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Workshop No. 3

GCC-Sub-Saharan Africa Economic Relations: Energy, Mining, Infrastructure, and Food Security

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2. Abstract

This workshop examines the multidimensional relations between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Sub-Saharan African states with a focus on key sectors such as energy, mining, infrastructure, and food security. By analyzing various concepts and strategies underpinning Gulf engagement in Africa, the workshop seeks to unpack the multiple dimensions of energy diversification, infrastructure development including ports, railways, and aviation, agricultural initiatives, and mining activities. It argues that these engagements are driven by both geoeconomic and geopolitical imperatives.

Furthermore, the workshop contributes to academic and policy-oriented debates on agency in Gulf-African relations by offering deeper insights into concrete partnership models, asymmetric power dynamics, instruments of power projection, and mechanisms of mutual leverage. Central to this inquiry is the notion of dual agency defined as the

projection of influence by Gulf actors, alongside the strategic recalibration of external partnerships by African states in pursuit of sovereignty and enhanced economic opportunity.

Bringing together early-career and senior researchers from the Gulf region, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the international scholarly community, this workshop aims to provide a nuanced and differentiated perspective on this complex and contested topic. Through the presentation of concrete case studies at bilateral, minilateral, multilateral, and non-state levels it seeks to critically engage with the concept of geoeconomic statecraft, or economic diplomacy. In doing so, it draws upon new qualitative and quantitative data concerning investments, development projects, key actors and networks, as well as local perceptions and assessments of these engagements.

3. Context

In the context of an increasingly multipolar and fragmented international order, the relationship between the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, and Sub-Saharan Africa has developed into a dynamic, complex, and multidimensional partnership. These evolving ties are shaped not only by the proactive strategies of the Gulf states but also by the growing, deliberate, and coordinated agency of African actors, who seek to balance competing interests, enhance strategic leverage, attract investment, and foster business development. As a result, the concept of agency has emerged as a central analytical lens in understanding Gulf-African relations, especially in the domains of energy, investment, minerals, and food security.

In the current landscape of intensifying global competition for markets, partnerships, and geopolitical influence, both Sub-Saharan African and Gulf countries are presented with distinct opportunities to assert greater agency and negotiate more favorable terms of engagement. Within this framework, economic diversification and geoeconomic statecraft constitute the core of the Gulf's strategic outreach to Sub-Saharan Africa.

The UAE is the most economically embedded Gulf actor in Africa. Between 2019 and 2023, it invested over USD 110 billion, primarily in ports, agriculture, mining, energy, and ICT infrastructure. This accounts for approximately 60% of all Gulf capital inflows into East Africa and positions the UAE as the fourth largest source of foreign investment in Africa overall, trailing only the European Union, China, and the United States. Through firms like DP World, Masdar, and AMEA Power, the UAE leads in renewables, data infrastructure, and port operations, particularly in Kenya, Ethiopia, Angola, and Senegal. In total, DP World and the Abu Dhabi Ports Group have been involved in operating over 30 port infrastructures across the continent since 2006 and have signed agreements with other port companies such as the UK-based CDC Group or the Indian Adani Ports. In the energy sector, companies such as Dubai-based AMEA Power, Abu

Dhabi-based Masdar, and the Egyptian-Emirati joint venture Infinity Power have been key drivers of renewable energy expansion in Africa. In the minerals sector, Emirati investments aim to extract resources for the development of an emerging AI industry. Saudi Arabia is a more recent entrant but is rapidly scaling up its geoeconomic engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast to the UAE, Saudi investments are more concentrated and transactional, with a primary focus on sectors like mining and agriculture which are essential for the kingdom's long-term economic transformation and food security. From 2004 to 2014, the Gulf countries invested over USD 30 billion in this sector, including Saudi Arabia's acquisition of more than 2 million hectares of farmland under the King Abdullah Initiative, with 124,000 hectares located in Ethiopia. Finally, Qatar's economic approach is targeted but cautious, emphasizing aviation, infrastructure, and finance. As one of the largest exporters of liquified natural gas (LNG), Qatar considers Africa an interesting market for LNG exports. Furthermore, Qatar is heavily invested in the African aviation sector as indicated in Rwanda.

Despite differing strategies, all Gulf states view Sub-Saharan African countries as economic partners and not merely as recipients of aid. Nevertheless, structural asymmetries remain. Gulf investments often prioritise extractive or logistics-based infrastructure, replicating patterns of resource movement that could be branded as "exploitative" in the future. African states must respond not with rhetorical demands, but with strategic conditionality – embedding investment within national industrial plans, mandating technology transfers, and insisting on labour protections.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

Referring to the concept of agency, this workshop seeks to analyze the evolving dynamics of Gulf-African relations in the context of shifting global power configurations. The central objective is to explore how both Gulf and Sub-Saharan African actors are actively shaping these relations through strategic engagement, negotiation, and mutual leverage. The discussions aim to address the following guiding questions:

- Who exerts agency?
- What are the desired outcomes of respective agency strategies?
- What are the broader implications of agency?

These questions serve to structure the workshop's conceptual framework, contributing to both theoretical discussions on agency and empirical explorations across specific sectors, actors, networks, and case studies within Gulf-African economic relations.

Against this backdrop, the workshop will examine the multidimensional and evolving economic ties between the Gulf states and Sub-Saharan Africa through five interrelated thematic lenses:

- **Challenges of Growing Economic Engagement:** Despite its growing importance, Gulf economic statecraft in Africa faces significant criticisms and structural challenges. Tensions exist between the pursuit of economic returns and the promotion of long-term development goals. Issues related to transparency, governance, and accountability continue to generate concern.

 - How can economic partnerships be designed to ensure sustainability, inclusiveness, and human development particularly in areas such as education, employment, and capacity-building?
 - In what ways can economic engagement contribute to regional integration, social cohesion, and conflict mitigation?
 - How might the negative consequences of “economic statecraft”, where external investments risk exacerbating systemic inequalities, be mitigated?
- **Multilateral and Minilateral Networking:** Gulf states have expanded their engagement with African multilateral organisations, such as the African Union, and have supported peacebuilding and development initiatives, particularly in regions like the Horn of Africa. Simultaneously, African states have become increasingly active in Middle Eastern multilateral institutions, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Platforms like BRICS further facilitate geoeconomic collaboration.

 - To what extent do multilateral frameworks support economic engagement and regional integration?
 - Do bilateral and minilateral agreements dominate in practice, potentially leading to intensified competition over market access, natural resources, trade routes, and supply chains?
- **Shifting Approaches to Development Assistance:** As the global development landscape becomes increasingly multipolar, the development-investment nexus has emerged as a pragmatic model for Gulf-African engagement. Aid is no longer viewed purely as a humanitarian instrument, but as a tool of economic diplomacy, infrastructure development, and political influence.

 - How has the Gulf’s approach to development assistance shifted from traditional aid models to a more integrated investment-driven strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa?
- **Growing Cooperation on Green Energy and Climate Action:** The strategic convergence between Gulf states and Sub-Saharan African countries on climate action and green development reflects a new phase of South-South cooperation which offers potential for mutual agency and leverage.

- In what ways is the growing emphasis on green energy investment and climate-related initiatives reshaping economic ties between the Gulf and Sub-Saharan Africa?

- **Strategic Communication and Networking:** Gulf-Sub-Saharan African relations have historically been shaped by flexible and adaptive modes of communication at both state and non-state levels, grounded in longstanding networks of trade, cultural exchange, religious affiliations, and business ties.
 - How do actors from the Gulf and Sub-Saharan Africa engage in strategic communication to achieve socio-economic objectives, promote investments in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and mining, and align geoeconomic interests with broader ambitions related to power projection and regional security?
 - What are the implications of this shift for recipient countries, particularly in sectors such as energy, mining, infrastructure, and food security?

5. Paper Focus/Topics

The submitted papers could provide either (1) theoretical contributions on the concept of geoeconomic agency; or (2) policy-oriented papers including empirical and/or quantitative data; or (3) case studies focusing on respective countries/companies/networks/sectors; or (4) explorations of multilateral and regional areas and fields of cooperation to address chances and challenges for regional integration and sustainable development.

The submitted papers should focus on the following topics:

- Investment projects in infrastructure (railroads, roads, ports, maritime)
- Investment in energy projects (oil and gas, renewable energy, hydrogen)
- Investment in food security
- Investment in mining projects
- Investments in aviation or other relevant sectors
- Networks of partnerships (G2G, B2B, bilateral, multilateral) and involved players (governmental, semi-governmental, private, developmental organisations, charities)
- Development-investment nexus and investments in sustainability
- Capacity development and regional educational exchange formats
- Specific case studies on investment projects
- Engagement in climate diplomacy and green developmentalism
- Levels of agency in partnership structures and challenges of asymmetric relations in terms of geoeconomic power projection
- Security-investment nexus

- Areas of future trilateral collaboration including European or other Asian players in energy, investment, mining, and food security
- Implications of global shift towards multipolarity and omnibalancing on investment strategies
- Multilateral platforms such as AU, GCC, BRICS as drivers or challenges for inclusivity and participatory investment

6. Publication Plans

The proceedings of the workshop will be transformed into two special issues of reputed scientific journals. One of the special issues will contain up to 5 papers and will be published by the Journal of Gulf Studies (Intellect Discover). The other special issue will contain up to 8 papers and will be published by the Journal of Arabian Studies (Taylor and Francis).

The articles selected for the journal special issues will undergo the journals' standard double-blind peer-review procedures.

The submission of the revised full drafts of the papers for the special issue is expected on 21 September 2026. The typescript is expected to be delivered to the publishers by 30 September 2026. Papers that may not be publishable in the special issues will still be reviewed by the directors and considered for individual publication. Directors will make reasonable efforts to ensure that all accepted papers are published in one of these forms.

7. References

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8. Workshop Directors

Dr. Damyana Bakardzhieva is the Senior Research Fellow leading the Economic Diplomacy programme at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (UAE). With a dual PhD in Economics from the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis (France) and Sofia University (Bulgaria), Dr Bakardzhieva has taught Economics and Sustainable Development in Bulgaria, France, Monaco, the United States, and Egypt. Prior to joining AGDA, she was Chief Sustainability Consultant for Global Economics and Finance Consulting (Monaco) and Associate Department Chair and Director of Graduate Programmes at the Department of Economics of the American University in Cairo. She is

Editor for the International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy, and was previously Senior Editor (Economics) for the International Journal of Emerging Markets. Her research focuses on international macroeconomics, economic diplomacy, comparative economic studies, and sustainability.

Sebastian Sons works as a senior researcher for the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO). Prior to that, he served as an advisor for the Regional Programme “Cooperation with Arab Donors” (CAD) of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. He holds a Ph.D. from the Humboldt University Berlin. His thesis deals with media discourses on labour migration from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. He studied Middle Eastern Studies, Contemporary History and Political Sciences in Berlin and Damascus. Prior to his studies, Sebastian was further trained as journalist in print, TV and radio media at the Berlin School for Journalists (Berliner Journalisten-Schule). He heads the CARPO research project “West Asian and Sub-Sahara African Partnerships in Flux” which explores the multi-dimensional and complex relations between selected Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran) and four Sub-Saharan countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia). Additionally, he engages in Track 2 dialogue projects and initiatives. His fields of interest include foreign assistance policy of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait, sport diplomacy and sports for development concepts, South Asian migration to the countries of the GCC, and political and economic engagement of the Gulf countries in Africa. He has written three books focusing on political, economic, social and cultural developments in the GCC countries.

Hubert Kinkoh is a Senior Researcher at CARPO. Over the last decade, he has developed expertise in the governance of peace, security, and development in Africa, researching, among others, how external influences impinge on African states and societies. Currently, he serves as a Senior Program Officer (Sudan) at Conflict Dynamics International, where he leads the design and implementation of research activities to inform the political dialogue process in Sudan. Hubert has held research positions with prestigious organizations such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), International Crisis Group (ICG), the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the African Leadership Centre (ALC). He has also consulted for various stakeholders, including the US Department of State, UNESCO-IICBA, the African Union, and the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy.

Hubert holds a double Master’s in Peace Studies and International Relations from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (2016). His contributions to policy-relevant knowledge on peace, security and development across Africa have earned him recognition as a non-Resident Fellow at the Gulf Research Center and as one of 50 Future Think Tank Leaders by ISPI and OECD. Hubert is highly sought after by government agencies, research institutions, and international journalists for his expertise on Africa’s

relations with the Gulf States, peace and security in Africa, and the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government. His recent publications include works on Gulf States' trade and investment relations with Sub-Saharan Africa, the First Saudi-Africa summit, and the resurgence of coups in Africa.