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# **ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series**

*Critical Infrastructure Development in West Africa: A Strategic Imperative for Regional Integration and Economic Growth*

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**This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).**

## INTRODUCTION

ECOWAS has identified infrastructure development as one of the major catalysts for regional integration in West Africa. In this context, infrastructure refers to the physical and organisational structures needed to create a functional economy. It can be broken down into different categories like transport i.e. roads, railways and ports; energy i.e. electricity grids and pipelines; digital i.e. telecommunications and broadband; and social infrastructure like healthcare and education.

ECOWAS' Vision 2050 document describes infrastructure as vital for “production and to facilitate the free movement of people and goods.” Similarly, the ECOWAS Master Plan for Regional Integration identified infrastructure as a foundational pillar of regional integration, alongside trade liberalisation and economic cooperation (ECOWAS, 2018). But despite the ambitious objective of boosting connectivity in West Africa, the region faces significant infrastructure deficits that currently hinder its economic growth and integration.

For instance, the maritime industry is the backbone of global commerce, as ports and shipping logistics play a vital role in facilitating trade, industrialisation and economic growth. However, West Africa's ports and transport networks are gripped by inefficiencies like dilapidated infrastructure, slow cargo clearance processes, congestion in terminals and access routes, and poor connectivity to inland areas, all of which hinder trade competitiveness by raising transport and commercial costs. Given that West African economies depend on maritime transport for 90 percent of their foreign trade, the poor maritime network in the region has major implications for economic productivity and growth.

West Africa's infrastructure inefficiencies extend beyond transportation and into the region's energy industry. According to the World Bank, only 42 percent of West Africa's population has access to electricity, a paltry figure that underscores the constraints to industrialisation and improved outcomes in education and health.

Since the 2010s, the ECOWAS Commission has taken considerable steps towards

accelerating infrastructure development in the region. It has begun the construction of the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway, a 1,028-kilometer road that will connect Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. In 2010, ECOWAS launched

**“West Africa’s infrastructure inefficiencies extend beyond transportation and into the region’s energy industry.”**

the West African Power Pool, a specialised agency which aims to create a common market for electricity in West Africa and improve cross-border transmission lines in the region. To accelerate progress on the two initiatives, ECOWAS has developed legal frameworks to harmonise them among the bloc’s Member States. The Commission has also raised money from partner organisations like the African Development Bank and the European Union to fund their completion. The African Development Bank (AfDB) has committed over \$122.49 million to the West African Power Pool (WAPP) under ECOWAS. Some selected funding include \$1.99 million for the Nigeria-Benin Interconnector Reinforcement Project (2016), \$6 million for the Desert to Power West Africa Regional Energy Program (2021), \$2 million for ECOWAS Electricity Regulatory Reforms (2024), and \$112.5 million for the Nigeria-Niger-Benin-Burkina Faso Power Interconnection Project (2019).

The European Union (EU) contributed \$10.38 million as a grant for the preparatory phase of the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway, specifically covering nearly 45% of the \$22.7 million total budget for socio-economic, environmental, and engineering studies. This funding was committed in 2019, co-financed with the African Development Bank (AfDB), which provided \$12.6 million for the same phase.

## **CHALLENGES OF INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT IN WEST AFRICA**

Poor transport connectivity constrains regional trade by raising the cost of transporting goods and services. The Lagos-Abidjan Corridor, which is intended to minimise many of the region’s infrastructure deficiencies, entails the development of a toll-free, six-lane dual carriageway highway that links Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou and Lagos, all of which are regional economic hubs.



**Figure 1:** An image showing the Lagos-Abidjan corridor in West Africa ([Source](#))

The implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in West Africa has been hampered by the region's inadequate digital infrastructure. According to the AfDB, West Africa has a broadband penetration rate of only 25 percent . ECOWAS's West Africa Regional Communications Infrastructure Program (WARCIP) has established fiber-optic networks in countries like Sierra Leone and The Gambia but due to differences in their regulatory regimes and comparatively high prices many citizens are out of broadband services, resulting in low internet penetration rates. This highlights the need for a harmonised set of regulations and more investment from the private sector.

Inadequate water infrastructure and the poor management of waterways like the River Niger exacerbate water scarcity and contribute to health crises in the region as industrial waste, sewage and agricultural runoff contaminate water sources. This degrades the quality of water, makes it unsafe for drinking and increases the likelihood of spreading waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid. The 2010 West African [Ebola outbreak](#) exposed the perils of weak water and sanitation systems, underscoring the need for cross-border cooperation to resolve those challenges.

West Africa's infrastructure development goals have also come under significant pressure from geopolitical shifts, economic contraction and security challenges. The withdrawal from ECOWAS by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger could put a dent in already-challenged contributions towards the ECOWAS Community Levy and cross-border infrastructure such as rails and roads. In addition, the region's security challenges like jihadist insurgencies, farmer-herder clashes and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea could threaten the viability of connectivity projects like the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor.

## **POLICY BARRIERS TO INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

The lack of a cohesive regulatory framework for infrastructure development in the ECOWAS zone is a major obstacle that policymakers must overcome. The lack of harmonisation among the bloc's Member States leads to siloing which occasionally leads to national policies that contravene regional protocols. It also makes it difficult to implement large international projects that are vital for productivity and growth in the region. Inconsistencies in tariff rates, import duties and other taxes often cause delays to the approval of large-scale projects and affect construction standards, environmental impacts and procurement policies. (Buzingo, 2021; Charly Gatete et al., 2024).

Corruption and bureaucratic bottlenecks like lengthy approval processes and poor inter-agency collaboration often cause delays in project execution, cost overruns and resource misallocation. In Nigeria, the completion of the Lagos-Ibadan Railway in 2021 was delayed several times due to difficulties in getting approval from the relevant government agencies, resulting in a 20 percent increase in the price of project materials. The inchoate policy environment in West Africa hinders private-sector investment from domestic and international partners that could have a transformative effect on infrastructure development in West Africa.

## **FINANCING INFRASTRUCTURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

In 2022, ECOWAS was said to have a regional infrastructure gap estimated to be between \$20 billion to \$36 billion per year. Modest government coffers, competing budget allocations and other fiscal constraints are all factors that contribute to this gap. As a result of limited domestic finances, West African governments depend on financing from international development partners to fund infrastructure projects.

Several countries in the ECOWAS zone, including the bloc's more prosperous Member States like Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal, regularly allocate large proportions of their annual budgets to recurrent expenditures like salaries, pensions and spending on health care and education, leaving little room to invest in capital expenditures like road, maritime and electricity infrastructure.

For example, Nigeria's 2023 budget allocated about 20 percent of its funds to capital expenditures like the repair and construction of airports and major highways compared to recurrent items like social services, on which more than 50 percent of the 2023 budget was spent. Similarly, Ghana's 2022 budget apportioned 15 percent of its funds to spending on education and health, while a considerable share of the funding for infrastructure spending came from funds borrowed externally and public-private partnerships.

## **ROLE OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS (PPPs)**

ECOWAS has identified Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as a means of closing the infrastructure gap in West Africa. In partnership with the World Bank, the regional bloc has established a regional framework for PPPs aimed at mobilising private-sector investment and harmonising national-level policies into a unified framework. A prominent example of an infrastructure-oriented PPP is the Dakar-Diamniadio Toll Highway in Senegal, which has enhanced physical connectivity, reduced travel time and boosted economic activity in the Dakar Region. In Burkina Faso, the FasoBiogaz project, which involved several entities including FasoBiogaz SARL, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency and the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE), used a PPP model to deliver renewable energy in rural areas across the country.

However, a lack of support from political institutions, vague regulations and a weak regime for enforcing contracts are some of the factors that discourage private investment and affect the viability of PPPs. In addition, poorly designed PPPs can create problems of financial sustainability and risk worsening public debt profiles over time. For PPPs to be an effective means of financing infrastructure in the ECOWAS region, the contracts that underpin them must be well-structured, transparent and backed by strong regulatory frameworks.

With more than 60% of the population under 25, West Africa offers a vibrant opportunity to spur entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and innovation in infrastructure development. Young people's new perspectives and tech-savvy abilities can be used to tackle issues like smart transport systems and sustainable energy solutions by involving them in initiatives like the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway and the West African Power Pool (WAPP). The region can uncover creative solutions to infrastructural concerns by supporting youth-driven projects like hackathons, startup incubators, and digital platforms for SMEs, as well as by including young voices in ECOWAS policy forums. This kind of involvement also guarantees that initiatives meet the demands of future generations, fostering long-term regional integration and economic expansion.

## **FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI) AND MULTILATERAL FUNDING**

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and multilateral organisations play an important role in financing infrastructure projects in the ECOWAS zone. For many years, organisations such as the AfDB and the World Bank have provided billions of dollars in concessional loans and grants to support infrastructure development in West Africa.

While external financing from multilateral institutions can help to close financing gaps, it is not without its risks. The loans taken by West African governments generally have high interest rates and opaque terms, exacerbating concerns about debt sustainability and macroeconomic instability in the long run. Governments must carefully assess the



condition of loans they take and prioritise financing options that align with their fiscal capacity and development goals.

## OTHER INNOVATIVE FINANCING MECHANISMS

ECOWAS and its Member States must explore innovative financing solutions needed to close the region's infrastructure gap. Green bonds and climate financing options like green bonds have gained traction as effective ways to fund environmentally sustainable projects, including renewable energy and climate-resilient infrastructure. These initiatives tend to attract investors interested in financial returns. In addition, infrastructure funds and Sovereign Wealth Funds are viable sources of financing for climate-resilient infrastructure. Infrastructure Corporation (InfraCorp), an investment vehicle co-owned by the Central Bank of Nigeria, Africa Finance Corporation and the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority, is a tangible example of an entity that was established to mobilise long-term capital for critical infrastructure projects. By pooling resources from public and private sectors, West African governments can reduce their reliance on external borrowing and create a more stable investment environment in the region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Through interconnecting grids, WAPP can deliver a regional electricity market that engenders collaborative infrastructure development.** This type of inter-connecting grid network allows electricity to flow across borders, thereby creating a collaborative effort among different governments in the ECOWAS zone. This initiative would incentivise electricity trade in West Africa, boost its supply and lower its production costs. It would also encourage joint infrastructure investment and regional planning. However, there are risks including political misalignment, grid instability, and unequal benefits. Strong governance, harmonised regulations, and technical cooperation are key to realising a stable regional market.
- **The ECOWAS Commission should establish a Regional Infrastructure Policy Forum to coordinate harmonised standards for taxation, customs and energy prices.** This forum would include civil society groups, private sector organisations and local community leaders. In addition to the forum, WAPP can also collaborate with CSOs and private enterprises to pilot standardised price models.
- **Policymakers should prioritise infrastructure investments tailored to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the informal sector,** which account for 50–60% of the region's GDP and employ 70–90% of the non-agricultural workforce. These critical economic drivers face significant challenges, including unreliable power supplies, costly transportation, and limited digital con-



nectivity, which undermine their productivity and competitiveness. To address these barriers, targeted interventions, such as developing reliable electricity grids, affordable transport networks, and expanded broadband access, should be implemented to promote formalisation, enhance market access, and strengthen economic resilience. Collaborating with local business associations to pilot infrastructure projects and streamlining regulatory processes will further ensure that initiatives like the West African Power Pool (WAPP) and the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway deliver equitable benefits to SMEs and the informal sector

- **The ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development should create an Infrastructure Investment Fund with private sector organisations, multilateral development banks, sovereign wealth funds, export credit agencies and development finance institutions, among others.** Community groups would be empowered to have oversight over all agreements, while a Regional Infrastructure Academy and energy market participation workshops could be designed for capacity-building exercises.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ayodeji Stephen Adekanbi** is a PhD researcher at Dublin City University and the founder of two innovative companies, Sledge Infrastructure and HydroGEM.

At Sledge Infrastructure, Ayodeji leads the company's strategic direction, ensuring alignment with its mission to deliver excellence in construction, infrastructure, real estate, and energy projects while adopting sustainable practices. He oversees project planning and execution, ensuring quality, timeliness, and budget goals, while building strategic partnerships and driving business growth. Ayodeji also excels in team building and operational management, ensuring compliance and efficiency across the organisation.

At HydroGEM, Ayodeji serves as the founder and team lead, driving innovation and advancing the organisation's vision in energy, infrastructure, and sustainability. He builds high-performing teams, fosters stakeholder partnerships, and represents the organisation on global platforms. He also secures funding, manages operations, and champions systemic change through impactful policy advocacy and community initiatives.

He is also a PhD Candidate in Sustainable Hydrogen and Transport Decarbonisation at Dublin City University, Ireland. Ayodeji brings deep expertise in clean energy solutions and sustainable mobility, aligning infrastructure development with global climate goals. He also drives business growth and stakeholder engagement, forging strategic partnerships that enhance the company's market position.

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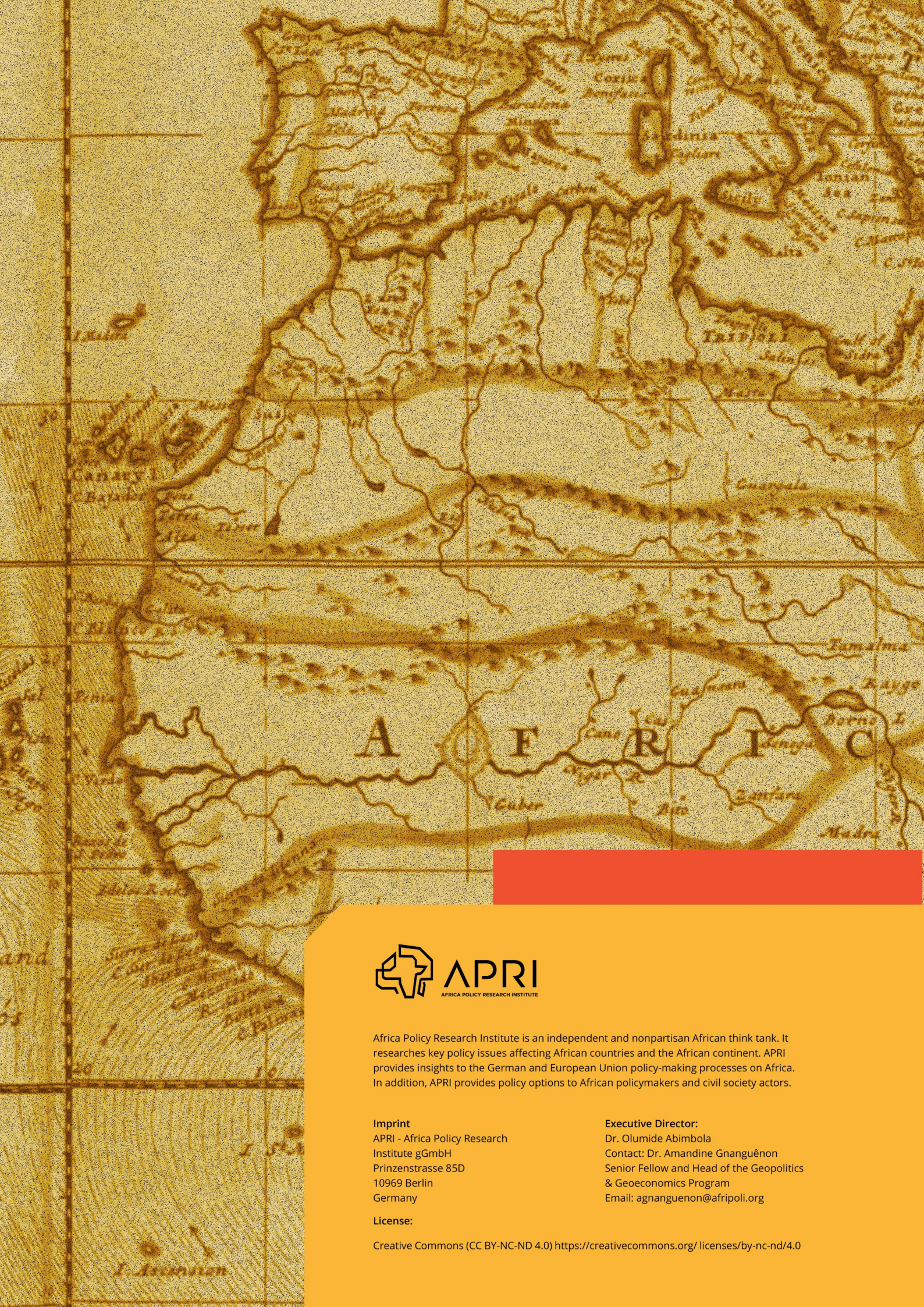
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