

AGENCY IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER:

African Priorities for the Transformation of
Global Governance

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
2-3 July 2026

OUTCOME REPORT

Convenors: African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS), University of the Witwatersrand; the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) associated with UNISA, and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR).

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Introduction

For at least two decades, global public opinion has focused on tectonic shifts in global governance marked by visible social, political, and economic fissures. More recently, sharp domestic and external changes by significant global powers have intensified debates, anxieties, and realignments. The world has been drawn into once-in-a-lifetime questions about the changing global order, thrusting the 'reform of global governance' firmly at the centre of the international agendas. Africa has not been untouched by the revolutionary upending of relations between nations and regions in which regional and global institutions are implicated. The resultant concern about Africa's place and role in the rapidly evolving global governance architecture spurred a group of intellectuals to convene a forum to brainstorm pathways for Africa's priorities. The motivation is that nearly all world regions and nations are strategizing self-interested approaches to survive in an uncertain global present and future.

The forum took the form of a roundtable discussion, convened on 2-3 July 2026, at the University of the Witwatersrand under the theme "African Agency in a Shifting Global Order: African Priorities on the Reform of the Multilateral System". The engagement was designed as a multistakeholder dialogue bringing together scholars, civil society actors, policy practitioners, diplomats, and other stakeholders to reflect on Africa and its place in a rapidly changing international order. The objective was to generate practical recommendations to strengthen African agency in the emerging contestations and possibilities. It also aimed to influence global debates and initiatives around multilateral reform from an African standpoint.

The discussion took place against a backdrop of deepening geopolitical contestation, institutional strain within the United Nations (UN), and an increasingly fragmented global governance architecture. Africa has too often been positioned as a rule-taker rather than a rule-shaper, even as the continent bears the consequences of global power rivalry, debt distress, climate vulnerability, technological disruption, and conflict. The roundtable therefore sought to identify pathways through which African states and institutions, working in partnership with academia and civil society, could exercise greater strategic agency in shaping the reform of the multilateral system, including the UN Security Council (UNSC), the global financial architecture, and African engagements with external powers. In particular, the roundtable discussed African agency as a strategic pathway towards mobilizing global support to invoke Article 109, as a means of convening a General Conference to Review the Charter of the United Nations. The goal is to contribute to a growing intellectual and crusading effort to catalyse the transformation of global governance in ways that centre long-neglected African priorities.

The roundtable objectives were to:

1. Convene relevant stakeholders to identify practical pathways for strengthening Africa and its coordination and influence in multilateral reform;

1. Analyse Africa and African interests in the United Nations in the context of the evolving global order;
2. Align Africa's positioning as a champion of global governance through a reformed multilateral system; and
3. Produce pragmatic recommendations for governments, international organizations, civil society, and think tanks.

These objectives shaped both the broad analytical discussions informing deliberations on the first day and the more action-focused and solution-oriented recommendations of the second day.

Framing the dialogue

The first day set the context for the discussions by establishing the analytical and political foundations for the deliberations. Participants interrogated the structural conditions of the shifting global order, the crisis of legitimacy facing the post-1945 multilateral architecture, and the longstanding marginalisation of African voices in agenda-setting and norm-shaping processes.

At the inception of the United Nations in San Francisco, USA, in 1945, only four African countries, Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and apartheid South Africa, were present. A key point of convergence was that Africa's exclusion from the original UN formation and related governance arrangements continues to shape the continent's limited influence. This problem is particularly acute on peace and security issues today. This is despite Africa's demographic weight, strategic resources, and growing geopolitical significance.

Participants also agreed that African agency must be understood in substantive, not rhetorical terms. Discussions reiterated the need to move beyond symbolic commitments to unity toward more concrete forms of coordination, institutional preparedness, and implementation capacity. The meaning of "African Unity" and "Pan-Africanism" was put under the spotlight with participants warning against artificial uniformity. It was argued that a model of coordinated diversity should align national, regional, and continental interests where possible, without erasing legitimate differences among states.

The discussions stressed the point that the crisis of "African Agency" is not only external but internal. A recurring concern was the widening gap between elite diplomatic and political discourse and citizens' lived experiences. Several interventions argued that continental legitimacy cannot rest on formal representation alone. It must be grounded in accountable governance, citizen participation, youth inclusion, and institutions that translate multilateral positioning into tangible public benefit.

Discussions on the first day highlighted several cross-cutting constraints on African agency. These included:

1. Continued dependence of continental institutions on external financing,
2. Weak implementation of African Union (AU) norms and decisions,
3. Uneven governance and poor accountability across member states, and
4. Persistent disconnect between elite diplomatic discourse vis-à-vis the everyday priorities of African citizens.

Participants also emphasized the view that security should no longer be treated narrowly as a matter of military conflict. Instead, it should be understood through a broader lens that includes debt, development, public health, inequality, climate vulnerability, technological change, and social justice. This is best encapsulated by the concept of 'human security'.

Sessions on the first day regarding the UN Security Council, the global financial architecture, and the African Union generated critical reflections that informed the more practical orientation of the second day.

The deliberations produced concerns about key issues and themes relating to the:

1. Ineffectiveness of the Ezulwini Consensus

Participants contended that, while the Ezulwini Consensus offers a principled continental stance on UNSC reform, its current implementation has become largely symbolic and procedurally ineffective. The stagnation of the intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) process, the absence of updated text-based proposals, and the lack of strategic coalition-building show that Africa's normative claims are not translating into concrete institutional change or bargaining leverage. African states have de-prioritized deep representational dilemmas. This not only stunts discussion-making but ultimately makes intra-African alignment more difficult.

Regarding the formulation of the Ezulwini Consensus, the question of which country would legitimately occupy the two proposed permanent seats on Africa's behalf remains unresolved. Likewise, pursuing non-veto-power Security Council permanent membership risks reproducing the same exclusionary architecture charted by the five permanent-seat members. This runs counter to the core objective the reform process was meant to address. Despite the structural constraints of the Ezulwini Consensus, participants reckoned that the challenge is not to abandon the common African position, but to refine it into a more operational and politically credible framework to address internal African divergences while preserving the principle of historical redress.

2. Inadequacy of Bretton Woods Institutions

The discussion emphasised that Bretton Woods Institutions were designed for post-World War Two reconstruction and economic stability based on a Western-centric context. Over the years, this has entrenched unequal voting power, conditional lending and austerity, thereby constraining African development trajectories. Participants argued that debt

distress, climate vulnerability and financing gaps reveal these institutions' limited responsiveness to African priorities, underscoring the need to review the UN Charter towards a more equitable, Africa-informed financial governance arrangement.

3. Underdevelopment of African Financial Institutions

Participants highlighted the underdevelopment and fragmentation of the African financial architecture, noting that institutions such as regional development banks, payment systems and rating agencies remain under-capitalised, weakly coordinated and insufficiently integrated into continental strategies. This limits Africa's ability to mobilise domestic resources, lower borrowing costs, support informal and cross-border trade, and provide credible alternatives to external financial dependence.

4. Implementation and Legitimacy Deficits of AU and RECs

The AU and RECs were described as strong norm producers but weak implementers. Ambitious frameworks such as Agenda 2063, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) have been undermined by inconsistent enforcement, inadequate financing and political interference by elite actors. Participants stressed that institutional autonomy of these and other entities has been eroded, citizen participation remains shallow, and external dependence persists, collectively weakening continental legitimacy and credibility in multilateral reform debates.

5. Relevance of Pan-Africanism

Participants argued that Pan-Africanism has often become rhetorical, disconnected from economic realities, youth experiences and contemporary governance challenges. They called for rearticulating Pan-Africanism as a people-driven, institutionally grounded project, with clear practical value and regional validity. For instance, it was suggested that customs unions should deepen trade facilitation measures such as reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, enhance the movement of people, goods and services across borders. This would strengthen the economic dimensions of Pan-Africanism. Embedding and institutionalising the spirit of Ubuntu into continental, regional and national development programmes would re-dress Pan-Africanism as more than a nostalgic liberation-era ideological inheritance.

6. African Agency vis-à-vis External Powers

Participants concurred that African agency in engagements with external actors (such as the US, Europe, Russia, China, Japan, BRICS Plus, Gulf states, East and South East Asian states, and others) must move beyond reactive alignment toward coordinated, interest-driven multilateral strategy. They warned that bilateral, "Africa-plus-one" deals and rival power agendas fragment continental bargaining. A case for the formation of collective positions, issue-specific coalitions and value-adding partnerships. Such approaches would tie external relationships to democratic UN reform, financial restructuring and the catalysing of Agenda 2063 ambitions.

Key Considerations for African Policymakers

While discussion on the first day clarified the conceptual and institutional terrain, the second day focused directly on outcomes, prioritisation, and the development of a practical action agenda. This was through an African strategy session, a recommendations session, and a plenary dedicated to implementation and advocacy planning. The overall tone on the second day was pragmatic. Participants sought to identify where Africa has leverage, how it can organise that leverage more effectively, and the concrete next steps that think tanks, civil society, and policy actors should take. Key discussions unfolded as captured below.

1. African Approaches to Global Powers

Discussions centred on African agency in external engagements as real but uneven. Agency is undermined by fragmentation, weak institutional capacity, and the dominance of short-term elite or regime interests over longer-term public and continental priorities. Participants stressed that external powers continue to benefit from weak collective bargaining due to the tendency of African countries to negotiate bilaterally on matters with broader regional and continental implications. The discussion therefore converged on the need for more disciplined and issue-specific collective engagement, particularly where questions of security, migration, climate, health, digital governance, and critical minerals require cross-border responses.

Participants argued for selective and strategic partnerships grounded in African priorities rather than prioritizing external partnerships with Europe, China, India, the Gulf states, Russia, Turkey, the United States, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asian countries, Canada, Australia, and others. This would call for assessing partners according to what they can contribute to value addition, industrial development, technological upgrading, infrastructure, regulatory capacity, and diplomatic coalition-building, rather than measuring relationships primarily based on aid or symbolic alignment. This orientation would mark an important shift away from reactive diplomacy toward a more calibrated form of African statecraft.

2. The Under-utilised Importance of the African Diaspora

The discussions identified the diaspora as an underutilised but potentially transformative dimension of African agency. Participants went beyond the familiar emphasis on remittances to highlight the diaspora's role in soft power, knowledge transfer, subnational influence, policy advocacy, and long-term capacity building. This was linked to a broader call to operationalise the AU's recognition of the diaspora as its "sixth region". The strategy would entail building practical channels through which diaspora expertise, institutional linkages, and political networks can support African bargaining strategies in key capitals and multilateral settings.

3. Critical Minerals and Global Value Chains

A particularly concrete area of agreement concerned critical minerals and global value chains. Participants argued that African countries continue to occupy the lowest-value positions in strategic supply chains. They export unprocessed raw materials while external actors capture the benefits of processing, manufacturing, pricing, and downstream innovation. The key discussion point was how this trend could be reversed. The discussion therefore framed critical minerals not only as a resource issue, but as a strategic test of African agency. The choice was whether or not the continent could use its mineral endowments to secure beneficiation, local processing, industrial upgrading, stronger investor-state protections, and more advantageous positions within global green-transition value chains. In this sense, mineral governance was understood as central to Africa's economic sovereignty, value-added production, industrialisation, bargaining power, and wider geopolitical agency and leverage.

Towards an Action Plan for Civil Society and Academia

The strongest substantive outcome on the second day emerged in the recommendations and action-planning session, which consolidated the discussions into a more explicit agenda for policy engagement and advocacy. The specific recommendations are captured below.

1. UN Reform

On UN reform, participants expressed frustration with the stagnation of the intergovernmental negotiations. They argued that exclusive reliance on the Ezulwini Consensus, without updated and operational text-based proposals, has limited Africa's ability to shape outcomes. A key recommendation was therefore to treat Article 109 of the UN Charter as an important strategic pathway for convening a general review conference of the UN Charter. This would be with the express agenda of instituting the desired reforms. This approach offers a more democratic route to wider Charter review than the more restrictive amendment process under Article 108, which is prone to veto action by the permanent members of the Security Council.

Participants proposed a set of practical steps to support this strategy, including:

1. Building a broad-based coalition of civil society actors, think tanks, legal experts, and communications specialists to lobby both African and non-African member states;
2. Undertaking detailed stakeholder and power mapping to identify likely allies and blockers;
3. Engaging diplomatic hubs such as the UN headquarters in New York and UN regional hubs in Addis Ababa, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, to redirect attention toward the Article 109 option;

4. Developing updated, text-based proposals that could be understood as an “Ezulwini 2.0”, capable of addressing internal African divergences while preserving continental principles.
5. Adopting a campaign- and advocacy-oriented approach to the reforms, moving away from the current abstract endorsement style.

2. Strengthening the Capacity of African Representation

Strengthening the capacity of African representation within existing multilateral institutions, particularly at the UN, was recommended as a route to achieving efficiency and effectiveness. Enhancing AU capacity on this front would significantly improve coordination, consultation and responsiveness between the AU and African members of the Security Council. Concerns about the severe resource constraints faced by African states serving on the Security Council, as well as the limited staffing and technical reach of the AU Observer Mission in New York, need priority attention. Participants therefore recommended the creation of diplomatic secondment or deployment arrangements, modelled on existing practices, whereby former African Council members could support current and incoming A3 representatives with technical expertise, institutional memory, and coordination support.

Noting the importance of the Committee of Ten (C10) in promoting and canvassing support for the Common African Position on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform, as outlined in the Ezulwini Consensus and Sirte Declaration, participants recommended the creation of a mechanism to support its work. At the same time, it was recommended that specific African leaders and nations be identified to serve as champions for the reform process along the C10.

3. Reforming the Financial Architecture

On the financial architecture, participants advanced a complementary set of recommendations focused on building African economic agency rather than relying solely on the reform of existing Western-dominated institutions. These included:

- Strengthening African-led financial institutions,
- Mapping the continent’s payment systems and fintech infrastructures,
- Reducing the cost of cross-border transactions,
- Formalising digital payment corridors that already support a large share of regional and informal trade.

The discussion also called for stronger alignment between debates on debt, financial reform, critical minerals, and industrial policy. It was determined that Africa’s position on financial governance must be tied more closely to issues of industrial policies for production, trade, and investment governance.

While participants recognised the growing relevance of BRICS, the G20, and other non-Western platforms, they warned against the assumption that these spaces offer

emancipatory alternatives by default. It was cautioned that Africa could simply exchange one set of hegemonic dependencies for another unless engagement is anchored in coordinated bargaining, robust governance standards, and institution-building on the continent itself. The example cited in this regard was alignment with the protocols under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the Pan African Payment Systems (PAPS) framework.

4. Managing External Power Engagement through Knowledge Coordination

Participants recommended a more systematic and evidence-based approach to Africa's external partnerships and summit diplomacy, supported by stronger mechanisms for knowledge coordination, institutional memory, and accountability. This included:

- Conducting sectoral mapping of foreign investment by country and industry
- Distinguishing more clearly between AU-initiated and externally initiated partnerships, and
- Creating tracking and monitoring frameworks to assess whether Africa's representatives are substantively shaping declarations, action plans, and outcomes in fora such as the Forum on Africa China Cooperation (FOCAC), the African Union-EU summits, the Tokyo International Conference on Africa's Development (TICAD), the G20, and many more.

These proposals reflected a broader concern that the problem is often not the absence of policy frameworks, but the lack of implementation, institutional memory, and accountability mechanisms needed to make them effective. The AU has over 2400 policy decisions, nearly 80 treaties, and hundreds of strategy documents. Participants recommended that an interactive digital database be created as a starting point for further research, implementation support, revision of those that need updating, and building strategies around them. At the same time, although policy expertise on African agency, multilateral reform, and external engagement exists across universities, think tanks, and advocacy institutions, participants observed that it remains fragmented and poorly connected to decision-making processes. A key recommendation was therefore to establish a central repository or portal for policy briefs, case studies, summit tracking tools, and examples of successful and unsuccessful bargains, particularly in areas such as critical mineral negotiations and international partnership agreements.

Strategic significance

Taken together, the discussions revealed a conception of African agency that is at once more sober and more actionable than some conventional formulations. Participants did not deny the structural constraints facing the continent, including asymmetries of power, financial dependence, domestic governance deficits, and the institutional weakness of continental bodies. However, they also insisted that these constraints do not eliminate agency; rather, they make it necessary to think more carefully about the forms of coordination, institutional investment, and strategic selectivity required for African actors

to exercise influence effectively.

The roundtable therefore advanced a view of multilateral reform in which African priorities cannot be reduced to a single institutional demand such as permanent representation on the UNSC. Instead, reform was understood as a wider project involving the democratisation of global governance, the restructuring of financial and payment systems, the strengthening of African institutional capacity, the strategic governance of critical minerals and value chains, and the creation of more effective bridges between policy institutions, civil society, and academic knowledge. This broader framing is fully consistent with the idea that the transformation of the multilateral system must be tied to Africa's long-term aspirations under Agenda 2063 and to the need for proactive African scenario-building in a rapidly changing world.

The multistakeholder methodology of the roundtable was a significant factor. African academia and civil society are essential complements to formal political processes. The discussions reinforced the importance of this broader ecosystem in generating ideas, testing strategy, and sustaining momentum between formal diplomatic moments. The roundtable thus did not treat think tanks and civil society as merely supportive actors, but as part of the institutional architecture needed to translate African priorities into persuasive, technically credible, and politically coordinated reform agendas.

Next steps

The meeting concluded with a strong emphasis on follow-through. Participants agreed that the discussions should be translated into a validated implementation action plan, accompanied by a full edited report and a set of policy-oriented outputs capable of informing both immediate advocacy and longer-term strategic engagement. The roundtable was conceived not as a standalone event, but as part of a broader process of agenda setting and coalition building around Africa's role in global governance reform.

Several immediate advocacy and engagement opportunities were identified as avenues for engagement, consultations and dissemination of the core issues. These included:

- A year-long advocacy campaign leading to the United Nations General Assembly in 2027,
- The SADC Summit in Durban, South Africa, August 2026,
- Regional consultation forum throughout 2026 and 2027,
- The UN General Assembly in New York, USA, in September 2026,
- Amplifying African Voices for Strategic Action (AFSA) Conference in November 2026 in Addis Ababa on "Africa, the United Nations, multilateralism, and reform"
- The African Union Summit in the first quarter of 2027.

Participants proposed using these platforms to circulate concise recommendation documents, convene side events, deepen coalition-building, and test the resonance of the roundtable's proposals in wider regional and international forums.

The group also endorsed further regional consultations across Central, East, Horn, North, and West Africa to broaden the geographic base of the conversation and ensure that the emerging agenda reflects a genuinely continental range of experiences and priorities. These consultations were seen as essential not only for legitimacy, but also for refining recommendations through engagement with region-specific political economies, institutional contexts, and partnership patterns. In this way, the roundtable's outcomes were understood as a beginning rather than an endpoint: a zero point for building a more coherent African reform agenda that is analytically grounded, politically pragmatic, and institutionally actionable.