

African Integration Reexamined: Security, Economy, and Sovereignty in a Multipolar World

A synthesis report on the first IDAN Annual Conference, 26-28 November 2025, Dakar, Senegal: "*Rethinking Regional Integration in Africa: Transcending past failures and preparing for the challenges of a multipolar world*".

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The 1st IDEAS Africa Network Conference convened in Dakar, Senegal, from November 25 to 28, 2025, gathering some 150 scholars, policymakers, military strategists, activists, and descendants of Pan-African icons. This diverse assembly took place against the backdrop of overlapping crises: soaring sovereign debt, climate collapse, youth disillusionment, militarization by external powers, and fragile democracies. As such, the conference was framed as an urgent, collective rethinking of regional integration in service of the liberation, sovereignty, and survival of African peoples. The pioneers of the pan-Africanist struggle did not speak about regional integration, focusing instead on the unity of all Africans wherever they may be and the political unity of the African continent as a pre-condition for tackling imperialism and neocolonialism. The language of regional integration, according to the Executive Director of IDEAs, Charles Abugre, is a second-best objective and a testament to the failure to achieve African unity. We should therefore approach regional integration as a step towards a united Africa.

The opening pre-conference roundtable posed the provocative question, “Between debt crises, Gen Z protests, sham elections, and externally driven wars—what are the practical Pan-Africanist responses?” The tone was set for three days of rigorous dialogue on critical themes such as the failures of regional security architectures, the climate crisis as an imperative for unification, the limits of the African Continental Free Trade Area, the urgent need for African payment systems and industrial policy, free movement constraints within ECOWAS, lessons from Asia and Latin America on financial dependence, regional monetary cooperation and social protection, and political obstacles to integration. All these themes were examined through the lens of African unity, with a shared understanding that Africa’s current fragmentation is a geopolitical choice, not destiny.

This report is structured around four interconnected pillars of continental sovereignty: security architectures that transcend colonial borders, economic systems that reject extraction and demand reparative justice, climate resilience through physical unification projects, and the intellectual foundations of Pan-African consciousness. Each section examines how regional integration as a political project, when reimagined beyond neoliberal frameworks, can transform Africa from a fragmented member of the global periphery into a unified geopolitical force capable of navigating and shaping the emerging multipolar order. Using this structure, the report moves from diagnosis to vision, offering concrete pathways for Africa to secure its sovereignty, dignity, and future in a changing global landscape.

I. The Security Imperative: From Fragmented Defense to Continental Collective Security

The panel on regional integration, defense, and security, chaired by Joe Ageyo, Editor-in-Chief of Kenya’s Nation Media Group, featured three distinguished senior military

leaders who have advised heads of state and worked at the heart of regional security bodies. General Mactar Diop, a highly decorated infantry officer from Senegal, served until recently as the Chief of Staff of the ECOWAS Standby Force. General Ousmane Kane, a navigator and captain with extensive flight experience, serves as Chief of Staff of the Senegalese Air Force while Major General Emmanuel Wekem Kotia of the Ghana Armed Forces served as head of Ghana's Boundary Commission and is an international analyst, expert and trainer with over 37 years of distinguished service in defense and security.

Together, they identified the historical and structural roots of Africa's security crisis. General Diop traced the "original sin" back to 1963, when the Organization of African Unity rejected Kwame Nkrumah's vision of political union with a common defense, opting instead for minimal economic cooperation. This left post-colonial states defending porous colonial borders against transnational threats, a mission impossible without integrated command structures and shared sovereignty. General Kane reinforced Diop's analysis of constitutional weakness, noting that "there has never been a continental army anywhere in the world. An army is based on a political entity. When there is no political unity, no one can have an army that truly serves the people." General Kane detailed how a lack of financing has paralyzed action, citing that a scaled-down 1,650-strong force requiring \$130 million annually remains unfunded for years. Even the existing regional architecture, such as the ECOWAS standby force, suffers from critical gaps. This stands in stark contrast to past successes like the 1990 ECOWAS intervention in Liberia, which General Kotia highlighted as a landmark example of African-led collective security, crediting strong political leadership, Nigerian support, and Senegalese military excellence, while noting the often-overlooked role of U.S. equipment support.

The departure of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), was framed by the panelists as a political protest against failed solidarity. As General Diop starkly put it, "When your neighbor's house burns, you must bring water to extinguish it before you are affected." General Kane echoed that the withdrawal is "eminently political, not military," rooted in grievances over ECOWAS' slow response to crises such as the occupation of northern Mali. In the absence of a federal African state, the panel outlined what can and must be done at regional and continental levels. They called for honoring signed commitments, building integrated military production capacities that individual nations cannot achieve alone, and fully implementing and financing the African Peace and Security Architecture rather than reinventing it. External partnerships, while inevitable, must be framed around African interests. The session concluded with observations that security cannot be divorced from human security, and that jobs, education, and dignity are the first line of defense against extremism. Crucially, General Diop reminded that "sovereignty is not a military problem", but one of political leadership and governance. True regional integration in security requires a foundation of political trust, collective responsibility, and the will to fund existing collective mechanisms.

Further discussions revealed recurring tension between the imperatives of reforming existing regional bodies like ECOWAS and pursuing broader continental integration. In the panel on overlapping crises, Aminata Traoré critiqued ECOWAS as a donor-captured institution that enforces neoliberal policies and sanctions against member states, as seen in the case of Mali. She revealed that France's former foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian openly declared, "We are alongside ECOWAS because we are members of this institution... France will ensure [that] the institution sanctions Mali." Traoré argued that ECOWAS, created by military leaders in 1975 and influenced by the same donors funding member states, cannot mobilize the political will or resources for genuine solidarity. In contrast, Horace Campbell and others called for continental-scale thinking, which transcends regional blocs to pursue physical, economic, and political unification of Africa as a whole. This tension reflects a strategic debate: whether to fix broken regional structures or aim higher toward a United States of Africa. The synthesis that emerged was that regional bodies must be subordinated to a continental strategic vision; they are stepping-stones, not endpoints. As the pre-conference roundtable concluded, the chant "Africa Moja, Africa Huru" (A United Africa is a Free Africa) captured the ultimate ambition beyond regional fixes.

II. Climate as a Unification Project: From Victimhood to Agency

The panel on Tackling Climate and Environmental Challenges through Regional Coordination was chaired by renowned economist Jayati Ghosh, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a member of the UN's High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs. She was joined by Meron Tesfamichael, Director of the WRI Africa Energy Program, who contributed her deep experience in sustainable energy policy and just transition pathways across the continent. Horace Campbell, Professor at Syracuse University, provided a critical Pan-African perspective, drawing from his lifelong engagement in liberation struggles and his research on infrastructure and imperialism. Together, they explored how regional cooperation, from visionary water transfers to integrated energy systems, is essential for addressing Africa's existential climate crises.

Meron Tesfamichael argued that the standard functionalist model, where cooperation on shared economic or technical activities is expected to naturally "spill over" into deeper integration, fails in the face of climate change. Shared vulnerability to droughts, floods, and displacement does not behave like a shared market; instead, it intensifies security dilemmas and cross-border political pressures faster than regional institutions can respond. Tesfamichael critiqued existing frameworks, noting that while bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union have developed regional climate strategies, they remain constrained by donor-driven priorities, a lack of effective authority, and the dominance of unilateral national decisions. She posited that for climate change to become a genuine driver of integration, a new framework based on shared risk, shared authority, and shared justice is essential. Using regional energy policy as a critical

example, she analyzed hydropower projects like the Ethiopia-Sudan initiative and the Ruzizi III project, illustrating that such infrastructure can only anchor climate-resilient integration if it is consciously designed as a regional public good with equitable governance, shared ownership, and fair benefit distribution. That is to move beyond technical coordination to address underlying political and social inequities.

Building on this foundational critique, Horace Campbell transformed the climate narrative from one of African victimhood to one of agency and unification. He centered the existential catastrophe of Lake Chad, which has lost 95 percent of its volume since 1964, threatening 300 million livelihoods. The solution, he argued, lies in the shovel-ready TransAqua project: a 2,400-kilometer canal to transfer water from the Congo River, replenish the lake, and create a trans-African transport and energy corridor¹. Campbell detailed how this plan, backed by Chinese financing, has been systematically blocked for decades by French water conglomerates and the World Bank, which generate profit from water scarcity. He cited NATO's bombing of Libya's Great Man-Made River as a precedent for hydrological sabotage. Campbell expanded this into a blueprint for eight continental canal systems, arguing that "the unification of Africa is not merely an African challenge. It's about saving humanity in this present period." He insisted that while financing is available, what is missing is the political will to pursue this vision, noting pointedly that Nigerian elites stash billions abroad while claiming poverty at home. His presentation framed climate resilience as inseparable from continental integration, asserting that "we are past the tipping point" and only unified action can avert disaster. Together, the presentations reframed the climate crisis not merely as an environmental threat, but as the most compelling imperative for forging African sovereignty based on shared infrastructure, equitable governance, and collective resilience.

III. Economic Sovereignty: Beyond Extraction, Toward Value and Reparations

Participants at the conference delivered a sharp critique of the economic models that undermine African sovereignty, exposing how neoliberal ideology has come to dominate the very concept of regional integration. As Howard Stein argued, the prevailing neoclassical framework views integration not as a tool for building industrial capacity, but merely as a means to intensify competition, reduce state intervention, and increase consumer choice. This logic, embedded in agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), risks creating a larger African market that

¹ Campbell's diagnosis and prescribed solution are part of an active debate. Officials at the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC/CBLT), such as Technical Director Hycinth Banseka, have noted that the lake's volume loss over recent decades may also be linked to long-term climate variability, and not solely to human-induced climate change. They also caution that without first addressing severe sedimentation in the lake basin, large-scale water transfers could risk catastrophic flooding rather than sustainable restoration. The LCBC itself exemplifies the regional, climate-driven collaboration championed in this panel, operating on a human security and hydrological frontier that transcends colonial borders.

would only serve to further the domination of foreign products and investors. In order to counteract this risk, Horman Chitonge advocated for a fundamental reorientation toward deliberately constructed Regional Value Chains (RVCs). He argued that integration must be a state-led political project focused on "localizing" or "regionalizing" value addition, processing raw materials like cotton within Africa to capture more wealth, create jobs, and build interlinked, sovereign regional economies. This industrial policy imperative was inseparable from the question of labor, as highlighted by Hannah Cross. She critiqued the "free movement" agenda as heavily shaped by Western powers serving external state interests and global capital, not Pan-African solidarity. The European Union's externalized border regime, she argued, criminalizes migration, reinforces colonial borders, and actively blocks regional circulation, undermining the very social fabric necessary for integration. For Cross, in order for integration to be equitable, a labor-oriented approach based on substantive equality and workers' solidarity across borders is essential. Marion Ouma further tied economic integration to human welfare, arguing that social policy: health, education, social protection, must be seen not as a residual cost but as a productive investment that builds human capital and drives structural transformation. The neoliberal separation of social policy from economic planning, she contended, has undermined both human and economic progress, calling instead for a paradigm where they are integrated and mutually reinforcing.

Within this critique of the dominant paradigm, specific mechanisms of financial subordination were detailed. In her keynote address, Jayati Ghosh demonstrated how perception-based financial hierarchies force African countries to borrow at punitive rates, crowding out essential spending. She proposed two bold regional counter-institutions: an African Credit Rating Agency and an African Grain Management system. This systemic subversion was further explored in a later panel focused on wealth extraction, where Andrew Fischer critiqued the narrow focus on illicit financial flows. He shifted the focus from illicit financial flows to the legal architecture of extraction, revealing through Zambia's mining sector how multinational corporations legally repatriate profits, draining economies even during crises. Daniela Gabor warned of the "Wall Street Consensus," which repackages development as an "asset class," forcing states to de-risk private investments and leading to "green extractivism." The panel on regional integration in a global perspective provided crucial cautionary lessons from Asia and Latin America. C.P. Chandrasekhar detailed the political sabotage of the proposal of an Asian Monetary Fund, arguing that "the challenge is not economic but political." From Latin America, Diego Guevara and Pedro Rossi explained the trap of "subordinated financialization" and dollar dependency, showing how integration through financial opening, rather than industrial diversification, has locked regions into perpetual vulnerability.

Central to transcending this vulnerability was the Conference's powerful call for reparations, a discourse notably advanced by Horace Campbell and Aminata Traoré, and articulated with forceful clarity by Ndongo Samba Sylla. Speakers reframed the

debt crisis, arguing that Africa is a net creditor to the global system when accounting for centuries of extraction. Sylla, while supportive of monetary reparations, cautioned that payments in currency alone risk recycling value through the very financial architecture that perpetuates asymmetry. Instead, he called for “systemic reparations,” a transformative approach that combines material restitution with the dismantling of inequitable global structures and the creation of independent institutions. This vision includes proposals such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Reparations, an institution proposed by Horace Campbell. This proposal resonates with the 2024 Development and Change Forum issue, which similarly examined the creation of an International Bank for Reparations as a structural mechanism for cross-border claims².

This framework fuses the critique of neoliberal integration with a demand for historical justice, positioning reparations not as aid but as foundational capital for building the sovereign industrial, social, and financial systems Africa requires. These insights hold timely relevance for the African Union, which has declared 2026–2036 the Decade of Reparations for Africans and People of African Descent, underscoring the need for a reparative agenda that is both materially substantive and architecturally transformative.

IV. Intellectual and Cultural Sovereignty: Recovering the Pan-African Mind

The legacy panel on Pan-Africanism, featuring Samia Nkrumah (daughter of Kwame Nkrumah), Julius Garvey (son of Marcus Garvey), Fidel Toé (childhood friend and minister of Thomas Sankara) and Dialo Diop (nephew of Cheikh Anta Diop), underscored that behind every social revolution is an intellectual revolution. Samia Nkrumah opened with her father’s belief: “Behind every social revolution there is an intellectual revolution. We need to focus on mindsets and consciousness.” She lamented the deliberate destruction of Nkrumah’s archives after the 1966 coup, a symbolic erasure of Pan-African memory. Garvey noted that his father Marcus Garvey’s papers remain scattered, hindering public understanding. Both stressed the crisis is educational: Pan-Africanism is not taught in schools, leaving youth disconnected from a shared African identity. As Garvey observed, “Nobody wakes up in the morning and says ‘I’m African.’ Everybody here can wake up and say ‘I’m Nigerian,’ ‘I’m Ghanaian’... The concept of being African has not been centralized in our educational system.” This fragmented consciousness, he argued, explains why regional bodies like ECOWAS fail. There is no underlying sense of shared personhood to sustain political sacrifice. The panel called for a massive project of Pan-African education to rebuild historical consciousness and cultural confidence, rooted in what Garvey termed “African Humanism”, a paradigm of communalism, consensus, and

² See Carolyn Sissoko, “On the Economics of Cross-border Reparations Payments: The Case for a Bank of International Reparations,” *Development and Change* 55, no. 4 (2024): 700–726.

spiritual-material balance, concepts that are inherent in African tradition, but which are suppressed by Western individualism.

In his contribution, Fidèle Toe, representing the legacy of Thomas Sankara, emphasized that authentic security is fundamentally about dignity and self-reliance. He connected contemporary youth movements across the Sahel to Sankara's revolutionary ethos, arguing that "security cannot be purchased with foreign weapons or guaranteed by external bases; it is built through the empowerment of ordinary people and the rejection of neocolonial control." Toe insisted that the current and often-critiqued wave of military-led transitions in the Sahel represents a deep-seated demand for a new social contract: one where security means food sovereignty, domestic industrialization, and pan-African solidarity rather than border patrols. Dialo Diop, speaking on the intellectual legacy of Cheikh Anta Diop, rooted the security dilemma in a civilizational perspective. He argued that Africa's vulnerability stems from a dislocation from its own historical models of statecraft and collective defense. Diop stated, "We are defending borders drawn by colonizers while ignoring the cultural and historical unity that once made our societies resilient." He called for a security framework informed by Diop's work. One that sees the unification of Africa as a scientific and historical imperative, where defense policy is integrated with linguistic, educational, and infrastructural unity. Together, these perspectives underscored that military solutions alone are futile; Africa's security depends on a holistic project of political, economic, and cultural integration that restores agency to its people.

V. Policy Pathways: From Ideas to Action

The conference culminated with concrete, actionable proposals that integrated the call for reparations into a comprehensive framework for continental sovereignty. Economically, it called for a bold, state-led industrial policy anchored in Regional Value Chains (RVCs) to transform production and retain wealth within Africa. This includes moving beyond raw material extraction to domestic processing and manufacturing, creating green jobs through large-scale public employment programs, such as a continental Job Guarantee focused on infrastructure and ecological transformation. To finance this transformation, the conference proposed establishing an African Grain Management system to ensure food sovereignty and buffer the continent against volatile global markets, an initiative strongly advocated by Jayati Ghosh. It further demanded the audit and rejection of odious debt and the creation of a Pan-African Gold Council to coordinate, regulate, and assert sovereign control over the continent's strategic mineral wealth, ensuring it serves African development rather than external extraction. Crucially, it demanded a shift from the language of debt relief to the language of reparations, advocating for the creation of an International Bank for Reconstruction and Reparations to replace the IMF and World Bank. This institution would address historical injustices while financing continental infrastructure, industrial

policy, and social protection through African-controlled mechanisms, and enforcing mandatory technology transfer in foreign partnerships.

On the issue of security, the Conference urged a revival of political unity as the basis for continental defense, investment in integrated regional defense production, and the prioritization of human security. For climate and infrastructure, it championed the TransAqua project and a continent-wide system of canals based on the river basins that connect the continent, alongside the training of millions of African engineers and hydrologists, framing ecological repair as a form of restitution and physical unification. Intellectually, it demanded a Pan-African education curriculum at all levels, the centralization and digitization of liberation archives, and platforms for youth engagement rooted in African identity and historical consciousness. Socially, the conference called for the integration of universal social policy: healthcare, education, social protection, as a productive investment in human capital, and for the establishment of equitable frameworks for the free movement of people based on worker solidarity, not externalized border control.

In her powerful address, Yassine Fall, Senegal's Minister of Justice, framed justice as multidimensional: economic, psychological, and historical. She also warned of the "enslavement of the mind" perpetuated by financial dependency and issued a direct call for African states to formally collaborate with networks like IDEAS to tackle the structural debt crisis, bridging radical thought and state policy. Her speech was a mobilization call, emphasizing that "true peace and reconciliation are impossible without first establishing truth and justice," and that reparations are integral to both.

VI. Conclusion

The inaugural IDEAS Africa Network Conference concluded with a resounding call to reclaim intellectual sovereignty as the foundation of all other liberations. The ideas, blueprints, and tools for African unity already exist from TransAqua to regional value chains, from Pan-African education to sovereign financial institutions. What has been lacking is not knowledge, but the collective political will to implement it. The conference reframed Africa's crises as opportunities for unification, its debts as claims for reparations, and its fragmentation as a challenge to overcome through solidarity. The legacies of Nkrumah, Sankara, Garvey, and Diop are not relics of the past but roadmaps for the future. Their teachings and struggles remind us that true liberation will face violent opposition.

Yet, as the Conference made clear, Africa's survival depends on its unity. The choice is stark: unite or perish. The path forward requires moving from fragmented resistance to a coordinated project of continental sovereignty, from analysis to implementation, from protest to reconstruction. The 1st IDEAS Africa Network Conference in Dakar was

a historic convocation to reignite an unfinished revolution, and to build a united, free, and sovereign Africa from the ground up. As Samia Nkrumah reflected, her father's message would be clear today: "Without political and economic unity, it will be very hard" to achieve socio-economic development. The task ahead is to make this unity a reality, transforming Africa's survival into a key to healing a fractured world, and ensuring that the call for reparations becomes not just a moral claim, but the structural foundation for a new Africa.