



# African Agency in International Politics: Key insights and recommendations



Recent years have seen a resurgence of African participation and influence in international political arenas. African Agency in International Politics was a series of five ESRC research seminars looking at the role of African political agency across a variety of issue areas, geographical spaces, and global interactions.

## About BISA Africa

The Africa and International Studies Working Group was formally established in summer 2007. The Group aims to provide a forum in which to bring together a diverse range of scholars to discuss and debate the research

## About the research

The seminars addressed the following range of topics at five different venues in South Africa and the UK:

1. Emerging agents of change? Chatham House, 2nd February 2011
2. Peace, Conflict and Intervention University of Birmingham, 7th April 2011
3. Transnational Security University of Kent, 16th June 2011
4. African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory, City University London, 14th September 2011
5. Agency and Southern Africa University of Stellenbosch, 2nd November 2011.



## Funding

The series was made possible by a grant from the ESRC Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and financial support from the host institutions. The Africa Programme at Chatham House hosted the first seminar, had a presence at each of the seminars, and was one of the main collaborators on the project.



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## Key insights

### The multilateral arena: Africa has the ability to frustrate progress

Across a range of international negotiations including the WTO Doha Round and the UN Climate Change negotiations, lack of engagement with African interests will delay progress.

African states can use their numerical advantage in international arenas to increase their influence, the numbers game works. But exerting greater influence requires common negotiating positions that are based on real areas of common interest and this will vary from issue to issue.

### China and Africa: influence need not be a one-way street

Africa has the resource capabilities, global voting power and relations with western states to drive harder bargains with China in the fields of aid, investment and international alliance building. There is growing awareness of this in both China and Africa.

There is a critical opportunity for African states to exert greater agency in negotiations with China. Leverage can be found through placing conditions on Chinese contractors, invoking international norms (such as the Paris Declaration) and playing China off against western powers.

### Regional organisations: 'African solutions to African problems' has a growing track record

In areas such as conflict intervention African solutions should not be seen as last-chance option. Limits on capacity and political constraints remain large, however.

The principle of sovereignty provides the basis for African states to exert greater influence externally. Emerging regional norms around the rights and duties of states gives potential for a greater focus on African solutions to African problems. However, it requires African states to close the gap between grand declarations of principle and political realities.

### States and Leaders: key states and key leaders are central to the future of African influence

Personalised politics is an important characteristic of African agency, a key determinant of regional or sub-regional interventions, however this can dominate and mutate agency in the interests of key states and key individuals.

There is an opportunity to develop greater effectiveness in regional interventions (such as in peace prevention) by exploring untapped political agency beyond the realm of 'big man' politics, especially through civil society, women and youth groups.

### Security: making issues 'security' priorities may bring development aid and concessions to Africa but there are costs

Securitising issues such as HIV/AIDS and the environment has given Africa a voice at the top table but it also makes Africa subordinate to policy agendas from outside.

African states should treat with caution attempts to securitise Africa within international policy areas such as health, migration and climate change.