

### The "Clubs of Heads of State" from Below: Local perceptions of the African Union, ECOWAS and their 2014/15 interventions in Burkina Faso

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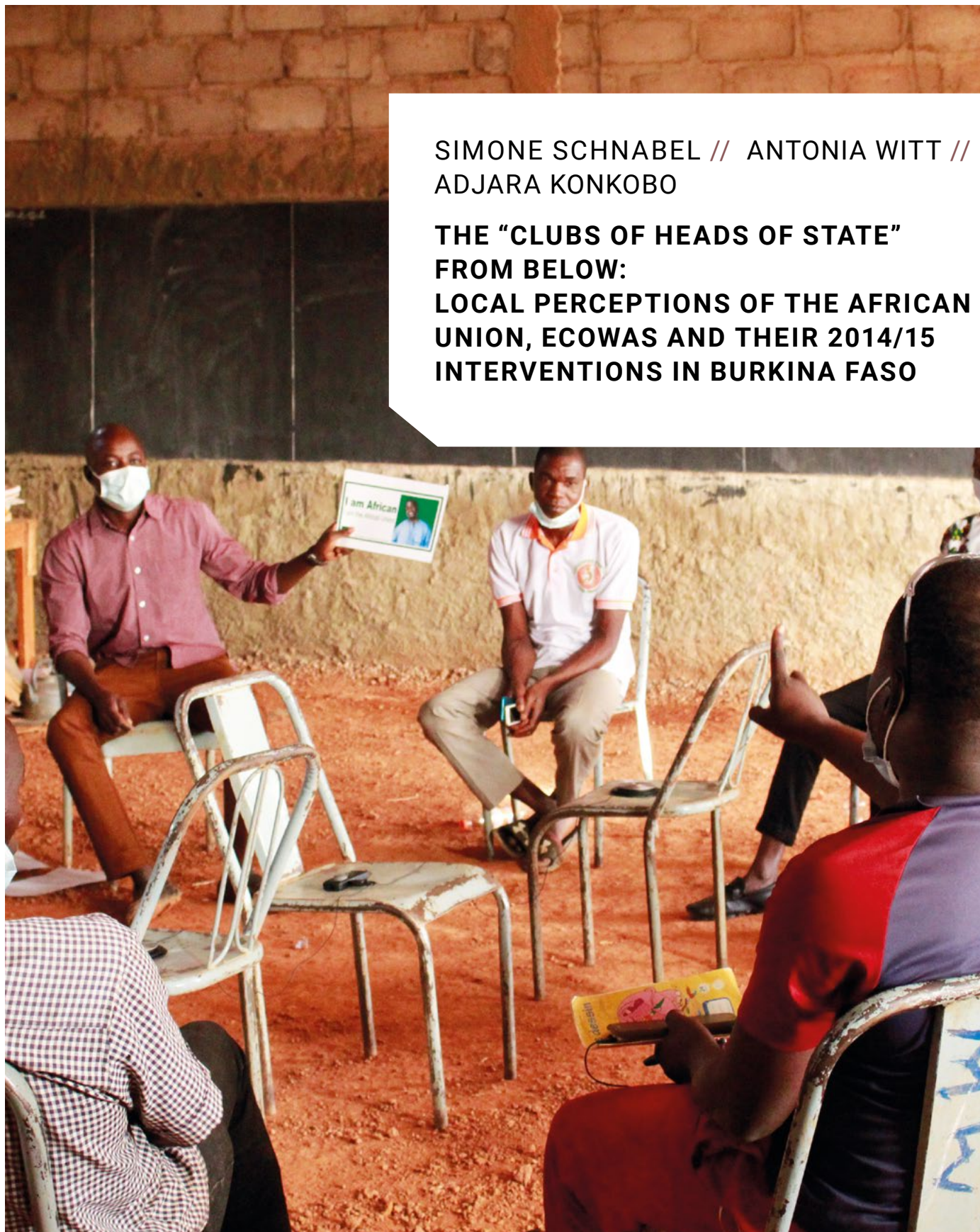
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# PRIF REPORT

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ADJARA KONKOBO

**THE “CLUBS OF HEADS OF STATE”  
FROM BELOW:  
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE AFRICAN  
UNION, ECOWAS AND THEIR 2014/15  
INTERVENTIONS IN BURKINA FASO**





PRIF Report 14/2022

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**Cover:**

Our moderator Amado Kaboré with some participants of a focus group in Djikôfê, Ouagadougou  
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African regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have become central actors in political crisis management and conflict resolution on the African continent. They regularly intervene in situations of *coups d'état* or other unconstitutional changes of government by seeking to restore “constitutional order” in affected countries through the suspension of countries from the organisations, mediation, the application of sanctions, as well as the threat to use violent means to enforce order. This power of African regional organisations to act in political crises is increasingly shaping the conditions under which African citizens live today.

Despite this role, we know very little about how those who are affected in their everyday lives perceive and evaluate African regional organisations and their role and contribution to the resolution of political crises. Existing empirical knowledge is limited to local perceptions of interventions by multilateral organisations such as the United Nations and/or the European Union as well as individual Western countries. In the absence of a systematic empirical research programme, there are two diverging hypotheses on this topic. On the one hand, the academic literature attributes a per se legitimacy to African regional actors, due to their proximity (cultural and otherwise) to the target societies. On the other hand, in public discourse and in everyday private conversations, there is a widespread and general representation of African regional organisations as “clubs of heads of state”.

The following report aims to capture, in a methodologically sound and in-depth empirical manner, local perceptions of a concrete regional intervention of the AU and ECOWAS, namely in Burkina Faso in 2014/15, following the fall of President Blaise Compaoré. It also analyses the knowledge about these organisations held by different Burkinabè actors from various social strata. The report is based on ten focus groups and about sixty individual interviews conducted in the capital, Ouagadougou, and several cities and rural areas in the country. The on-site research was carried out through the collaboration of a Burkinabè and a German researcher working in tandem.

This report reveals that local perceptions of regional interventions are more complex and ambiguous than is generally believed. Based on our data, we show that in Burkina Faso the two African regional organisations are locally more contested than assumed in the academic literature, and are at the same time perceived more positively than suggested by the dominant social imaginary of these organisations as “clubs of heads of state”.

Many aspects of the two organisations, their mandates, policies, and institutions are familiar to elites through their professional relationships, especially those active in the fields of human rights and economic integration. It is hardly surprising that ECOWAS is better known than the African Union, especially for its mandate for the free movement of persons and goods. Nevertheless, for most of the population, knowledge is based on concrete experiences such as the ECOWAS passport which allows people to freely cross the borders of neighbouring countries to trade, as well as their interventions in Burkina Faso in 2014/15.

In terms of local perceptions of the 2014/15 AU/ECOWAS regional interventions, our analysis shows both more contestation and more acceptance than suggested in either the academic liter-

ature or everyday discourse. The two aspects criticised most – both by elites and non-elites from different political camps – were the delayed intervention of the two organisations in 2014, as well as the amnesty proposed for the coup plotters in 2015 by the ECOWAS mediators, which is interpreted as evidence of the organisation's bias. Beyond this strong criticism and depiction of the multitude of local perceptions, the report presents three different narratives on the two regional organisations and their interventions in Burkina Faso in 2014/15.

The first narrative is based on a negative assessment of the role played particularly by ECOWAS in the Burkinabè transition, among those who consider themselves to be the protagonists of the period: local activists who participated in the social movements created in 2013/2014 to oppose Blaise Compaoré's attempts to change the constitution to make a fifth term possible. Although some of these actors were included in the consultations with the regional mediators, the latter were labelled as partisan. On the other hand, those with broader political experience – be it as deputies or as leaders of traditional civil society – appreciated ECOWAS and AU accompanying the transition, as this corresponded to their mandates. These actors feared too much military influence and a civil society dominated by political aspirations.

Beyond these two narratives reflecting the main, concurrent conflict lines of the transition, the third narrative reveals a perspective on African regional organisations and their interventions that is as yet little known and lacks media channels to communicate its concerns. This is the perspective of so-called "ordinary" people and those without access to political discourses and intervention sites. Although they concur with the two main criticisms of the intervention, their perceptions are generally positive. According to this narrative, neglected in the academic literature on the African peace and security architecture, the role of African regional organisations is appreciated for having contributed to a return to "normal" life – with access to the market in particular – even though the conditions of this achieved peace remain far from satisfying their everyday needs. It is this non-elitist narrative which is largely ignored in research practice, as well as in the academic understanding of regional interventions and the African peace and security architecture (APSA).

This multitude and ambiguity of local perceptions can be explained by several factors, especially the different concrete experiences with African regional organisations, either during or even before the interventions, as well as the different expectations of Burkinabè citizens towards the transition. The findings call for both a better understanding of multiple local perceptions and methodologies capable of recording non-elitist voices. They also show that in order to shape local perceptions positively and to become citizen-friendly actors as stipulated in their own strategic documents, AU and ECOWAS need to take measures that extend beyond information campaigns.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

African regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have become central actors in the management of political crises and conflicts on the African continent and in the protection of constitutional and democratic governance.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly visible in the regular reactions of these organisations to coups or other unconstitutional changes of government (Souaré 2014; Witt 2020). As foreseen by their own doctrines, in such cases AU and ECOWAS intervene by seeking the restoration of constitutional order, primarily through mediation and diplomacy. In addition, both organisations can apply coercive measures such as the suspension of member countries from the respective organisations, sanctions, as well as the threat or application of violent means. Since the adoption of the AU’s anti-coup norm in 2001, the continental organisation, as well as its sub-regional counterparts, have intervened in a total of 18 cases of unconstitutional changes of government on the continent, seeking to quickly restore constitutional order.

The years 2021/22 saw a sad peak in these intervention activities, with coups in Sudan, Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. The latter three countries had already experienced similar regional interventions in response to unconstitutional changes in 2008/09 (in Guinea), 2012 (in Mali) and 2014/15 (in Burkina Faso), respectively. This list and the regularity of regional responses to coups and political crises show that African regional organisations are increasingly shaping the order and politics of African states, including the conditions under which African citizens live today. Yet we know very little about how those whose everyday lives are affected by regional interventions experience and evaluate the role of these organisations in conflict resolution (cf. Sabrow 2017; IRRI 2017; Witt 2018; Witt and Khadijala 2018).<sup>2</sup>

The following study aims to capture, in a methodologically sound and in-depth empirical manner, local perceptions of a concrete regional intervention by ECOWAS and the AU, namely in 2014/15 in Burkina Faso, following the fall of President Blaise Compaoré.<sup>3</sup> This intervention was based mainly on mediation between the conflicting actors, the suspension of the country from regional institutions, and the threat of sanctions. In the existing literature and evaluations of African interventions, the intervention in Burkina is widely considered a “success story” due to the relatively quick restoration of constitutional order (ISS 2015; IPSS 2017: 30, 32). In response to these representations, we analyse how the AU and ECOWAS intervention in 2014/15, and the way it was implemented, was perceived

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1 This report is part of the research project “Local Perceptions of Regional Interventions: AU and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso and The Gambia” funded by the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG, project grant 661664). The project is based on case studies of regional interventions in Burkina Faso (2014/15) and The Gambia (2016/17). The Burkina Faso case study was carried out in partnership with the *Centre pour la Gouvernance Démocratique* (CGD) and the *Institut de Sciences des Sociétés* (INSS) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

2 In contrast, local perceptions and reactions to international interventions by the UN and Western states – France in particular – have led to a growing body of research (Pouligny 2006; Talentino 2007; Karlborg 2014; Banégas 2014; Kohl 2015; Müller and Bashar 2017; Leib and Ruppel 2021).

3 By “regional intervention” we mean any concerted effort by African regional organisations to affect the political order within a member state, regardless of whether such efforts involve coercive or non-coercive means, regardless of the concrete instruments used, and regardless of the primary objectives of such efforts.

by different social and political actors and groups in Burkina Faso, as well as what explains the differences between these perceptions. We use the term “perceptions” to refer to the understanding and interpretation of concrete experiences (Talentino 2007: 156). Although perceptions are always subjective, they are at the same time socially negotiated and powerful. By “local perceptions” we mean the multiplicity of perceptions of people living in an intervention country.<sup>4</sup> We deliberately use the term in its plural form in order to emphasise the simultaneous existence of different, sometimes divergent and even contradictory perceptions of the same event. The aim of this study is therefore to explore in more detail the multiplicity of local perceptions of the regional intervention in Burkina Faso in 2014/15 and to understand how different experiences and social relations affect them.

In the absence of a systematic empirical research programme, there are two divergent assumptions on this subject. On the one hand, the literature largely – if only implicitly – attributes local legitimacy to African regional actors per se, due to their proximity (cultural and otherwise) to the target societies (Tavares 2010: 12-13; Sabrow 2017: 174). This perception is linked to their deeper knowledge of political contexts compared to other international actors, which translates into a more locally relevant intervention. A recent quantitative comparison of mediations in Africa, for instance, revealed more success when conflicts were resolved by including African mediators, compared to conflicts resolved by mediators from outside the continent. This is said to be due to Africans preferring “African solutions” to their political crises (Duursma 2020: 592).

On the other hand, in contradiction to this finding, several case studies have identified African mediators’ partiality and failure to take local actors and contexts into consideration as the main challenge of African-led mediations (Adebajo 2002; Khadiagala 2007; Saidou 2018; Witt 2020: chapter 4). Furthermore, and in contrast to their per se legitimacy attributed in the academic literature, there is a widespread and general representation of African regional organisations as “clubs of heads of state”, both in public discourse and in everyday private conversations.<sup>5</sup> This social imaginary, which also featured prominently in our interviews and focus groups, is based on the general feeling that these organisations are detached from the lives of African citizens and mainly serve the interests of political elites. It is fuelled by a lack of visible effects of regional organizations’ policies on the ground and a perceived lack of knowledge about these organisations on the part of African citizens.

In the context of these two divergent readings and by exploring the knowledge and perceptions that Burkinabè<sup>6</sup> have of AU and ECOWAS, as well as their respective interventions in Burkina Faso, we show in this report that the two African regional organisations are both more locally contested than appears in the academic literature, and at the same time perceived more positively than suggested

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4 More specifically, perceptions of an intervention are concerned with how different local actors understand and interpret the overall objectives, concrete implementation, and outcomes of an intervention as well as the responsible organisation(s) behind it.

5 The French phrase used was “syndicat des chefs d’État”.

6 We use the Burkina Faso spelling (“Burkinabè”) instead of the international spelling (“Burkinabé”) which is also gender and number invariant.

by the dominant social imaginary of these organisations as “clubs of heads of state”. In short, both organisations are more contested and more accepted than is generally believed.

As regards *knowledge of regional organisations*, we show the existence of a crucial gap between elite actors and so-called “ordinary” people.<sup>7</sup> Our analysis also shows that personal experiences – only some of which are related to the interventions – are a crucial element which determines how and what people know about the two organisations, beyond their school education and socio-economic status.

Contrary to the idea of a “success” story of regional intervention, we show that *local perceptions* are both more complex and multifarious, and more critical than expected. The belated reaction of regional organisations to the undemocratic political drift of President Blaise Compaoré’s regime, as well as ECOWAS’s efforts to offer amnesty to the 2015 coup plotters, are two widely shared points of critique, regardless of the political orientation or social position of the interviewees. This criticism highlights what the literature calls the blind spot of the regional anti-coup policy: The organisations are reactive rather than preventive, and penalize neither the undemocratic behaviour of elected governments nor the failure to punish those in power (Souaré 2014; Dersso 2019).

Beyond this shared critique, we reveal three quite different narratives on the implementation and concrete contribution of the regional intervention to the transition in Burkina Faso. Not surprisingly, actors on the two sides of the political conflict that necessitated the regional intervention – Blaise Compaoré’s supporters and the street protesters – have very different perceptions of the regional intervention. These narratives are strongly shaped by the politicised discourses of elites on both sides, which are also reproduced in the Burkinabè media (Witt and Schnabel 2020). In contrast, the third narrative is that of “ordinary” Burkinabè, far from access to power. Such a non-elitist perspective on regional interventions has not yet been rendered visible in either the academic literature or the political discourse on African interventions. This narrative focuses on a general and “pragmatic” appreciation of regional organisations as having helped the country return to peace and “normal life”. The non-elitist perspective on African regional organisations and their interventions has two key aspects. On the one hand, it demonstrates the problem of “ordinary” citizens’ systematic detachment from the two regional organisations, despite their geographical and cultural proximity. On the other hand, this systematic detachment translates not into a radical critique, but rather into pragmatic appreciation of the positive effects of intervention on everyday life. However, contrary to the argument that African regional organisations enjoy rather ideological legitimacy (Sabrow 2017: 177), the evaluation of their interventions is based on tangible and concrete effects of their presence on the ground, without reference to their African origin.

The report is structured in six parts, including the introduction. The next part explains our methodological approach to studying local perceptions. In the third part, we present the political context in

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<sup>7</sup> In interviews and focus groups, participants often used the term “citoyen lambda” when referring to themselves and/or “ordinary” people as opposed to a well-known person from the political or social elite (see also [https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/citoyen\\_lambda](https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/citoyen_lambda), 26 July 2022).

Burkina Faso in 2014/15, as well as the reactions of the two regional organisations to the fall of President Compaoré. In the fourth part, we explore what citizens in Burkina Faso know about the AU and ECOWAS in general, because a certain level of knowledge is required before we can even talk about socially relevant perceptions. In the fifth part, we present the three different narratives and elaborate on the dominant actors that make use of them. In the final section, we draw some conclusions for the understanding and practice of African regional interventions, highlighting the relevance of this study's findings for both academic and policy purposes.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on empirical data generated during two phases of field research in Burkina Faso, in February and March 2020 and between January and April 2021. The field research, planned in two periods, included focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews, both of which are data collection methods that meet the study's objective of recording people's stories as closely and directly as possible (Hennink 2007; Kvale 2007). This combination of methods allows the lived experiences of the regional interventions to be analysed in great depth, while at the same time facilitating the discussion of certain ideas that emerge during the process of data collection. While the individual interviews reveal a deeper understanding of the different experiences and perceptions, the contradictory and sometimes complementary debates in the focus groups bring to light not only some points at which these perceptions diverge, but also areas of agreement.

We conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups in various neighbourhoods – both peripheral and inner city – of the Burkinabè capital Ouagadougou. We also worked in different cities and rural areas of the country such as Bobo-Dioulasso, Koudougou, Loumbila, and Yako (see Map 1).<sup>8</sup> In total, ten focus groups and about sixty individual interviews were conducted with various local actors. The individual interviews involved trade union and civil society leaders, journalists from the print and broadcast media, religious leaders, and representatives of political parties (opposition and ruling party). For the focus groups, in addition to diversity in terms of age, gender, and political or associative affiliation, spatial diversity and socio-economic status were taken into account. In the city of Ouagadougou, leaders of civil society organisations, former and current members of parliament, residents of a peripheral neighbourhood, young people, and market women took part in the focus groups. The focus groups were facilitated by a moderator and a Burkinabè research assistant. Respondents were contacted through several channels (by phone, email, WhatsApp, and/or official letter) and we obtained their informed consent after explaining the purpose of the research and its objectives. We also emphasised in advance that participation in the research was voluntary and guaranteed the anonymity of the participants. Participants were free to use the language in which they felt most comfortable in the discussion. The majority spoke French, but some spoke local languages (Mooré and Dioula). Overall, there was very little reluctance to participate in the study on the part of local actors contacted. The interviews and focus groups were, as far as possible, recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

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8 Due to the security situation in the country, it was not possible to conduct research in other areas.



Map: Burkina Faso, field research locations. Source: [https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=4562&lang=de](https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=4562&lang=de) (personal editing).

The fieldwork and data analysis were carried out in tandem by a Burkinabè socio-anthropologist and a German political scientist, who are both authors of the report. By combining two disciplinary approaches and two perspectives – that of the insider and the outsider, that of the involved and the observer – the aim was to define the research topic in the most detailed and multifaceted way possible. Tandem research is part of a growing preoccupation in many disciplines with the politics of knowledge production, with attempts to explore new avenues of collaborative research (Hagberg et al. 2017) and with the decolonisation of knowledge, particularly when it comes to knowledge in and about Africa (Arowosegbe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The interviews and focus groups were sometimes conducted together and sometimes separately, but they were always followed by a joint debriefing. Sometimes these debriefings revealed diverging understandings and interpretations of aspects of the study participants' narratives, leading to the need to clarify and challenge the basis upon which conclusions were drawn. The positionality of the two researchers also had an effect on what was possible during the fieldwork. For example, certain actors who were reluctant to make appointments with the Burkinabè researcher responded more readily to the German researcher, highlighting one of the difficulties of “anthropology at home” (Jackson 1987). On the other hand, the presence of the German researcher provoked reactions from some participants, ranging from a strategy of concealment through the use of Mooré, to an interpretation

of the study (despite the long preliminary explanations of the project and its objectives) as a channel to criticise African organisations as inferior to European organisations. In summary, the tandem work thus added an extra layer of reflexivity to the ongoing field research. It also served to reveal aspects of positionality and their impact on what is possible during field research.

### 3. THE FALL OF BLAISE COMPAORÉ AND REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Understanding the different perceptions of the regional interventions in 2014/15 requires an explanation of some key aspects of the political context of that period, as well as a brief recap of the concrete reactions of the two organisations to these political developments. On 31 October 2014, after weeks of popular protests in the capital Ouagadougou and other major cities, the President of Burkina Faso resigned and went into exile in Côte d'Ivoire. His attempts to amend Article 37 of the constitution to embark on a fifth term provoked a massive mobilisation of social movements that emerged during 2014, among them the *Balai Citoyen*, the *Collectif Anti-référendum* (CAR) and *Ça Suffit* (Frère and Englebert 2015: 301; Hagberg 2015). Alongside this collective resistance, a new opposition party called the People's Movement for Progress (MPP) was founded at the beginning of 2014, led by key figures from the hitherto ruling party (the Congress for Democracy and Progress, CDP) who opposed the constitutional change. The proposal for a referendum in parliament, in which the president could count on a majority thanks to his allies in government, led to the massive mobilisation of thousands of inhabitants of major cities, civil society, trade unions, and opposition parties in the last days of October 2014, a mobilisation known as the "Burkinabè revolution" or "popular insurrection" (Chouli 2015; Hagberg 2015; Hagberg et al. 2015: 200; Saidou 2018: 51).

However, the political and social crisis that led to the fall of Compaoré is more complex and had already begun before the mobilisation against the constitutional amendment. Since the assassination of Burkinabè journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998, and culminating in 2011, Burkina Faso has experienced phases of great social frustration and growing political opposition to the impunity, corruption, and inequality that characterised the Compaoré regime (Hilgers and Loada 2013; Bonnecase 2015).

Blaise Compaoré's "semi-authoritarian" regime (Hilgers and Loada 2013) was built on a system of patronage that included the country's economic and administrative elite, as well as some influential traditional authorities of the Mossi kingdom. He also relied on the loyalty of the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP), a special military unit which was well-armed and used by Compaoré as a counterweight to the regular army (Sampana 2015: 37). At the same time, he pushed forward an agenda of institutional openness aimed at civil society, building a "double-faced democracy" (Hagberg 2010). The image of this democracy was maintained externally by Blaise Compaoré's numerous engagements as a mediator on behalf of ECOWAS in many conflicts in the sub-region (Niang 2016; Afolabi 2020: 57).

Following the former president's flight to Côte d'Ivoire at the end of October 2014, the army – supported by some social movements – seized power and installed Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida as interim president. Zida, for his part, declared the suspension of the constitution to allow for

the establishment of a transitional regime. While the fall of Compaoré was a “revolution” for those involved in the protests, for most international actors, including the AU and ECOWAS, the event left a power vacuum to be filled by quick elections (Sampana 2015).<sup>9</sup> The two African organisations immediately condemned the military takeover and demanded a return to constitutional order. However, they did not immediately suspend Burkina Faso as a member. In its resolution of 3 November 2014, the AU Peace and Security Council called for the establishment of a civilian transitional government within 14 days of the resulting communiqué, on pain of the country’s suspension from the organisation, as well as “targeted sanctions against all those who would obstruct” the return to constitutional order (AU PSC 2014). ECOWAS, applying a more moderate approach, called for an immediate return to civilian rule through an inclusive dialogue and urged the international community not to impose sanctions on the country (ECOWAS 2014).

Following the initial reactions, the AU sent former Togolese Prime Minister Edem Kodjo as a special envoy, while ECOWAS sent Senegalese President Macky Sall to Ouagadougou to consult with local actors – members of the former government and the opposition, as well as representatives of civil society – in order to facilitate a return to civilian rule. This involved the elaboration of a transitional roadmap, including the timetable for the organisation of elections. The latter galvanised a debate between local actors, who aimed for a longer transition to reform the old system, and ECOWAS, which advocated a six-month transition (Saidou 2018: 46). The result of the regional mediation was a “power-sharing deal” with an interim government comprising the former diplomat Michael Kafando and a prime minister from the army, Lieutenant-Colonel Zida. ECOWAS, in collaboration with the AU and the UN, established the International Monitoring and Support Group for the Transition in Burkina Faso (GISAT-BF) to accompany and monitor the transition process and coordinate international support through regular missions to Ouagadougou (AU PSC 2014; ECOWAS 2014).

In addition, a transitional charter was drafted – as part of consultations with the envoys of both organisations – to legalise the transitional government and set up institutions such as the National Transitional Council (CNT), composed of the former opposition, the former majority, civil society organisations and the defence and security forces. One of the most contested projects during the transition was the revision of the electoral code, which deemed, on the basis of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, any actor who supported the amendment of Article 37 before the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for November 2015 to be ineligible (Witt 2019; Witt and Schnabel 2020). A group of politicians and citizens close to the former president brought the proposed modification of the electoral code to the ECOWAS Court of Justice, which argued that the amendment violated the principle of free participation in elections (ECOWAS Court of Justice 2015: 10-11). However, this decision was not enforced. As a result, many members of the former regime were excluded from the planned elections. On 16 September 2015, a *coup d’état* against the transitional government was led by General Gilbert Diendéré, President Blaise Compaoré’s former chief of staff and a member of the RSP (Ouédraogo 2016). Less than a month before the elections, this coup

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9 It was even a “double power vacuum” (Sampana 2015: 40) due to the resignation and flight of not only Blaise Compaoré, but also the president of the National Assembly, who was next in line to head the government according to the constitution.



was seen as an interruption of the transition and the achievements of the “popular insurrection” of October 2014. As a result, large-scale civil protests mobilised against the “theft of the transition” (Banégas 2015; Zeilig 2017).

The AU and ECOWAS immediately condemned the coup, albeit with different approaches. While the AU suspended Burkina Faso from the organisation, labelled the coup plotters as “terrorist elements”, and threatened sanctions against the perpetrators (AU PSC 2015), ECOWAS took a more reconciliatory approach, sending Macky Sall and Beninese President Thomas Yayi Boni to Ouagadougou to hold consultations with the military (ECOWAS 2015). The two envoys negotiated with the coup plotters for the return of the transitional government and the release of some of its members. Despite this success, the ECOWAS mediators’ proposal for an amnesty for the coup perpetrators, communicated through the local media, was fiercely opposed by civil society, which mobilised against this provision (Saidou 2018: 49). ECOWAS heads of state, at their extraordinary summit in Abuja on 22 September 2015, decided to support the transitional government rather than engage in a compromise with the coup perpetrators (ECOWAS 2015). Transitional elections were therefore held on 29 November 2015, eventually leading to the restoration of constitutional order and thus the official end of the regional intervention.

In this context, the following chapters summarise the general knowledge about the two regional organisations among Burkinabè interviewed for this study (chapter 4), as well as the different accounts of the experience of their interventions during the transition (chapter 5).

#### **4. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

Understanding the level and nature of knowledge about the AU and ECOWAS is a necessary precondition for evaluating and interpreting the analytical value of local perceptions of regional interventions. It is generally accepted that African regional organisations are not well known by African citizens (Olapade et al. 2016: 14). For Burkina Faso, the results of our research only partially confirm this assumption. Such a correction is important, as the alleged lack of knowledge about regional organisations is often used to deny any analytical and social relevance of local perspectives. As will be explained in this section, our empirical results allow for three observations in particular: first, the levels of knowledge about the sub-regional organisation (ECOWAS) and the continental organisation (AU) vary widely. The AU is less known than ECOWAS, regardless of which local actors are considered. Indeed, the AU was rarely mentioned by the research participants. Frequently, respondents did not systematically distinguish between the two organisations in their narratives. They referred merely to “these organisations”, but when asked to specify which of the two they were referring to, most of the time it was ECOWAS. While ECOWAS is known for its regional governance instruments in various areas (such as free movement and/or market integration), the AU is known more through political crises and conflicts, including its condemnation statements. This shows that in terms of general awareness, ECOWAS is indeed the organisation that is “closest” to the Burkinabè. Secondly, we also confirm that there is a major difference between members of the political and associative elites on the one hand and “ordinary” citizens on the other, in terms of both the level and the type of knowledge

held by the participants in our research. While the former have “factual” knowledge of regional organisations, the latter have more “practical” knowledge that is based on concrete everyday experiences. Thirdly, it appears that the level of knowledge is related to socio-economic status and school education, as well as the individual and everyday experiences of the different actors.

#### 4.1 WELL-KNOWN ORGANISATIONS IN THE CIRCLE OF LEADERS

Most leaders in various fields and members of civil society organisations have a fairly good knowledge of what the AU and ECOWAS are. Indeed, be it for their objectives, their field of intervention, their policies or their instruments, these organisations are well known by this category of actors. Most leaders of civil society organisations or political parties are familiar mainly with the policies relating to the free movement of persons and goods, as well as those on democracy and governance which set standards for elections and establish the principle of limiting electoral mandates (for example, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance). In addition to the area of governance, some referred to the ECOWAS Vision 2020, ECOMOG (the ECOWAS military force), and, even more mentioned, the ECOWAS Court of Justice, especially in relation to the Court’s verdict on the 2015 electoral process in Burkina (see Chapter 3). ECOWAS’s policies on the exploitation of mineral resources, and bodies such as the African Commission and Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights of the AU are known to our interviewees, who regularly referred to them. Also known among some political leaders is the West African Health Organisation (WAHO), which is based in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

While some ECOWAS and AU policies and instruments are relatively well known, knowledge about the internal workings of these two organisations is based more on the dominant social imaginary, according to which they are seen as “clubs of heads of state”, than on detailed, factual knowledge. Explaining that recruitment to these institutions is more political than competence-based, one trade union leader expressed his opinion – reflected by many other participants as well – through the following image:

“[...] because of the very fact that in order to access a position at the ECOWAS executive level, you have to be endorsed by your leader. [...] It’s true that there are some officials who are there, but at the highest level, you have to be endorsed by your country to be there, so unfortunately there is the duty of accountability which means that, well..., at a certain point when there is a crisis..., the officials who are there are working on behalf of the leaders who sent them” (trade union leader in Ouagadougou, interview 16 February 2021, authors’ translation).

One marker of these African actors’ knowledge is the fact that some interviewees are affected by the norms and policies of both organisations in their daily professional lives, as politicians, lawyers, or civil society activists. These are mainly those who use ECOWAS and AU policies in their professional activities and who have direct contact with the organisations through seminars, workshops or other

working sessions. In addition to a relatively high level of formal education, for the elite, it is therefore the daily professional encounters that allow a better knowledge of African regional organisations, but also define their limits.

#### 4.2 TWO AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS KNOWN LITTLE OR NOT AT ALL FROM BELOW

While they are known by the elite, the AU and ECOWAS are little known by “ordinary” citizens of Burkina Faso. Indeed, according to various actors we met, the grassroots population has limited knowledge of the two organisations. More important than the actual level of knowledge is therefore the fact that people have the far-reaching perception that they or other so-called “ordinary” citizens know nothing about the two regional organisations. For example, in a focus group in a smaller city in the country, one of the participants said:

“[...] the African Union and ECOWAS are structures that are unknown to the people, especially to the economic [working] class of the population [...]. You ask the peasants of Yako what it is the AU or ECOWAS, and they will be dumbfounded” (MPP member in Yako, focus group 4 March 2021, authors’ translation).

This view of the general public’s lack of awareness of regional organisations is shared by a majority of the interviewees and is considered to be fairly “normal”:

“In fact, we know nothing about these institutions! That’s it. So the laws or the policies they vote on and so on, it’s only reserved for... what do you call it... for a level of people, university intellectuals and so on. But after that, the vast majority don’t give a damn about these institutions, because they don’t know anything about them” (social movement leader in Ouagadougou, interview 27 February 2020, authors’ translation).

It sometimes seems that, from the “ordinary” people’s point of view, not knowing about regional organisations is a central element of self-identification with this part of Burkinabè society and an indication of the great gap that separates these organisations from “ordinary” citizens. A widespread explanation for this lack of knowledge is the invisibility of the two organisations in the everyday lives of most Burkinabè, as the same interviewee explains:

“So today, if you ask Burkinabè or Malians what ECOWAS has achieved here, nobody will show you anything. But if you ask about financial funds, maybe European Union funds and others, they will show you buildings where it says “European Union” and you will see” (social movement leader in Ouagadougou, interview 27 February 2020, authors’ translation).

Nevertheless, formal education has an important influence on the level of knowledge. Our focus groups and interviews have shown that people who have attended school know, for example, how to define the acronyms of these organisations, their geographical coverage, the history of their creation, their field of intervention, their headquarters, etc. School thus offers basic knowledge of these African organisations to those who have access to it. This is also what emerges from the statement of a student who participated in the focus group conducted in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Ouagadougou:

“I am a student, so if I say I don’t know the African Union, it’s a bit problematic. Let’s say that the African Union brings together all the African states, as we already hear, the African Union, that’s it, and then ECOWAS too, the definition is the Economic Community of West African States [...], when there are problems in a country, they can delegate senior representatives to try to resolve that problem” (young adult in Djikôfê, focus group 21 February 2021, authors’ translation).

Even if it appears that these organisations are generally not well known by the “popular masses”, some people do hear about them. Information about these organisations is also accessed by “word of mouth” and certainly also through the media (radio and/or television) and social networks, in addition to school. Some of the people we spoke to said they knew about these organisations because they had heard about them. This is the case of the following interviewee, a woman who runs a stall at the popular Zogona market, who said:

“We hear about these organisations, but we don’t know much about them or the aid they provide, but we hear about them” (market woman at Zogona market, focus group 11 March 2021, authors’ translation).

In addition, the organisations are known by some of the traces they leave in the everyday lives of “ordinary” people – albeit to a very limited degree. Consequently, some of their actions, such as the free movement of persons and goods, are also relatively well known among the population. Thus, the ECOWAS passport, for example, remains a strong mark of visibility and therefore for knowledge of this organisation. For example, women running stalls at local markets have systematically associated their knowledge of ECOWAS with the ECOWAS passports they have obtained in order to conduct their trade freely. This is what one of them tells us:

“What I learned about ECOWAS was when they came to distribute ECOWAS cards to enable women to enter neighbouring countries without being harassed” (market woman at Zogona market, focus group 11 March 2021, authors’ translation).

In sum, while the level of knowledge about the two regional organisations is (perceived to be) relatively low among “ordinary” citizens, our interviews and focus groups also revealed the existence of

widespread practical and everyday knowledge. This practical knowledge is based on the daily experiences of Burkinabè with regional norms and policies. However, beyond formal education, both elite and “ordinary” citizens’ knowledge of these organisations is shaped strongly by individual everyday experiences, be they users of regional policy frameworks and legal doctrines, or people affected by them in their daily encounters.

## **5. PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERVENTIONS BY THE AFRICAN UNION AND ECOWAS**

The following chapter reveals local perceptions of AU and ECOWAS interventions after the fall of Blaise Compaoré in 2014 and during the transition in 2015. These perceptions are shaped by two dominant points of criticism. First, the lack of anticipation and late intervention of regional organisations after the fall of Blaise Compaoré in 2014 was criticised by all actors, including representatives of the former regime. Second, actors in several locations, with the sole exception of members of the former ruling party, perceived ECOWAS’s condemnation of the failed coup of 2015 as lacking in firmness and criticised the mediators’ demand for amnesty for the coup plotters. The two points of criticism are strongly linked and at the same time reflect the popular image of regional organisations as “clubs of heads of state”, with their members protecting each other (see introduction and chapter 4).

Although there are common perceptions and critiques of regional interventions, they are embedded in three different collective narratives about regional actors, their role in the political transition, and the concrete experience of their interventions. In general, a narrative brings together shared perceptions, evaluations, and even emotions, which reveal a process of understanding and making sense of a period or indeed a crisis (Gadinger et al. 2014: 9-10). Identifying narratives is an appropriate way to understand local perspectives on conflict and peace, as well as on external interventions (see also Karlborg 2014; Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Each narrative thus reveals its own process of understanding and logic to make sense of this period of Burkinabè history and the concrete actions of the AU and ECOWAS. The first two narratives, mainly shared by the elites of the country’s largest cities, reveal opposing interpretations of the role played by African regional organisations: a virulent criticism of the closest regional actor, ECOWAS, expressed particularly by members of the social movements created in 2013/2014, versus a certain appreciation of the support for the transition and the return to civilian government among those with long political experience as members of parliament or civil society.

The third narrative represents a perspective hitherto little recognised in the discussion and academic literature on African regional interventions: the non-elitist perspective and thus the perceptions of so-called “ordinary” people. As the analysis shows, people’s perceptions go beyond harsh criticism on the one hand, and a mixed assessment based on regional norms on the other. Their assessment of the interventions is rather positive, based on their everyday needs and devoid of excessive expectations. It is the perspective of those without access to power and debate – including mediation by regional organisations – which thus remains unknown. This non-elitist narrative shows

that the intervention of ECOWAS and the AU, despite their geographical distance, was appreciated for its immediate and positive effects, notwithstanding the most audible criticisms.

### 5.1 THE RADICAL PERSPECTIVE: A TARDY AND PARTISAN ECOWAS

The first narrative is shared mostly by main actors of the popular movements that played a key role in the mobilisation in 2013/2014, especially in the country's major cities – Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, and Koudougou. These actors identify strongly with “their revolution”, and were among the most dominant voices during the Burkinabè transition (WANEP 2015: 2). The main criticism of this narrative is based on two points: First, the reproach of a “stolen” revolution, due to the late intervention in 2014 after the fall of Blaise Compaoré – which marked the completion of their collective resistance; second, the demand by regional actors to organise quick elections, although the vision of civil society during this period went beyond a simple change of government:

“We were really direct actors on the ground, we can say that at that time, ECOWAS, especially ECOWAS, disappointed us, disappointed us because ECOWAS had come to re-establish injustice at the expense of justice. ECOWAS had come against the Burkinabè people, that's it” (leader of the social movement in Ouagadougou, interview 29 January 2021, authors' translation).

Their narrative carries an image of the organisations as “having done nothing” to curb the Burkinabè crises of 2014 and 2015. This fierce criticism directed instead at ECOWAS – “everything ECOWAS has done, ECOWAS has completely failed” (social movement leader in Ouagadougou, interview 27 February 2020) – further reinforces the popular image of the organisation as a club manipulated by heads of state protecting each other, but serving no purpose for their countries. This mistrust is strongly linked to Blaise Compaoré's career as a celebrated ECOWAS mediator, as well as to the proximity of the president of the ECOWAS Commission at the time, Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo, who was a close ally of Blaise Compaoré, and also participated in the organisation's first mission to Ouagadougou just after the president's fall. As a result, the organisation's silence regarding the attempt to change the constitution is interpreted by some actors as an endorsement and support for the former president, as a young member of *Balai Citoyen* puts it:

“[...] when there was the insurrection, because immediately, what we observed was a guilty silence from the institutions that are supposed to defend citizens when they are martyred, when they are under a dictatorship, when they cannot exercise a certain legitimate right to freedom of expression and everything else. They immediately took a stand for their ally, who was Mr Blaise Compaoré, through a silence that lasted for a long time, and which, for us, seems like tacit support” (member of *Balai Citoyen* in Ouagadougou, interview 20 February 2020, authors' translation).

According to this account, the amnesty for the coup plotters proposed by the mediators after the 2015 coup further adds to this image of a club that remains loyal to the former regime, as expressed by the leader of a social movement:

“Let us say first that ECOWAS is a club of heads of state who are here to defend themselves. To defend themselves, because the colleagues who are there can testify to what they came to do during the insurrection and during the resistance to the coup in Burkina Faso. That’s it. We cannot understand that a sub-regional organisation, instead of standing by the people, assisting the people of Burkina Faso, has come to endorse a coup. That’s what it is! ECOWAS had come to endorse a *coup d’état*” (leader of a social movement in Ouagadougou, focus group 14 March 2020, authors’ translation).

This strong criticism of ECOWAS contributed to a more positive appreciation of the role played by the African Union, both in 2014 and 2015. The AU’s strong condemnation of the failed coup in 2015 was highly appreciated and even considered “honourable” (activist in Ouagadougou, interview 16 February 2021). While ECOWAS was the subject of fierce criticism, the continental organisation was perceived to be more distant, but also more neutral. This perception was further encouraged by some direct contacts among activists with the Chairperson of the African Union Commission at the time, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma – “Mrs Zuma” – who was also known for her struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. This fed an image of the AU’s intervention as a direct response to the local demands and reaching out of the protagonists of the insurgency towards the AU, and not because of its conflict management mechanisms and instruments.

As with the early activists, the image of an ECOWAS that did not understand and/or was manipulated also manifested on the side of the former majority, among members of the CDP.<sup>10</sup> Parliamentarians and members of Blaise Compaoré’s party in the capital also criticised the lack of anticipatory measures and the late intervention of ECOWAS in the face of the instability and “chaos” they saw reigning in the country throughout 2014. In some interviews, a more radical perception of the organisations as “complicit” with the insurgents emerged because of their intervention after the fall of Compaoré (see also Hagberg et al. 2015: 201). For them, it was a *coup d’état* against a legitimately elected regime. Therefore, they expected a stronger reaction against the “unconstitutional” insurgency and reproached regional organisations for being too close to the insurgents (CDP deputy in Ouagadougou, interview 26 March 2021; CDP representative in Ouagadougou, interview 30 March 2021).

The way in which the popular image of a “club” is turned around to accuse ECOWAS of “complicity” with the insurgents shows how this image was fed by all sides of the political spectrum at the time of the crisis. The politicisation of ECOWAS also reflects how perceptions of interventions are embedded in local dynamics and politicised discourses of winners/losers in the transition.

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10 Nevertheless, there is no narrative from the CDP per se, especially outside the capital. There are also moderate voices which appreciated the accompaniment of ECOWAS at the beginning of the transition, but strongly criticised the conduct of the transition and the politicisation of civil society (CDP deputy in Ouagadougou, focus group 18 March 2021).

### **An imposed mediation that thwarted the popular uprising**

Perceptions of the mediation on the ground in this narrative are manifested in a general discourse of “imposition”, and a “dictate” by ECOWAS and its roadmap for the transition, particularly with regard to its objective (quick elections) and duration. The aspirations of the insurrection’s protagonists did not stop with the fall of the former president. They aspired to a profound change of the regime in place, often using the images and vocabulary of the revolutionary Thomas Sankara, Blaise Compaoré’s predecessor who was assassinated in 1987 (Hagberg 2015; Zeilig 2017; Soré 2018). This was expressed by a member of one of the key movements for the mobilisation in Koudougou in 2013/2014:

“[...] the problem of Burkina was not a problem of elections. That is why I said, when you want to help, you have to be honest. In Burkina Faso, people did not go out on 30 and 31 October [2014] for an election problem, no. People went out, not because they didn’t like Blaise, no. People came out because Blaise had done his time in Burkina Faso. People were waiting for a change” (member of a social movement in Koudougou, focus group 10 March 2020, authors’ translation).

In the face of this desire to put an end to the “Blaise Compaoré system”, the electoral timetable and the six-month duration proposed by the mediators were the most polarising elements of the regional intervention, and even more so in the context of the threat of sanctions. This reinforced the image of ECOWAS as an organisation that wanted to thwart the popular insurrection.

While their involvement in consultations with ECOWAS and the AU was seen as positive, the mediators’ general practice of consulting all actors – the former regime, the opposition, civil society, and traditional and religious leaders – was subjected to more critique than in the other two narratives. For example, the imposed inclusion of members of the former regime after the insurrection was seen as an affront by social movement leaders:

“When the old regime was presented to us, we denounced it and left the room. This means that we did not agree! Here we are, those responsible, those who were guilty during the insurrection, those who were responsible for the death of our comrades who are still in the morgue, they are presented to us in front of us? 72 hours later? We can’t agree! That’s what we told Macky Sall, we told Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo” (representative of a social movement in Ouagadougou, focus group 14 March 2020, authors’ translation).

In addition, they accuse the mediators of politicising the consultations through the inclusion of civil society groups they believed to be close to the former government, such as traditional authorities like the Moogho Naba,<sup>11</sup> but also certain individuals. In short, they saw the ECOWAS mediators – often

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11 The Moogho Naba is the highest traditional authority of the Mossi, the majority ethnic group in Burkina Faso. The distrust expressed among some research participants is certainly due to the former regime’s strong relationship with traditional authorities supporting formal state institutions since colonial times and independence (Harsch 2017).



referred to as “the Macky Salls” – as acting in the same partisan manner as the organisation they represented. This shows once again how perceptions of the intervention and its concrete practices on the ground are strongly influenced by the local and politicised dynamics of the transition.

## 5.2 THE MODERATE PERSPECTIVE: THE AU AND ECOWAS AS ASSISTANTS OF THE TRANSITION

The second narrative identified is shared by most leaders with experience in national politics, either as opposition parliamentarians during the Blaise Compaoré era or as leaders or representatives of (traditional) civil society organisations. These organisations, associations and movements (in the following “traditional civil society”) present in the major cities of the country have a (longer) tradition and experience of counterbalancing the government – the former regime included.<sup>12</sup> This political experience is reflected mostly in the parameters within which they perceive and evaluate the interventions by the AU and ECOWAS, parameters related to their mandates and instruments, without distinguishing between the two in judging their performance, as in the earlier narrative. The mainstream and majority of civil society appreciated the return to civilian government, and the accompaniment by AU and ECOWAS during the transition period. This is also due to better knowledge of their policies, functioning and instruments, as well as experiences with direct cooperation, especially among some traditional civil society leaders, which also affect their perceptions of the interventions of both organisations.

Most assessed their “omnipresence and close monitoring of developments” positively, including the preparation of the elections (company director in Ouagadougou, interview 17 February 2021), and their “constant assistance” (civil society representative in Ouagadougou, interview 16 April 2021) in accompanying and monitoring the transition. Some civil society members with experiences of direct cooperation with ECOWAS were even aware of and appreciated the organisation’s unofficial diplomatic attempts to prevent Blaise Compaoré from changing the constitution in 2014, despite their ultimate failure (civil society leader in Ouagadougou, interview 28 February 2020; civil society leader in Ouagadougou, interview 19 March 2020; civil society representative in Ouagadougou, interview 16 April 2021). Rather, the organisations’ commitment throughout the transition and their general willingness to help resolve the crisis in Burkina Faso – even if it was too late – were valued, as expressed by a senior civil society leader:

“[...] at least they didn’t sit on their hands. They cared about the crisis we were going through, they moved around, they came. Well, unfortunately for us, they came at a time when the people had finished solving their problems” (civil society leader in Ouagadougou, focus group 14 March 2020, authors’ translation).

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<sup>12</sup> This also explains their more critical view of some of the protagonists of the insurgency. However, this narrative is not shared by more left-wing organisations with a more radical view of the state and its institutions, such as trade unions and ideologically oriented student and youth associations.

In contrast to the first narrative, perceptions of the roles of the AU and ECOWAS in the transition do not differentiate as much between the two organisations. This group’s assessment was more focused on the two organisations as a whole – referring to “they” or “them” – and their efforts to accompany the transition:

“They were really keen to keep an eye on things, because there too, at the last minute, the guys wanted to slip up. They insisted that the terms of the transition be respected, so that we could go to the elections quickly” (representative of an association in Bobo-Dioulasso, focus group 31 March 2021, authors’ translation).

For this group, it was quite “normal” that both organisations – on the basis of their mandates and instruments – followed and reacted to the Burkinabè transition. Nevertheless, while positive assessments of AU and ECOWAS’s contribution to the Burkinabè transition focused on the general objectives of supporting the return to civilian rule and rejecting all influence and governance by the military, ECOWAS’s efforts as the responsible organisation of the sub-region were more appreciated than those of the AU:

“I think that their coming was almost normal because when there is a crisis in the sub-region, [they] have agreements that they have had to sign, they must come to manage the problem. Now, did we personally want [...], I think that when they said that ECOWAS was coming, I was happy and I know that there were quite a few people who thought that they were going to come and resolve the crisis” (MPP deputy in Ouagadougou, focus group 18 March 2021, authors’ translation).

Among a large segment of traditional civil society and political party representatives, there was a consensus on the one-year timeframe and on the objective of the transition period, including the holding of free and transparent elections to determine a new government. The majority feared that if the transition lasted more than a year, the transitional government might stay in power too long and take advantage of the situation (see also Saidou 2018: 46), although ECOWAS’s first suggestion of six months raised concerns that this period would be too short. Some also appreciated the fact that ECOWAS did not impose sanctions in 2014, which was interpreted as recognition of the “insurgency” on its part. This appreciation, compared to the strong criticism of regional interventions in the previous narrative, reflects well the division among social actors at the beginning of the transition, when mainstream civil society organisations feared that “the revolution would be confiscated” by the military (Hagberg et al. 2015: 216).

#### **A mediation that follows the “power relations” of the time**

In contrast to the respondents in the first narrative, civil society leaders and parliamentarians from the former opposition generally appreciated the efforts of mediators, who consulted with different political and social groups to facilitate the installation of a transitional government:

“So, let’s say that the African Union and ECOWAS played a very important role in the transition, insofar as they played a fairly important mediation role to enable the establishment of institutions. Let’s say that both the African Union and ECOWAS sent representatives to Ouagadougou who had to work with the different parties – be they political parties, civil society, or even the political parties that had just lost power – to see to what extent it was possible to set up a system” (civil society leader in Ouagadougou, interview 19 March 2020, authors’ translation).

While the mediation was judged positively, the majority of traditional civil society representatives and deputies considered the inclusion of civil society during the transition period to have been politicised by actors close to the MPP, accusing the latter of having manipulated the movements in their direction.<sup>13</sup> They criticised the political and personal aspirations of certain leaders, as expressed by this representative of a civil society organisation:

“It was very, very far from being representative. Let me give you an example. The meetings with ECOWAS that I attended: I saw actors from “civil society” whose organisations are not known at all. They are perhaps limited to the members of their office who do not carry out activities in the field, who were actually there on behalf of a political party, the MPP, the party in power” (civil society representative in Ouagadougou, interview 5 March 2021, authors’ translation).

For them, regional consultations mainly with representatives of social movements reflected the “power relations” of the time, as these representatives had a considerably more dominant voice and were at the same time under the influence of certain opposition parties with political aspirations.

This “power relations” argument was also shared by members of the former majority in the capital. Those close to Blaise Compaoré strongly criticised the poor management of the transition – “chaotic” according to moderate opinions (CDP representative in Ouagadougou, interview 30 March 2021) and “illegal” according to the more radical ones (CDP deputy in Ouagadougou, interview 26 March 2021) – with the *coup d’état* of 2015 as its logical consequence. The revision of the electoral code which prompted a decision by the ECOWAS Court of Justice is added to this narrative, invoked almost exclusively by those who criticised the lack of professionalism during the transition (including part of traditional civil society): “From that moment on, ECOWAS was convinced that this transition had to be ended because it could lead Burkina Faso adrift. That’s it” (CDP representative in Ouagadougou, interview 30 March 2021). The ex-majority saw the sub-regional organisation on its side and was therefore disappointed by the non-reaction of the two organisations when the decision of the ECOWAS Court in favour of inclusion remained a “dead letter” (CDP deputy in Ouagadougou, interview 26 March 2021).

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<sup>13</sup> This politicisation of the movements that participated in the insurrection and transition is also reflected in the academic literature, which argues that many of the recently created organisations that contributed to the fall of Blaise Compaoré were financed by opposition political parties (Saidou 2018: 43).

In sum, although more appreciative of the involvement of regional organisations in the management of the transition in Burkina than the first narrative, the second narrative nevertheless shows the perception of both organisations as limited in power, particularly with regard to their capacity to influence the political game on the ground. Like the first narrative, the second highlights how local perceptions of AU and ECOWAS were strongly shaped by local political dynamics during this period.

### 5.3 THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EXCLUDED: THE AU AND ECOWAS AS PEACE FACILITATORS

A third – and as yet little-known – account of regional interventions is that of local actors far removed from political discourse and access to public debates on the transition. This is the perspective of “ordinary” people: representatives of small local associations and local officials in rural municipalities and peripheral urban neighbourhoods, women running stalls in a popular market in Ouagadougou, among others. Although this group covers a wide range of respondents from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, they all share a crucial exclusion from official political processes in the capital, including those led and moderated by the AU and ECOWAS during the transition. While these actors also criticise the late intervention in 2014, as well as the lack of impartiality of ECOWAS in 2015, their perception of the politics of the capital, including the regional interventions, is more remote. This is the narrative of those without access to power or official political debates. While the protagonists of the insurgency call for a democracy from the streets (Hagberg 2015: 217) and a transition led by “the people”, the latter do not necessarily share the same perceptions of this period and even less so of the regional interventions.

The perceptions and assessments of this group are strongly linked to everyday life and immediate needs. The return to “normalisation”, including getting out of the “crisis” and back to stability, was a positive and widely shared assessment of the regional interventions, without any distinction between ECOWAS and the AU. For some of the respondents, the two organisations helped to bring the country to the elections and a new president – without reference to the other expectations of this period that played a major role in the discussions held among political leaders in the major cities. These actors link the return to stability to a return to their everyday lives, to “business as usual”, such as access to the capital, access to local markets, and the possibility of meeting in the village:

“For example, we are currently interacting with each other here. At the time of the crisis, we couldn’t meet like this or interact, everyone was holed up in their houses; and as we have relatives in the capital, we didn’t know how they were doing and we couldn’t go and visit them” (village counsellor in Loumbila, focus group 24 February 2021, authors’ translation).

So, for them the security situation was worsening in a way that prevented them from meeting, discussing and carrying on their normal lives. As a result, they appreciate the regional intervention, simply because “in a country where there is no peace, it is difficult to live one’s life” (market woman at Zogona market, focus group 11 February 2021). A woman from Loumbila also notes:

“They [regional organisations] play their role well, which is to bring peace. When they arrive, things calm down! We who are here, at the beginning of the problem, we could no longer go to the market, we heard here and there that there was gunfire here and there, but when these institutions arrived, we found peace again and we could go to our markets again” (female MPP member in Loubila, focus group 24 February 2021, authors’ translation).

This positive perception was also reflected in an expression used especially in focus groups held in Mooré. When talking about interventions, respondents often referred to African regional organisations as *Sougkoata*: mediators being “peacemakers”.<sup>14</sup> The positive assessment reflected in this phrase is a far cry from the popular image of “clubs of heads of state” often used among political elites and civil society leaders to criticise African regional organisations and their interventions.

Despite this appreciation of the two regional organisations as having helped the country return to “calm” and stability, this peace was not enough to solve the problems of everyday life. For example, for women selling at local markets, the peace that has come out of the situation “[...] is peace at the level of the leaders, there are no worries among them. Things are going well. But at the level of the population, this is not the case, even when you go home, you are not at peace” (market woman at Zogona market, focus group 11 March 2021). This is the peace of those “above”, but at the level of the population, there is still a sense of insecurity, as well as lack of social cohesion, while the political tensions felt among the leaders in the capital do not affect the population as such:

“Well, the results, we have relative peace, if I say, and I repeat, politically it’s going well, but here we are, there is a social crisis, we need to reconcile the population while socially it’s not going well, but if we said politically, it’s the politicians ... He and I ... He’s my little brother, he’s a CDP, I’m an MPP, we eat together – is there a crisis? No, there is no crisis” (participant in Yako, focus group 4 March 2021, authors’ translation).

Linked to this perspective of a “relative” peace during the “social crisis” is the perspective of the victims. While feelings of winners and losers are expressed in public and politicised debates, the perspective of the excluded recalls the civilian victims of the insurgency and refers to the “collateral damage” in wars: the loss of human life and the suffering of families, the wounded, and among the latter, those who are left with physical handicaps:

“As far as I am concerned, they [the regional organisations] brought peace, but there was damage, if you have a relative among the wounded or the dead. Peace had certainly returned, but we were no longer happy because of the loss of human life. People who have lost loved ones are not happy and are suffering. At the moment, we can’t say we fully appreciate it. If it had been otherwise, one could say that they have done an excellent job. But it

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14 This word in the Mooré language literally means “forgiveness seekers”. “Sougri” means “forgiveness” and “koata” means “seeker”.

should be noted that in the resolution of a dispute, not everyone can come out happy” (MPP woman in Loumbila, focus group 24 February 2021, authors’ translation).

According to their perspective, the victims and those who suffered human and material losses were forgotten in the efforts to resolve the political crisis, and it is criticised that the families of the victims did not receive reparations. This perception was strongly shared among movements and organisations close to trade unions (trade union leader in Ouagadougou, interview 30 January 2021; civil society representative in Ouagadougou, interview 27 January 2021). The latter helped to give a “voice to the voiceless” who are dead today, a perspective much less considered in the other two narratives.

### **A beneficial but distant mediation**

Although in the major cities, especially Bobo-Dioulasso and Koudougou, ECOWAS was accused of not playing “fair” and of taking sides in the mediation in 2015, criticism of the 2015 intervention was less politicised and less personalised beyond these localities.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the above discussed pragmatic appreciation of the two organisations, there was also much less debate about their mediation. Most considered the mediators to be competent because they were chosen and sent by their organisations. Thus, the inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods and rural municipalities do not share the perception of mediators and organisations as supporters of the old power (narrative 1), but see regional organisations and their representatives as distant, even when the latter are in the country:

“I think that if it’s in a small circle like that, the message doesn’t get through, which is why we don’t feel affected” (woman from an association in Yako, focus group 4 March 2021, authors’ translation).

For them, these are small circles that mediators talk to, and this is quite normal for those who have no access to power. No one in this group was involved in the consultations with regional organisations and no one knew anyone who was. Nevertheless, their exclusion or possible lack of representation in the consultations was not discussed. The fact that regional mediators consulted traditional and/or religious authorities, such as the Bishop of Bobo-Dioulasso and the Moogho Naaba, was seen positively; for some, it even ensured the inclusion of “the population” in the process. Thus, contrary to the criticism of these “people’s” authorities by the protagonists of the insurgency (narrative 1), ECOWAS’s approach of meeting with representatives outside the political system was honoured among those without a voice in the public debate, as one resident of Yako recounts:

“[...] they all fought, yes, until they went to the Moogho Naaba to negotiate with the Burkina community so that peace could return to Burkina Faso, so that the crisis could be resolved

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15 In Yako, some of the participants, independent of their political or social affiliations, even appreciated the “pragmatic” intervention of ECOWAS, which sent a mission to negotiate – unlike the AU, which merely sanctioned the country without taking concrete action.

amicably. And fortunately, it was successful, we thank God! We can't say that they don't work" (participant in Yako, focus group 4 March 2021, authors' translation).

As a group largely excluded from the organs of the transition, as well as from politics more generally, they are also outside the politicised debates around the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion during the transition. As one participant explained, "in his time, everyone was from the CDP. Among those who were chosen to lead the transition, there were people from the CDP" (counsellor in Loumbila, focus group 24 March 2021), to demonstrate that all belong to the same system of political elites. No matter whether it was before, during or after the fall of Blaise Compaoré, these are the people who did not have access to power, so they remain outside the game of winners/losers of the crisis and its resolution. For them, the fall of Blaise Compaoré did not give rise to any great individual political aspirations. But his resignation and the events of 2014 meant a break in their daily lives, hardly affected by the politics of those "above".

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Despite the growing imprint of African regional interventions on politics and order in African states, the existing academic literature has largely adopted a top-down, external perspective on these efforts. As a result, we know very little about how people in countries affected by regional interventions experience and evaluate these interventions. This study has for the first time, in a comprehensive and methodologically sound manner, delved into local perceptions of an African regional intervention – the one in Burkina Faso in 2014/15. In sum, our study shows the complex nature of local perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS intervention in Burkina Faso, which is both more contested and more locally accepted than is commonly assumed. Based on this case study, our research reveals several conclusions and avenues for future research on African regional organisations and their interventions beyond the context of Burkina Faso.

On the one hand, the analysis shows that the popular imaginary in the region – the African Union and ECOWAS as "clubs of heads of state" at a far remove from the people and oriented towards the interests of their leaders – is also vividly reflected in the accounts of our interviewees. This imaginary is fed by a lack of knowledge of these organisations, their policies, and their functioning, as well as a lack of visibility in the everyday lives of African citizens – outside of political crises. They are organisations that are "not seen" or "heard of" without knowing their mandate or policies, except for the free movement of persons and goods. Nevertheless, perceptions of the two organisations and their actions on the ground in Burkina Faso clearly go beyond this simple imaginary. However, neither do our results confirm the assumption found in the academic literature that attributes to regional organisations a kind of per se legitimacy due to their African identity (Duursma 2020).

Indeed, the study's findings call into question the ideational legitimacy attributed to African actors in the literature, mainly by virtue of their cultural and geographical proximity (Tavares 2010; Sabrow 2017; Duursma 2020). The arguments of early activists, notably that ECOWAS "didn't get it", and the

preference for the AU as a continental body, contradict this assumption. The first account, in particular, shows that proximity to ECOWAS does not automatically translate into a perception of greater knowledge of the country and its context, but adds to its contestation. On the other hand, most of the interviewed members of traditional civil society largely appreciated the constant support of both organisations, especially ECOWAS. This appreciation is limited to actors with a broader knowledge of regional norms and policies, or even direct cooperation experiences. Thus, the argument of legitimacy deriving from the proximity of the organisations to local contexts was found to be shared by only some of the actors. Moreover, regional intervention was also appreciated by actors otherwise excluded from political circles and official debates. For them, it was valuable because it contributed to the restoration of “normal life”, even if it did not lead to social peace. In addition to highlighting the broad spectrum of local perceptions between contestation and appreciation, our study also reveals that interventions by African regional organisations are judged primarily by the concrete practices and actions of implementation and the results they are able to deliver – and much less by cultural or ideational factors. The fact that there is a strong demand for more involvement and visibility of these actors, especially ECOWAS, shared by all, especially those outside the political discourse, also goes in this direction. Most of the participants in our research claimed that ECOWAS was more active in the implementation of infrastructure development programmes, in food security, in the fight against terrorism, as well as in the resolution of crises from the outset, to mention a few examples.

Our study also demonstrates the relevance of a non-elitist perspective on regional interventions, which has so far been neglected in the literature on the African peace and security architecture (Witt 2018). Beyond the virulent criticism expressed in the media as well as among political leaders, the two organisations remain distant for the majority of the population. Although they have contributed to the return of peace, it is the peace of those “at the top”, which includes the mediators and all those involved in the mediation. For most Burkinabè, even those living in the capital, the interventions and their representatives were more remote, and therefore less contested; as a consequence, their actions are evaluated rather positively. This is reflected in similar perceptions among, for example, the inhabitants of a marginalised neighbourhood or the market women in a local market in Ouagadougou, as well as among the inhabitants of rural or urban municipalities far from the main scenes of Burkinabè politics. It is this perspective of “ordinary” people that shows the exclusionary way in which African regional interventions are both conducted and studied, leaving a large part of the affected societies detached and unheard.

This neglect of non-elite perspectives in the academic and other understandings of regional interventions is also a consequence of research practices and methods. In the case of Burkina Faso, most studies on the 2014/15 period are based on interviews with well-known key activists in the transition (Saidou 2018; Bertrand 2021; Brett 2021), and limited to those with relatively dominant voices due to their links to power and access to the media. The aim of this study was to go beyond these voices. The focus group method used for this study allowed us to access and listen to those people whose opinions are not considered in the politicised discourses of the capital. At the same time, the analysis shows that, although these organisations are far removed from their everyday lives, citizens share concrete experiences of regional intervention in Burkina Faso and arrive at their own evaluations. Too often, the academic and political relevance of this non-elite reality is questioned. Recognising this



fact reveals how our kind of academic research remains shaped by power structures and how we need to decolonise our own thinking and approaches (Smith 2012).

What then explains the wide variance in local perceptions of regional intervention in Burkina Faso? First, the findings show how experiences of intervention are shaped by everyday social logics and by actors' social relations and their positioning with regard to the political scene and power. The perceptions of most parliamentarians and civil society actors, especially in traditional civil society and newly created movements in the capital, are linked to their concrete experiences with regional actors, either during the interventions or even before, as the first two narratives presented show. The results also highlight a spatial dimension of perceptions, revealing in particular how (lack of) access to the "sites" of interventions shapes the geography of perceptions.

Second, the different expectations of the transition, linked to access to power, at the same time influence expectations on the role of regional organisations. While traditional civil society was guided by regional policies and norms, such as the rejection of military interference in politics, social movement activists did not see a role for external actors, as this was "their" insurgency and their aspirations to end the Blaise Compaoré system went beyond the organisation of elections. The inhabitants of the municipalities and peripheral neighbourhoods, on the other hand, did not share these political aspirations. For them, the evaluation horizon of the interventions was their everyday life and immediate needs, such as access to markets and opportunities to meet in the village for discussions. This is in line with ethnographic studies on conflict transformation and the importance of locally derived evaluation frames, which includes not only the security and development situation, but also indicators of peace deriving from daily routines (Firchow 2018).

Third, another influential factor is the direct knowledge and contacts of local actors to the AU and ECOWAS administrations. Just as direct contact at the level of the AU Commission among social movement activists contributed to a better assessment of the organisation, the same can be said for traditional civil society actors and some members of parliament. The latter, in most cases, had direct experiences of working with ECOWAS and were familiar with key AU and ECOWAS intervention policies and tools, including the African Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance (AU 2007) and the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (ECOWAS 2001).

Finally, two other factors that quantitative surveys have shown to influence perceptions of regional organisations (Schlipphak 2015) – age and gender – had no clear effect on our data, even though the popular uprising in Burkina and the subsequent transition clearly had a gendered dimension and were both strongly influenced by the younger generation (Hagberg 2015; Banégas 2015).

In summary, the results of our study offer some avenues for future research on African regional interventions and their implementation. Above all, they demonstrate that more effort is needed to understand and shape local perceptions of African regional interventions. A better understanding of local perceptions depends, first, on appreciation of and methodologies that are able to collect non-elitist voices, to go beyond those who shout the loudest. Second, to shape local perceptions in a positive direction, abstract ideas as propagated by the organisations themselves, such as an "ECOW-

AS of the people” (ECOWAS 2010) and an AU “led by its own citizens” (AU 2015: 1), will not suffice. Our results show that what shapes local perceptions are lived experiences and expectations of a particular political situation. Based on our results, such an effort should go beyond information campaigns and include deeper learning in several instances of the school system, a greater presence of both organisations through the implementation of development programmes, and, most importantly, more involvement in the prevention of political crises.

As we finalise this report, the ongoing interventions by the AU and ECOWAS to restore constitutional order in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, as well as the resistance these efforts are encountering at the local level, show the need for both organisations to listen to the complex societal discourses on experiences with and expectations of regional involvement in such situations. This report offers some ideas on how to do this.

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SIMONE SCHNABEL // ANTONIA WITT //  
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**THE “CLUBS OF HEADS OF STATE” FROM  
BELOW:  
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE AFRICAN  
UNION, ECOWAS AND THEIR 2014/15  
INTERVENTIONS IN BURKINA FASO**

This study examines local perceptions of an African regional intervention – by the African Union and ECOWAS in Burkina Faso in 2014/15 – as well as the knowledge about these organisations held by different local actors from various social strata. The study is the result of collaborative and empirically comprehensive research carried out in the capital and several localities in the country. We show that the two African regional organisations are more locally contested than is depicted in the academic literature and, at the same time, perceived more positively than suggested by the dominant social imaginary of these organisations as “clubs of heads of state”.

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