvering room remains confined. As the AU Journal on PCRD(2024) reported, while the AU has revised its peacebuilding policy, "very little is known of the AU concept of PCRD ... and the institutional constraints it faces" (p. 3).

In 2023, the AU pledged USD 7 million from its crisis reserve facility—the first significant activation of its kind—yet this amount falls short of the scale required for continental peace operations (AU, 2024). In brief, the Peace Fund remains a step away from effectively replacing donor financing.

AU Budget and External Financing

Beyond the Peace Fund, the broader AU budget is substantially financed by outside partners.⁵ Payable contributions from member states are

frequently late, partial, or forgiven altogether, breeding perennial unpredictability.⁶ Consequently, the AU consistently depends on bilateral and multilateral donors to finance its core activities (Security Council Report, 2023).⁷

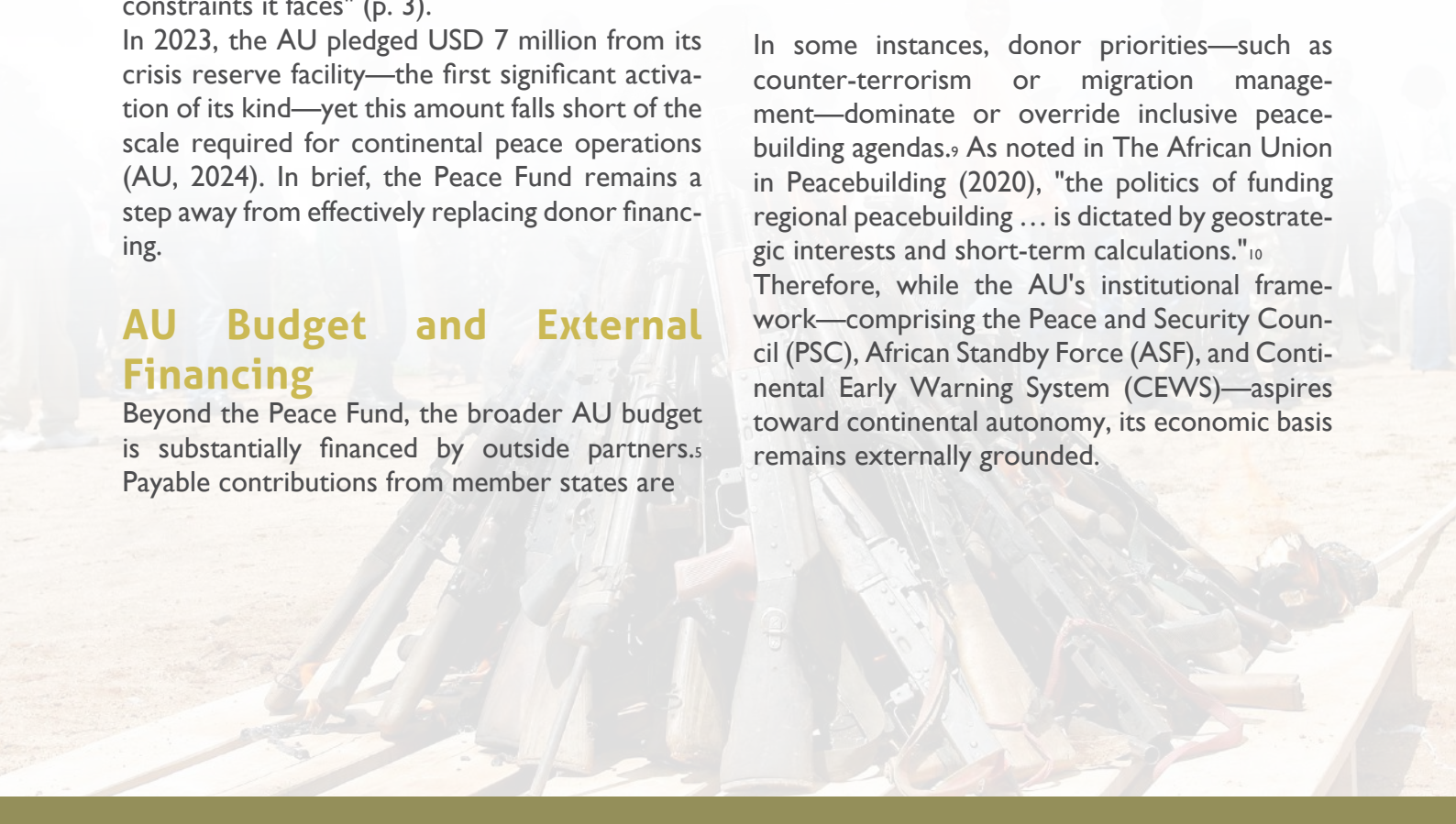
Moreover, donor funds are usually "projectized" and earmarked, leaving little room for flexibility.⁸ Unlike an internal budget where the AU designs projects based on internal priorities, donor grants often compel the AU to fit within prescribed templates. This dynamic erodes strategic autonomy (Jentzsch, 2014; AU, 2020).

Fragmented and Overlapping Mandates

A further complication of the funding dilemma is fragmentation: different donors fund numerous parallel activities with distinct goals, timelines, and conditions. This generates a heavy coordination burden within AU institutions, complicates policy coherence, and risks duplication or tension between activities.

In some instances, donor priorities—such as counter-terrorism or migration management—dominate or override inclusive peacebuilding agendas.⁹ As noted in *The African Union in Peacebuilding* (2020), "the politics of funding regional peacebuilding ... is dictated by geostrategic interests and short-term calculations."¹⁰

Therefore, while the AU's institutional framework—comprising the Peace and Security Council (PSC), African Standby Force (ASF), and Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)—aspires toward continental autonomy, its economic basis remains externally grounded.



How Donor Dependence Becomes a Governance Trap

This section examines how financial dependency on donors diminishes governance, legitimacy, and strategic control within the AU.

Priority Distortion: When Donors Dictate the Agenda

When external actors provide the majority of funding, they inevitably influence priorities. Focus areas often shift toward counterterrorism, migration control, or anti-jihadism based on the strategic interests of the donor nations. The AU, in need of funds, is often forced to compromise, placing short-term stabilization efforts above long-term governance reform, development, and reconciliation.

Mlambo (2021) observes that overfunding creates a dependency that distorts the internal logic of "Silencing the Guns." In practice, African institutions may become more concerned with meeting donor checklists than addressing the homegrown root causes of conflict. Consequently, peace becomes securitized, with military-led solutions prevailing. This risks stabilizing violence without challenging root causes such as inequality, exclusion, or frail institutions, leading to a repeated cycle of relapse.

Institutional Vulnerability and Conditionality

The dependency of AU institutions on donors renders them vulnerable to fluctuations in foreign interests, delayed disbursements, and political negotiations.¹¹ When donors retreat or decrease assistance, peace missions stagnate; salary discrepancies, supply deficiencies, and operational freezes emerge as immediate threats.¹²

The lack of readily available, replenishable internal finance means the AU cannot act autonomously during emergencies. As the Security Council Report (2023) notes, funding has

entirely been "the AU's Achilles' heel" regarding the sustainability of its peace support missions. While the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2719 in 2024 urging member states to finance AU-led peace efforts (Security Council Report, 2024), the AU remains structurally vulnerable to fiscal turbulence.

The Legitimacy Deficit and Ownership

Peace missions perceived as donor projects suffer from a legitimacy deficit among host populations. When the AU is viewed as pursuing foreign agendas, public trust erodes, and local ownership diminishes. Similarly, national governments may tune their rhetoric and programming to align with donor agendas rather than the needs on the ground, weakening the political social contract between governments, citizens, and continental institutions (Jung, 2025).

Civil society representatives often point out that participation is limited by donor modalities; local voices can be co-opted or marginalized in the interest of external agendas (Aeby, 2024). As a result, peacebuilding loses its necessary bottom-up reference point.

Fragmentation, Competition, and Strategic Disjunctions

Donor reliance fuels rivalry between states, institutions, and regional entities competing for funds rather than cooperating. Member states may favor bilateral donor links over the AU's continental mechanisms, depriving the AU of strategic coherence. In practice, states often pursue parallel undertakings to secure funding rather than converging in collective AU-led platforms. This fragmentation disrupts the strategic utility of the AU and centralizes influence in external hands.



Case Studies: Sahel and Somalia

To situate this analysis in reality, this section examines two cases where donor dependency has significantly influenced peace outcomes.

Somalia: From AMISOM to ATMIS

The AU mission in Somalia—originally AMISOM, now the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—is perhaps the most symbolically charged AU peace operation. However, since its inception, it has been financed almost entirely by external contributors, particularly through the European Union's African Peace Facility (Security Council Report, 2023).

The consequences are predictable: AU activities are susceptible to donor choices regarding funding levels, policy emphasis, and timelines. Reductions in aid translate instantly into salary arrears, troop withdrawals, or reduced geographic coverage.

Furthermore, donor priorities—particularly counterterrorism—tend to overwhelm the mission's rationale. Although combating Al-Shabaab is necessary, the heavy emphasis on kinetic operations often delegitimizes local governance, reconciliation, and development programming. The mission risks aligning itself with donor security agendas over the Somali

political vision. The transition to ATMIS has been fraught with disagreements over resource investment, force composition, and withdrawal strategies, all bound within donor-imposed limitations.

The Sahel and the G5 Sahel Countries

In the Sahel, the G5 Sahel framework was developed as a regional security cooperation and counter-terrorism mechanism across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania.¹³ However, in practice, the operational muscle is funded and maintained by European donors, including the EU and France, as well as the United States.

Consequently, the AU and other regional bodies often play subordinated roles. Donor agendas—focusing on migration control and anti-jihadism—dominate the framework, sidelining local governance, climate adaptation, youth inclusion, and cross-border collaboration. When donor priorities shift, the region suffers from funding shortages, and the procurement of logistics becomes uncertain. This donor-centric approach has constrained the region's ability to pursue endogenous peacebuilding and enabled outside actors to dictate the design and trajectory of interventions.¹⁴

Development-Led Peacebuilding: Emancipation from Dependency

Having identified the trap, we turn to emancipatory avenues. The necessary paradigm shift is from donor-initiated peace to development-informed, African-led peace systems.

Framing Peace as a Continuum of Development

The first step is intellectual: peace must be framed as intimately connected with development, not as a distinct, security-led field. The AU's revised Post-Conflict Reconstruction & Development (PCRD) policy pursues the integration of peacebuilding into long-term development planning across pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations (PeaceAU Journal, 2024). Practically, this involves integrating infrastructure, social services, inclusive governance, local markets, and livelihoods upfront—not as add-on appendages. Through this framing, peace dividends emerge in the near term, making socio-economic transformation integral to the peace narrative.

Improving the AU Peace Fund and Continental Finances

To escape the dependency trap, the AU must transform the Peace Fund into a credible, well-resourced driver of continental independence. This implies:

- **Dependable Assessed Contributions:** Securing consistent funding from member states, possibly through a limited import levy or standardized arrangement.
- **New Funding Streams:** Exploring diaspora bonds, extractive industry levies, private giving, and the mobilization of African philanthropic foundations.
- **Institutional Capacity:** Implementing fiduciary reforms, transparent governance, and rigorous oversight to build confidence in the Fund's integrity.¹⁵

Rebalancing Donor Relationships: Partnership, Not Patronage

Rather than shunning foreign alliances, the AU must renegotiate them on equal terms. This requires designing programs with donors rather than receiving donor templates. The AU should encourage donors to channel funds through continental or pooled mechanisms rather than fragmented grants and develop reciprocal systems of accountability where the AU projects its vision and standards.

Regional Economic Integration as Peace Infrastructure

Economic interdependence can be a stabilizing force. Through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), regional value chains, and cross-border connectivity, states can establish a mutual interest in peace. In border areas, development corridors—providing roads, power, and agro-processing—can become centers of stability. Employment minimizes the incentives for youth to join armed groups, while trade and mobility transform conflict dynamics into cooperation.

Localizing the Peace: Platforms of Community

Sustainable peace typically emanates from the local level. Empowering peace committees, reconciliation councils, youth entrepreneurs, and women mediators builds resistance to shocks at national levels. Grassroots financing through the Peace Fund or state budgets can maintain these platforms, instilling peace into the social fabric and minimizing reliance on top-down initiatives.

Creating African Research, Data, and Knowledge Capacity

To diminish intellectual dependency, the AU must invest in African think tanks, data observatories, and conflict analysis centers. When analysis, monitoring, and evaluation are African-led, outside funding loses its ability to dictate the narrative.

Recommendations

To bring the proposed framework into practice, the following policy steps are suggested:

1. Make Member State Contributions Binding:

Establish a compulsory schedule for contributions to the Peace Fund (e.g., a modest import levy of 0.2%) and encourage accountability through peer-review tools and governance bodies like the APRM.

2. Broaden and Stabilize Financing Sources:

Explore innovative funding streams including diaspora bonds, levies on extractive industries, and partnerships with private foundations. Improve the governance of the Fund through stronger transparency and auditing.¹⁶

3. Redefine Donor Relations as Equal Partnerships:

Shift from donor-driven agendas toward joint program design. Promote pooled funding mechanisms managed through continental institutions and ensure conditions attached to aid reflect shared goals rather than external dominance.¹⁷

4. Integrate Peacebuilding and Development from the Outset:

Design peace operations that incorporate long-term development planning immediately. Use regional economic corridors as entry points for stabilizing conflict-prone areas.

5. Invest in Community-Led Peace Platforms:

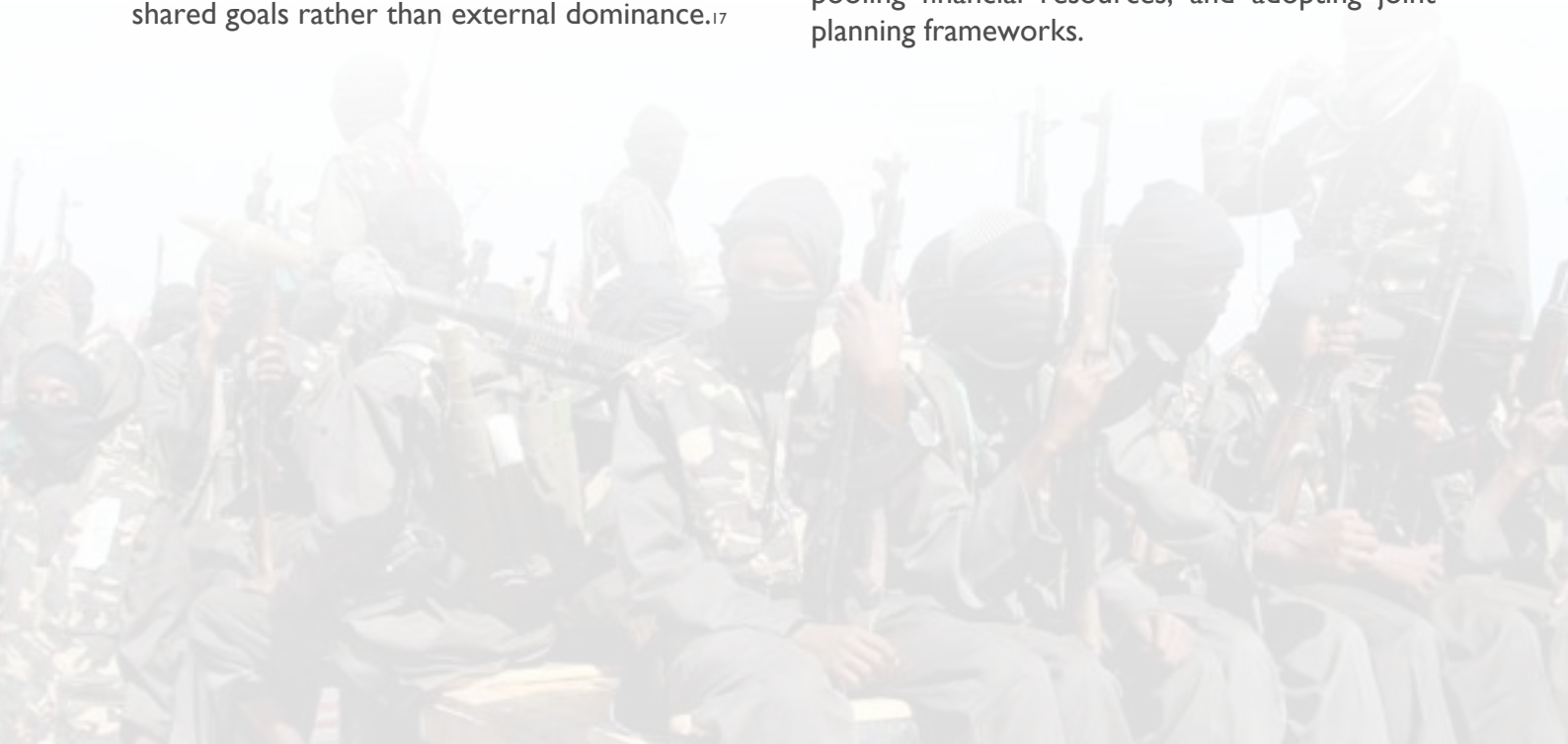
Guarantee a basic level of funding for local peace initiatives, centering youth, women, and grassroots actors in mediation and prevention efforts.

6. Strengthen African Research and Data Systems:

Support regional think tanks and data hubs to generate evidence-based insights, ensuring that analysis produced within Africa meaningfully informs AU policy.

7. Align AU–REC–UN Cooperation Frameworks:

Minimize overlap and inefficiency by coordinating mandates, pooling financial resources, and adopting joint planning frameworks.





Conclusion

The "Silencing the Guns" initiative represents one of the African Union's most ambitious commitments. Yet, ambition alone cannot resolve conflict. Without greater control over its own finances and

strategy, the AU risks being confined to implementing others' priorities rather than leading on African-defined peace and security.

Dependency on external donors is not simply a funding issue—it is a structural constraint that distorts priorities, weakens institutions, and erodes legitimacy.¹⁸ The goal is not to reject external support entirely, but to transform how it is used: by building sustainable financing mechanisms, insisting on shared ownership, linking peace efforts to development goals, and amplifying local voices.

If African leaders can summon the political will to reclaim the continent's peace agenda—and if international partners are willing to share decision-making space—then "Silencing the Guns" can evolve beyond rhetoric. It can become a symbol of genuine African agency and self-determined peacebuilding.

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