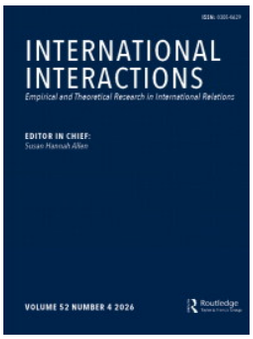

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IO overlap and the allocation of delegation: Evidence from the African organizational complex

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ABSTRACT

How does organizational overlap interact with the delegation of authority to international organizations (IOs)? This paper argues that delegation decisions cannot be understood in isolation from the increasingly dense organizational environments in which IOs operate. While existing delegation theory emphasizes IO-internal or member state characteristics, we introduce a systemic perspective that highlights how overlapping memberships and policy competences constrain states' collective willingness to empower multiple IOs simultaneously. Delegation entails sovereignty costs that accumulate across overlapping organizations, creating what we term an allocation problem: states have a finite tolerance for delegation and must collectively decide how to distribute authority across functionally similar IOs. Building on insights from functionalist theories of cooperation, we derive two expectations. First, organizational overlap induces a capping dynamic, whereby IOs embedded in dense webs of overlap exhibit lower or stagnating levels of delegation over time, while relatively isolated IOs can accumulate greater authority. Second, overlap may incentivize a differentiation dynamic, in which states allocate higher delegation to some IOs while limiting others, leading to divergence in authority among overlapping organizations. We evaluate these arguments empirically using a novel dataset covering nearly all African economic IOs from 1970 to 2020, coded on delegation and overlap. Controlling for alternative explanations and using a variety of model specifications, the results strongly support the capping dynamic: greater overlap is associated with stagnating delegation. Evidence for systematic delegation divergence across overlapping pairs is more limited, suggesting that overlap operates primarily as a systemic property of organizational complexes rather than dyadic relationships.

KEYWORDS

Regime complexes; IO authority; delegation; IO overlap; Africa; regional organizations

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RESUMEN

¿Cómo interactúa la superposición organizativa con la delegación de autoridad a las organizaciones internacionales (OOII)? Este artículo argumenta que las decisiones en materia de delegación no pueden entenderse de una forma aislada con relación a los entornos organizacionales, cada vez más densos, en los que operan las OOII. Mientras que la teoría existente en materia de delegación enfatiza las características internas de las OOII o de los Estados miembros, en este artículo, presentamos una perspectiva sistémica que resalta cómo las membresías y competencias políticas superpuestas limitan la disposición colectiva de OOIIs Estados a otorgar poder a múltiples OOII al mismo tiempo. La delegación implica costes en materia de soberanía que se acumulan a través de organizaciones que se superponen, creando lo que llamamos un problema de asignación, es decir, OOIIs Estados tienen una tolerancia finita para delegar y deben decidir colectivamente cómo distribuir la autoridad entre diversas OOII que funcionan de manera similar. Nos basamos en las ideas de las teorías funcionalistas de la cooperación, OOII que nos permite derivar dos hipótesis. En primer lugar, la superposición organizativa induce una dinámica de límites, por la cual las OOII que se encuentran integradas en densas redes de superposición muestran niveles más bajos, o incluso estancados, de delegación con el tiempo, mientras que aquellas OOII que están relativamente aisladas pueden acumular mayor autoridad. En segundo lugar, la superposición puede incentivar una dinámica de diferenciación, en la que los Estados asignan un mayor nivel de delegación a algunas OOII mientras limitan a otras, lo que lleva a una divergencia en el grado de autoridad entre organizaciones que se superponen. Ponemos a prueba estas hipótesis de manera empírica usando, para ello, un nuevo conjunto de datos que abarca casi todas las OOII económicas africanas desde 1970 hasta 2020. Estos datos se han codificado por delegación y superposición. Nuestras conclusiones, tras controlar otras explicaciones y usando diferentes modelos, respaldan fuertemente la dinámica de límites, es decir, un mayor nivel de superposición se asocia con un nivel estancado de delegación. Sin embargo, las pruebas con respecto la divergencia sistemática en la delegación entre organizaciones que se superponen son más limitadas, lo que sugiere que la superposición funciona principalmente como una propiedad sistémica de los complejos organizacionales en lugar de como relaciones diádicas Chevauchement des OI et répartition de la délégation

RÉSUMÉ

Quelles sont les interactions entre le chevauchement organisationnel et la délégation d'autorité aux organizations internationales (OI) ? Cet article affirme que les décisions de délégation ne peuvent être comprises séparément des environnements organisationnels à la densité croissante où les OI évoluent. Bien que la théorie existante sur la délégation mette l'accent sur les caractéristiques internes des OI et des États membres, nous présentons une perspective systémique qui souligne la contrainte exercée par le chevauchement des adhésions et des compétences politiques sur la volonté collective des États de soutenir plusieurs OI en même temps. La délégation implique une accumulation des coûts de souveraineté dans les

différentes organizations dont les activités se recoupent. Ainsi apparaît un « problème de répartition » la tolérance de délégation des États est finie et ils doivent décider ensemble de la façon dont ils vont distribuer leur autorité aux OI similaires d'un point de vue fonctionnel. Nous fondant sur des enseignements des théories fonctionnalistes de coopération, nous dérivons ici deux attentes. D'abord, le chevauchement organisationnel implique une dynamique de plafonnement : les OI intégrées dans les réseaux denses de chevauchements présentent des niveaux plus faibles et stagnants de délégation dans le temps, tandis que les OI relativement isolées peuvent accumuler davantage d'autorité. Ensuite, le chevauchement peut motiver une dynamique de différenciation : les États délèguent davantage à certaines OI et moins à d'autres, ce qui conduit à une divergence de l'autorité chez les organizations dont les activités se chevauchent. Nous évaluons ces arguments d'un point de vue empirique à l'aide d'un ensemble de données inédit couvrant presque toutes les OI économiques de l'Afrique entre 1970 et 2020, en chiffrant leurs données de délégation et de chevauchement. En neutralisant les autres explications et en utilisant diverses spécifications de modèle, les résultats viennent fortement étayer l'existence d'une dynamique de plafonnement : quand le chevauchement augmente, la délégation stagne. Il existe beaucoup moins de données pour étayer l'existence d'une divergence de délégation dans les paires d'organizations qui se chevauchent. Le chevauchement agirait donc d'abord comme une propriété systémique des complexes organisationnels, et non comme des relations dyadiques.

Introduction

How does organizational overlap interact with the delegation of authority to international organizations (IOs)? States delegate when they conditionally empower independent agents to act on their behalf (Hawkins et al. 2006, 7), such as granting courts the competence to adjudicate disputes and empowering secretariats to provide expert advice or propose policy. Since delegation constrains national sovereignty, it has been a core concern of scholarship on the institutional design of IOs (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 9; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Haftel and Thompson 2006). It is also consequential for the process and outcomes of international cooperation. Extensive delegation is associated with higher levels of IO performance (Lall 2017; Sommerer et al. 2022), sustained progress toward fulfilling IO mandates (Gray 2018), and a lower likelihood of IO death and replacement (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Haftel and Nadel 2024). Yet, existing scholarship largely treats delegation decisions as occurring in isolation, abstracted from the broader organizational environments in which IOs operate.

This article challenges this prevalent assumption. We argue that delegation cannot be understood without accounting for organizational

overlap—the increasingly common situation in which multiple IOs share members and policy competencies. While delegation theory typically explains variation through characteristics of the IOs in question or the nature of the states that create them (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Pollack 2003; Hawkins et al. 2006; Herbst 2007; Hooghe and Marks 2015; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019), a growing literature on regime complexity documents the increasing density of and overlap between international institutions and examines its sources and consequences (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009; Hofmann 2009; Gehring and Faude 2014; Pratt 2018; Henning and Pratt 2023). We bridge these research programs by theorizing the interaction between overlap and delegation, departing from established functional institutionalist premises.

Drawing out the implications of organizational overlap for institutional design, we argue that delegation under conditions of IO overlap is subject to an *allocation problem*. Because delegation entails material, political, and monitoring costs that accumulate across overlapping IOs and eventually become prohibitive, states face a finite tolerance for sovereignty transfer when addressing a particular cooperation problem. In dense institutional environments, states are therefore reluctant to empower *all* IOs suitable for addressing a given cooperation problem. Instead, they strategically allocate limited delegation across overlapping IOs with similar membership and policy competencies.

We engage with the allocation problem both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, the problem of allocation induces two complementary dynamics. The first is a *capping dynamic*: an IO with extensive overlap with other IOs exhibits, on average, lower or stagnating delegation levels, while more isolated IOs are in a better position to accumulate delegation over time. The second is a *differentiation dynamic*, whereby states concentrate delegation in some IOs while constraining others, leading to divergence of authority among pairs of overlapping IOs.

Empirically, we evaluate these theoretical expectations in a widely overlooked domain: regional economic organizations (REOs) in Africa. In doing so, our study begins to correct the Western-centric bias in much of the literature by engaging institutional dynamics in what is still—unduly so—a "massively neglected continent" in international relations scholarship (Sharman 2024, 10). In addition, Africa provides a hard case for functional accounts of delegation since political elites are generally wary of constraining national sovereignty and prominent research emphasizes ideational dynamics related *inter alia* to regime boosting and patronage (Söderbaum 2004; Herbst 2007). Furthermore, the African continent has perhaps the highest REO density in the world, with varying levels of delegation and overlap between them, as we show in the next section. If organizational overlap interacts systematically with delegation, such dynamics are likely to be visible in Africa.

To conduct this analysis, we coded a comprehensive sample of African REOs on delegation, membership and policy competencies from 1970 to 2020. This effort allows us to tackle a major methodological challenge, namely that studies of the consequences of organizational overlap are particularly susceptible to measurement error due to 'unrepresentative' samples. If, as we theorize, member states allocate delegation across overlapping IOs, the empirical test requires inclusion of *all* the IOs that could be affected by this dynamic. However, coding populations quickly confronts resource constraints by scholars, especially if the involved concepts require fine-grained measurement over time. Fortunately, the relative boundedness of African REOs—it emerged after decolonization in the 1960s and is well-delineated geographically—renders this methodological requirement also practically feasible.

The empirical findings corroborate the expectation that organizational overlap and delegation interact in systematic and predictable ways. Controlling for a battery of alternative explanations and using a variety of model specifications, the results indicate that African REOs that are embedded in an ever-denser web of overlapping competencies and members tend to display stagnating levels of delegation, whereas REOs that are less constrained by overlap tend to witness increasing delegation over time. Yet we find more qualified empirical support for the expectation that pairs of REOs that overlap extensively tend to have more divergent levels of delegation than those with more limited overlap. This finding suggests that overlap is better conceptualized and analyzed as a *systemic* property of organizational complexes rather than (the sum of) isolated relationships between pairs of IOs.

These findings bolster recent analyses of IOs that emphasize the organizational environment as an important determinant of IO design and behavior (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Copelovitch and Putnam 2014; Morin 2020) and contribute to existing research in several ways. First, this study joins a handful of studies that examine the *consequences* of regime complexity with systematic data and quantitative methods (Panke and Stapel 2018; Pratt 2018; Haftel and Hofmann 2019; Reinsberg and Westerwinter 2023) but depart from them by conceptualizing this phenomenon primarily in organizational rather than functional terms. In so doing, it provides the first complete description of a regional *organizational* complex, understood as a population of formal IOs in a geographically demarcated macro-region. Second, the findings suggest that institutional pressures operate alongside political ones, emphasized by recent studies (Walter 2021), as a strain on international cooperation and, possibly, the liberal international order more broadly. We expand on these implications in the concluding section.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section elaborates on the two core concepts of this study—overlap and delegation—and maps the empirical landscape of these phenomena in the African context, demonstrating substantial variation on both dimensions. The third section theorizes the interaction between IO overlap and delegation and derives two core hypotheses. The fourth section describes the research design, estimation strategy, and control variables. The fifthsection presents and discusses the results of the statistical analysis. The final section concludes.

Delegation and overlap in the African complex of REOs, 1970–2020

We define the African complex of economic organizations as the population of economic IOs in the geographically demarcated macro-region of Africa and track its evolution from 1970 to 2020. Our conceptualization and operationalization of delegation follow the *Measure of International Authority* (MIA) approach (Hooghe et al. 2017), while our understanding of organizational complexity builds on work emphasizing the concurrent overlap of membership and policy competences (Haftel and Lenz 2022). This section introduces the empirical domain, measurement, and key descriptive patterns. We show that as the African organizational complex has become denser, delegation has increased over time—but unevenly across REOs. This variation motivates the theoretical argument and empirical analysis developed in subsequent sections.

African regional economic organizations

To assess how delegation is distributed across the African organizational complex, we compiled the most comprehensive sample of African REOs to date. IOs are included if they meet three criteria. First, they must be fully nested within the *African* continent and have exclusive African membership in the post-colonial era. This criterion renders population-level analysis feasible and excludes global or inter-regional IOs with African members, such as the League of Arab States. Second, IOs must pursue economic cooperation as their primary (but not necessarily exclusive) objective. We define 'economic' broadly to encompass issues such as trade, development, finance, agriculture, fisheries, and macroeconomic policies. This excludes IOs focused on the management of transboundary water resources and specific commodities, such as the Niger Basin Authority or the African Timber Organization, and increases the likelihood that policy overlap is substantively meaningful.[1] Third, IOs must meet a minimal "threshold of 'organizationhood'" (Klabbers 2016, 135), operationalized, in line with the *Correlates of War* (COW) dataset (Pevehouse et al. 2020),

by the existence of an independent secretariat. This excludes informal IOs such as the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) or the Accra Initiative, as well as emanations and agencies of other—global or regional—IOs, e.g., the Central Bank of West African States and the Eastern Africa Standby Force.[2]

We began with the COW dataset and supplemented it with specialized sources compiled by scholars of African regionalism (Sohn 1972; Mays and DeLancey 2002; Mays 2015; Byiers 2017), reducing biases stemming from COW's heavy reliance on the somewhat haphazard *Yearbook of International Organizations*. This procedure yielded twenty-four REOs from 1959 to 2020, listed in the Online Appendix (OA1). Some of these REOs, such as OCAM and CEAO, were dissolved and no longer exist, whereas others have evolved over time and changed their names. For example, PTA and UDEAC were renamed COMESA and CEMAC, respectively. In most cases, we treat such renaming as incarnations of the same REO. One exception is the EAC that was dissolved in 1976 and reestablished in quite a different form in 1993. We therefore code them as two separate REOs (EAC I and EAC II).

Conceptualization and measurement of delegation and organizational overlap

We utilize Hooghe et al. (2017, 21–22) conceptualization and measurement of delegation, defined as "a conditional grant of authority by member states to an independent body." Delegation is a key dimension of IO authority, and it gauges the ability of decision-making, bureaucratic, and judicial bodies to act independently of member states. It may involve a general secretariat that can set the agenda for decision-making, an executive that has the competence to take day-to-day decisions, or a standing court that can sanction non-compliant states. Hooghe et al. (2017) devised a variable that takes into account the transfer of (1) agenda-setting and decision-making authority to four IO bodies that are composed of non-state representatives—assemblies, councils, secretariats, and consultative bodies—with respect to six decision areas (accession, suspension, constitutional reform, budgetary allocation, financial noncompliance, and policy making) as well as (2) judicial authority to a third-party dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). The aggregate measure, labeled *Delegation*, is an additive index of several weighted indexes standardized to range from zero, for no delegation, to one, for a high level of delegation (for details on variable construction, see section OA2 in the Online Appendix).[3] This variable was coded based on founding and amendment agreements for these organizations in several languages. Such agreements set out the mandate, authority, and rules of the IOs, and they may change over time.

We complemented these primary documents with several online catalogs and secondary literature. The variable captures variation in delegation between IOs and over time.

We follow conventional definitions of organizational overlap that treat two dimensions as necessary and jointly sufficient: membership overlap and overlap in policy scope (Gehring and Oberthür 2009; Hofmann 2009; Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2015). Our measure, labeled *MEPOS* (**ME**mbership and **P**olicy **O**verlap **S**core), gauges the extent to which IOs overlap in terms of both membership and policy scope. Following Haftel and Lenz (2022), it is the product of the number of overlapping members divided by the total number of members and the number of overlapping policies divided by the total number of policies for any two IOs.[4] It ranges from zero to one and is calculated dyadically for all IO pairs. We also calculate a monadic measure by averaging dyadic overlap scores for each IO, capturing its level of embeddedness in the broader organizational complex.

Changing patterns of delegation and overlap in Africa

Figure 1 displays the annual levels of monadic overlap, delegation, and number of REOs from 1970 to 2020 for the entire organizational complex. In addition, it plots the annual standard deviation (SD) of delegation for the full sample and for the subset of REOs that existed in 1985 and

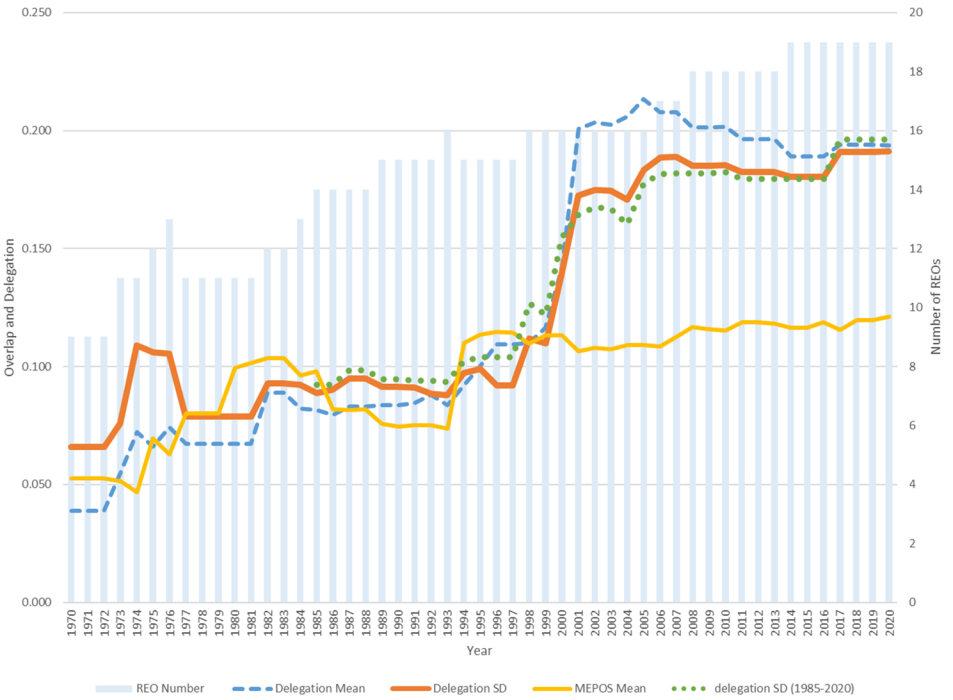

Figure 1. Delegation and overlap among REOs in Africa, 1970–2020.

remained active in 2020. This allows us to track changes in delegation for a consistent cohort of REOs, excluding new entrants or those that died during this period.

Overall, we observe a growing number of REOs and increasing overlap, suggesting that the African organizational complex has become denser over the past five decades. We also observe a loose positive association between overlap and delegation: both increase over time, though not simultaneously or to the same extent. Overlap rises gradually, particularly during the 1970s and 1990s, before leveling off, whereas delegation increases more sharply in the early 2000s and likewise plateaus thereafter.

Our primary interest lies not in average levels of overlap and delegation across the entire complex, but in variation among individual REOs (or pairs thereof). From this perspective, changes in delegation divergence are particularly informative. As illustrated by the orange line, divergence increases alongside the average level of delegation, suggesting that some REOs accumulated substantial delegations while others remained firmly intergovernmental. In addition, the dotted green line—which plots the standard deviation for a continuous sub-sample of IOs over time—closely tracks the orange line. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that the observed increase in divergence reflects changes in delegation within existing REOs, rather than being driven primarily by the entry of new REOs or the dissolution of older ones.

To further illustrate variation across REOs and over time in both overlap and delegation, Figure 2 traces the evolution of these variables for three prominent IOs in different subregions of Africa: The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

As Figure 2 shows, ECOWAS combines low and declining overlap (well below the mean of the entire sample) with a pronounced increase in delegation, ultimately reaching the highest value in the entire sample. This trajectory is consistent with qualitative accounts that emphasize ECOWAS's institutional development, comparatively high delegated authority, and the Commission's capacity to exercise agency in external relations (Saleh 2025). COMESA and ECCAS, in contrast, operate in much denser organizational environments and exhibit limited or stagnant levels of delegation. Specifically, COMESA displays medium and fairly stable levels of delegation—that changed significantly only once, when the original Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern Africa (PTA) was upgraded to COMESA in 1993/94—combined with much higher levels of overlap, almost twice as high as those of ECOWAS. Unlike ECOWAS, COMESA competes with other high-profile REOs in Eastern and Southern Africa, such as the EAC and SADC.[5] Even more tellingly, ECCAS, which has above-average levels of overlap, displays low and

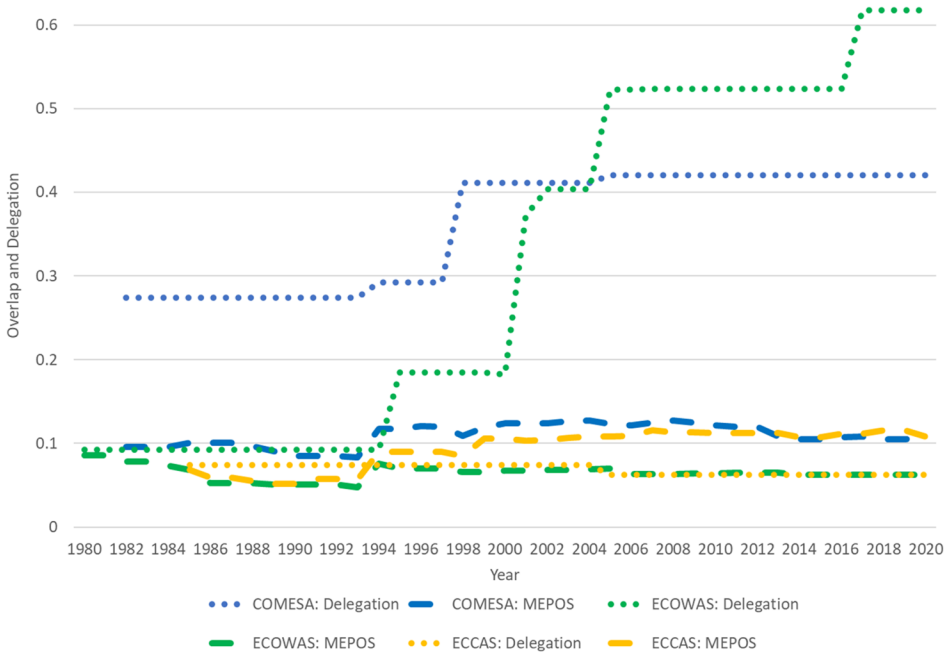

Figure 2. Overlap and delegation in COMESA, ECCAS and ECOWAS, 1970–2020.

unchanging levels of delegation since its formation in the mid-1980s. These trajectories may suggest a systematic relationship between embeddedness in overlapping organizations and the capacity of IOs to accumulate authority.

Taken together, these patterns underscore substantial variation in overlap and delegation, both across REOs and over time. As the African organizational complex has become denser, delegation has not increased uniformly across IOs. Instead, authority has accumulated in some organizations, while many overlapping REOs show little change in their levels of delegation. This uneven development of overlap and delegation raises the question of why states deepen delegation in some institutions but not in others, even when those institutions operate in similar policy spaces. Accounting for this variation requires an explanation of how states distribute delegation across overlapping organizations and why certain REOs are prioritized over others. The next section addresses this question by framing delegation as an allocation problem.

Theoretical framework: IO overlap and the allocation of delegation

We begin from the standard institutionalist premise that states delegate authority to independent agents when the expected benefits of delegation outweigh the loss of national sovereignty (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 5; Haftel and Thompson 2006; Hawkins et al. 2006, 20–21). Building on this foundation, we develop our theoretical framework by analyzing how

organizational overlap influences states' collective decision-making compared to the standard single IO scenario. We first identify a key design challenge in the IO overlap scenario—the allocation problem—before theorizing its impact on individual IOs and IO pairs, focusing on the African context. Throughout, our analytical approach conceives decision-making as a *collective* endeavor that is primarily geared toward realizing *joint* gains and avoiding 'collective' costs at the level of the organizational complex, not merely of individual IOs. Accordingly, we examine the collective incentives for and constraints on delegation, not those of individual (and differentiated) member states, similar to Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal (2013, 31; see also Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001, 766).[6]

The allocation problem: delegation in a dense organizational space

Delegated agents offer a range of benefits. Some enhance the efficiency of cooperation, including the facilitation of unbiased information generation and dissemination, agenda-setting, proposal of compromises, and authoritative resolution of contractual disputes (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Hawkins et al. 2006; Lall 2017). Other benefits—particularly relevant in Global South IOs—are financial, as delegation can help attract donor funding (Jolliff Scott 2020; Lenz 2021; Stapel, Panke, and Söderbaum 2023). These benefits must be weighed against the sovereignty costs, as delegation limits states' ability to engage in fully intergovernmental cooperation (on the problem of collective principals, see Nielson and Tierney 2003). Institutional design thus reflects a collective effort by member states to maximize delegation's advantages while minimizing its costs.

Existing delegation theory implicitly assumes a single-IO setting: states evaluate a proposed change to delegation relative to the institutional status quo of a standalone organization. If the proposed design improves the cost-benefit balance, states pursue institutional change. IO overlap, we propose, fundamentally alters this calculus. When two or more IOs share members and policy competencies, states face multiple, functionally similar organizations that make "rival authority claims" (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 332; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Westerwinter 2022, 234; Haftel and Lenz 2022, 327). In this situation, delegation decisions cannot be made in isolation. Instead, states evaluate delegation proposals not only against the institutional status quo of a given IO, but also against alternative delegation options across the overlapping organizational landscape. It follows that states strategize also at the level of the organizational complex (Helfer 2004; Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009; Morse and Keohane 2014) rather than treating overlapping IOs separately. Delegation becomes a problem of coordination across IOs rather than merely an institutional adjustment within a single one—our analysis thus

shifts the focus from an "individualist" to a systemic perspective on delegation.[7]

This gives rise to what we term the *allocation problem of delegation*.[8] Because the authority states are collectively willing to transfer to IOs addressing a given cooperation problem is finite, they must decide how to distribute delegation across overlapping organizations. The finiteness assumption follows from the cumulative nature of sovereignty costs in an organizational complex that eventually render additional delegation prohibitive. This dynamic takes several forms. First, delegation entails material costs—such as the creation of new institutions or enhancing the capacity of existing ones (hiring new staff, expanding office space, etc.)—that intensify budgetary tradeoffs as the number of potential delegation venues increases.

Second, delegation generates political costs because domestic audiences (parliaments, courts, voters, interest groups) impose limits on how much authority governments can credibly externalize. These concerns extend beyond limits on unilateral action, the traditional core of national sovereignty, to issues of democratic accountability and constitutional compatibility, including the domestic status and bindingness of international law. Third, monitoring costs scale poorly under overlap. As authority fragments across multiple IOs, agency slack—"independent action by an agent that is undesired by the principal" (Hawkins et al. 2006, 8)—becomes harder to detect and sanction, particularly because principals are not only collective (Nielson and Tierney 2003), but their composition also varies across organizations. Finally, delegation is characterized by institutional stickiness: exiting or reclaiming competences from delegated agents is often difficult and reputationally costly (Pierson 1996). Anticipating this lock-in, states ration delegation *ex ante*.[9]

As a result of cumulative sovereignty costs, even when delegating authority to a particular IO is individually defensible, states may refrain from doing so if it would overextend their overall tolerance for delegation in the organizational complex as a whole. Rather than empowering *all* overlapping IOs suitable for addressing the problem, states allocate limited delegation across overlapping IOs, either concentrating authority in some while constraining others or capping delegation across the board.[10] This does not imply that delegation across overlapping IOs is necessarily strictly zero-sum. In some cases, states may be willing to expand the total amount of authority devoted to a given cooperation problem and strengthen multiple institutions simultaneously. Nevertheless, insofar as the authority that states are willing to transfer is finite, the allocation of delegation across overlapping IOs necessarily becomes a central consideration in delegation decisions.

The allocation problem is particularly pronounced in Africa. First, organizational overlap is extensive, as shown in the previous section. Since the formation and consolidation of the organizational complex in the 1970s, member states have had to navigate the allocation of authority between at least the primary continental IO, the OAU/AU, and various sub-regional REOs. Over time, states have also increasingly faced the challenge of choosing between multiple sub-regional REOs. Second, sovereignty concerns are prevalent in Africa, which means that the allocation problem is particularly severe. Herbst (2014, 263), for example, argues that "African leaders jealously guard" their state's sovereignty, and Söderbaum (2004, 426) notes that "most postcolonial states in Africa tend to be obsessed with absolute sovereignty." African sovereignty concerns bind with respect to the material, political, and monitoring costs of delegation. Materially, Africa is the poorest continent in the world, so financial constraints bite quickly. Politically, the continent's colonial history has fostered a deep reluctance to limit national sovereignty. And due to limited state capacity in many African states, monitoring a complex REO landscape in terms of agency slack is particularly difficult.

The impact of sovereignty concerns is not that African policymakers are universally opposed to delegation to IOs—there is considerable variation in the extent of delegation across African IOs, as shown in Figures 1 and 2—but rather that they are likely to accentuate the tradeoffs involved in delegating to multiple IOs simultaneously. As Charalambides (2005, 23) notes, for Africa "the biggest impact of overlapping membership […] is the extent to which it impedes this transfer of sovereignty […] to regional institutions." Taken together, delegation in dense organizational environments is best understood not as a series of independent design choices but as a problem of allocating finite authority across competing institutions. This allocation logic generates clear expectations about how overlap interacts with delegation, both at the level of individual IOs and across overlapping organizational pairs, which we turn to next.

Implications of the allocation problem for REO delegation in Africa

Our core expectation is that the allocation problem intensifies with greater organizational overlap because—all else equal—the marginal benefits of delegation decline while the marginal sovereignty costs rise. This generates two observable implications that we expect to operate in a complementary fashion. First, the availability of functionally equivalent alternatives constrains the average level of delegation to any single IO—a pattern we term the monadic *capping dynamic*. Second, overlap creates incentives to concentrate authority in select institutions, leading to greater divergence in

delegation between IOs pairs—a pattern we term the dyadic *differentiation dynamic*. We examine both dynamics in turn, taking into account the efficiency gains and international funding benefits that delegation may provide.[11]

The *capping dynamic* suggests that overlap constrains delegation to any specific IO. On the one hand, both the marginal efficiency benefits and those stemming from additional financial support by international donors decrease as overlap grows. From an efficiency perspective, overlap creates functional equivalence and thus redundancy. If, for example, a secretariat or a DSM enhances cooperative efficiency by generating and disseminating unbiased information on state preferences and behavior—a logic that has been used to explain the creation of mediation support structures during the transition from the OAU to the AU (Nweke 1987; Abegunrin 2009, ch. 7; Aeby and Pring 2023)—creating similar institutions in overlapping IOs yields diminishing returns.

As Copelovitch and Putnam (2014, 487) note, "by providing additional sites for observing the actions of prospective partners, institutional context can mitigate uncertainty about behavior." Because regime complexes provide more readily available information to address cooperation challenges than isolated IOs, the incentive for states to delegate additional competencies to independent agents decreases (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Hawkins et al. 2006). A similar logic applies to potential gains from specialization and legalization. While states may benefit from forum shopping and strategic inconsistency, these advantages diminish as the number of overlapping institutions increases, yielding only marginal returns beyond a certain point (Jo and Namgung 2012; Alter and Raustiala 2018, 339–340).

On the other hand, the sovereignty costs of delegation increase as overlap intensifies, as noted. Material costs rise as additional agents are created or expanded, political constraints tighten as each act of delegation further limits governments' room for maneuver, and monitoring costs escalate as authority fragments across institutions. As a result, the marginal costs of delegation are higher for subsequent delegation acts under conditions of overlap than for the initial delegation.

The financing of REOs by international donors may alleviate the material costs of setting up and strengthening delegated agents, easing the constraints on delegation. Agents may even anticipate financial support for delegation, enhancing its benefits. However, the marginal benefits of delegation due to external funding nevertheless decline as overlap grows because finite donor resources are spread across a broader range of organizations. As a result, donors are likely to be more selective in their distribution of funding, implying lower marginal funding for additional acts of delegation. Given the financial constraints of many African states, international donors wield significant influence over domestic politics

(Whitfield 2009), and this extends to regional cooperation (Jolliff Scott 2020). Many African IOs rely heavily on external financing (Stapel, Panke, and Söderbaum 2023), giving donors leverage over policy and institutional decisions.

The European Union, in particular, has sought to shape African regional cooperation in its own image, influencing the design of regional institutions (Lenz 2012; Stapel and Söderbaum 2019; Piccolino 2020).[12] This dependency has raised concerns about donor-driven governance. The delegation of extensive competences to the SADC Secretariat and Tribunal, for example, was closely tied to EU funding dynamics. As one observer notes, "the situation is so [dire] that if the EU were to withdraw its funding, the entire SADC Secretariat […] would lose their jobs" (Saurombe 2009, 104).

In summary, considerations of both benefits and costs point to an inverse relationship between organizational overlap and delegation. All else equal, as overlap grows, the marginal efficiency and funding benefits of delegation are likely to decline while the marginal costs increase. Consequently, the level of delegation within any given IO is, on average, lower. The related temporal dynamic implies that as an IO overlaps more extensively with other IOs over time, member states are less likely to empower it through delegation—resulting in its stagnation. This leads to the following capping hypothesis:

> ***H1:*** *For a given IO, a higher (growing) level of overlap is associated with a lower (stagnant) level of delegation, ceteris paribus.*

The *differentiation dynamic* suggests that delegation is likely to become more polarized in the organizational complex as overlap grows. When IOs overlap extensively, incentives for functional differentiation lead to greater delegation disparities between them compared to IOs with minimal overlap. Functional differentiation occurs when states actively seek to distinguish between two functionally similar IOs, resulting in a nonhierarchical division of labor between institutions (Zürn and Faude 2013, 122; Henning and Pratt 2023). Delegation is a key tool states use to achieve this differentiation, assigning greater authority to some IOs—often referred to as 'focal IOs' in the literature (Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Gatti 2025)—while maintaining lower levels of delegation in others. What are the benefits of functional differentiation?

From an efficiency perspective, IOs with high and low levels of delegation offer distinct functional advantages. High-delegation IOs are better at generating unbiased information and specialized knowledge and policies, as well as resolving disputes and addressing distributional and enforcement problems. In contrast, low-delegation IOs provide sovereignty-protecting forms of cooperation and offer states greater flexibility in

their engagement (Abbott and Faude 2021). In Africa, in particular, IOs with limited delegation may provide additional benefits by functioning as intergovernmental 'elite cartels' through which governments support each other's rule (Söderbaum 2004; Cottiero 2023). Moreover, differentiating authority between high- and low-delegation IOs reduces the accumulation of sovereignty costs in the organizational complex. Monitoring costs are lower when one of several overlapping IOs concentrates the bulk of authority, and the domestic political constraints on delegation may also be more manageable in this situation. It follows that (1) member states benefit from having access to *both* types of IOs, allowing them to draw on their respective strengths for different purposes while reducing the costs that would emerge from empowering various IOs in similar ways (Jo and Namgung 2012; Morse and Keohane 2014; Abbott and Faude 2022) and that (2) states are likely to concentrate the bulk of delegated authority in select IOs, while many others remain predominantly intergovernmental.[13]

International funders are likely to reinforce this pattern of differentiation. Donors, particularly the EU, tend to prioritize high-delegation IOs because they facilitate more effective functional cooperation (Gray 2018; see also Lall 2017). The EU's institutional logic, often described as an inherent tendency to reproduce itself (Bretherton and Vogler 1999; Bicchi 2006), leads it to direct financial support primarily to high-delegation REOs that resemble its own structure. Empirical evidence supports this pattern. A recent study finds that the degree of IO independence from member state control, or delegation, is a key predictor of EU regional aid allocations (Jolliff Scott 2020). This suggests that African REOs with greater delegated authority receive the lion's share of international funding, while low-delegation REOs are largely overlooked.

In summary, as a result of these varying motivations, the landscape of African REOs is differentiated, with low- and high-delegation REOs coexisting because they offer distinct advantages to member states. This leads to a dyadic differentiation hypothesis, which examines the delegation disparity between any two IOs.[14] Specifically, we anticipate that IOs with extensive overlap will exhibit a greater delegation differential. Temporally, a growth in dyadic overlap should lead to growing differentiation. This dynamic is captured in the following hypothesis:

> ***H2:*** *A higher (growing) level of overlap between a given pair of IOs is associated with a greater (growing) difference in their level of delegation, ceteris paribus.*

Research design and confounding factors

How is the allocation of delegation across African REOs related to overlap between them? The hypotheses we seek to test may operate in a

complementary manner but have different units of analysis and are thus best tested using different empirical strategies. Whereas the capping hypothesis addresses the absolute level of delegation in an IO and is therefore best tested in a monadic setup, the differentiation hypothesis engages the distance in the level of delegation between any pair of IOs, calling for a dyadic setup. In both cases, delegation is an institutional trait of the organization rather than of any particular country. The dependent and independent variables, described in Section 2, and the control variables, described in more detail below, are thus defined and measured at the IO level. Summary statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables are reported in the Online Appendix (Section OA4).

The dependent variables, *Delegation* and *Difference in Delegation*, are continuous and range from zero to one. *Delegation* was introduced above, while *Difference in Delegation* captures the absolute difference in delegation levels between two IOs. We therefore estimate all models with ordinary least squares (OLS). These models also include IO or IO-dyad fixed effects and year dummies to account for unobservable heterogeneity across units and time. In addition, all models include robust standard errors clustered by IO or IO-dyad. Finally, the models include a lagged dependent variable to eliminate autocorrelation in the residuals and to model the dynamic data-generating processes,[15] and all independent variables are lagged one year to reduce the risk of reversed causality.[16] To shed additional light on delegation dynamics, we run models for the separate components of delegation mentioned above. The results are reported in the Online Appendix (Tables OA9 and OA10).

Independent variables and confounding factors

Our main explanatory variable, labeled *MEPOS*, is the extent to which two IOs overlap in their membership and policy scope simultaneously, as elaborated in Section 2. *Dyadic MEPOS* measures the overlap between any pair of IOs in the sample.[17] The degree of IO overlap is not the only factor that may determine the level of delegation. We control for a comprehensive set of additional factors that are potentially correlated with both of these variables to reduce the risk of spurious relationships between them. These pertain to member states' needs and incentives (Henning and Pratt 2023), on the one hand, and internal and external constraints, on the other hand.[18]

Conventional functionalist accounts posit that the demand for delegation increases as an IO's membership and policy scope expand (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2015). Although greater inclusiveness can facilitate collective action by internalizing the costs and benefits of cooperation across a broader set of affected states and by

enabling issue linkage, it may also increase the transaction costs of cooperation. Larger and more diverse memberships, as well as broader policy portfolios, can complicate decision-making, policy implementation, and monitoring. Delegation to an IO can therefore serve as a functional response to these governance challenges by reducing coordination costs and improving organizational performance. These two variables serve as building blocks of our measure of overlap, but our theoretical argument emphasizes joint overlap rather than their respective independent effect. We therefore include these variables in all models.

Next, theories of regional integration emphasize economic interdependence, and especially trade relations, as an important driver of delegation (Mattli 1999; Haftel 2013). We control for this factor with *Trade Share*, which is the ratio of intra-REO trade to the organization's total trade multiplied by a hundred. We calculate values for this variable with the COW Trade Data Set V4.0 (Barbieri and Keshk 2016), which is based on IMF statistics and ends in 2014. To reduce the number of missing observations, we complement it with data from UNCTAD, also based on IMF statistics, calculating trade shares for fourteen REOs in our sample.[19] Power asymmetry within REOs is often cited as a factor influencing institutional authority, though its effects remain debated. Some studies suggest that powerful states prefer weak REOs to avoid constraints on their interests (Smith 2000), while others highlight hegemonic powers as key suppliers of regional institutions (Mattli 1999). We do not take a strong position on this but control for it using the concentration ratio (Smith 2000). The *Concentration* variable, ranging from zero to one, reflects the economic size disparity among member states, measured by GDP data in constant 2010 US$ from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI).[20]

Turning to domestic factors, more economically advanced countries may benefit more from economic cooperation and have the capacity to sustain more authoritative REOs (Mattli 1999; Gray 2014). We control for this with *Mean GDPpc*, the average (logged) GDP per capita of all members, using data from the WDI. Additionally, democratic countries tend to delegate more extensively to IOs than other regimes (Pevehouse and Russett 2006; Tallberg and Vikberg 2025). We account for this with *Mean Polyarchy*, the annual average score of member states on a democracy measure from the Variety of Democracies (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2011).

Heterogeneity among member states in terms of domestic economic and political characteristics may also influence delegation. Countries with differing attributes may struggle to agree on shared institutional rules and delegate authority effectively. We assess the impact of this diversity in several ways. First, we account for heterogeneity in member states' regime type and level of development. *STD Polyarchy* represents the standard deviation of the Polyarchy measure, while *STD GDPpc* captures the logged standard

deviation of the member states' development levels. For simplicity, these variables are included in separate models. Finally, states with shared colonial histories may have more in common and find it easier to form and empower REOs. This may be particularly relevant in Africa, where colonial legacies remain influential. To capture this, some models include *Colonial Homogeneity*, which measures the percentage of member states in an REO that share the same dominant colonial power. This is calculated by identifying the dominant colonial power (based on the number of member states) and computing the percentage of states sharing this colonial legacy.[21]

The ability and willingness to empower REOs through delegation may also depend on the security situation within and across national borders. We measure two relevant factors. First, recognizing that states facing civil wars or internal unrest may devote their resources to domestic challenges rather than to regional cooperation, we use *Civil War*, which counts the number of internal armed conflicts within REO member states (based on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, Version 21.1; Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson et al. 2021). Second, we account for interstate conflict with *MID*, which is coded one if there was at least one militarized interstate dispute among REO members and zero otherwise. Data for this variable are drawn from the Dyadic MID dataset (Version 4.02; Maoz et al. 2019).

All the control variables described earlier are included in the monadic analysis. To adapt them for the dyadic analysis, which examines the difference in delegation levels between REO pairs, we calculate the absolute difference for each control variable. This approach is based on the logic that factors influencing delegation for a given REO should similarly explain the differences in delegation at the dyadic level. For instance, if the number of policy competencies is linked to greater delegation, an REO involved in more policy areas should exhibit higher delegation than one tackling fewer issue areas. Thus, the dyadic models include the following control variables: *Difference in Number of Policy Competencies*, *Difference in REO Trade Share*, *Difference in GDPpc*, *Difference in Mean Polyarchy*, *Difference in STD GDPpc*, *Difference in STD Polyarchy*, *Difference in Concentration*, *Difference in MIDs*, *Difference in Civil Wars*, *Difference in Colonial Homogeneity*, and *Difference in Number of Members*.

Results

We begin by presenting the results from our monadic analysis, followed by the dyadic analysis. Table 1 reports the results of four models accounting for the relationships between *Monadic MEPOS* and *Delegation*. Model 1 in Table 1 is our baseline model, which gauges the two elements of our main independent variable—membership and policy scope—independently,

Table 1. The sources of *delegation* in african REOs, 1970–2020.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	MEPOS excluded	GDP per capita variables	Polyarchy variables	Post-Cold war period
Number of policy Competencies	0.00240** (2.09)	0.00288** (2.19)	0.00306** (2.10)	0.00415* (2.02)
Number of Members	−0.000116 (−0.13)	−0.000225 (−0.24)	−0.000340 (−0.35)	−0.000278 (−0.29)
Monadic MEPOS		−0.155** (−2.17)	−0.0814* (−1.75)	−0.304** (−2.54)
REO trade share	−0.00158** (−2.21)	−0.00197** (−2.81)	−0.00218** (−2.71)	−0.00211** (−2.22)
Mean GDPpc (LN)	−0.00473 (−0.61)	−0.0115 (−1.31)		−0.0222* (−2.04)
STD GDPpc (LN)	−0.000203 (−0.06)	0.00162 (0.38)		0.0116* (2.02)
Mean polyarchy			0.0449† (1.49)	
STD polyarchy			−0.0278 (−0.59)	
Concentration	−0.0132 (−0.71)	−0.0124 (−0.61)	−0.0106 (−0.74)	−0.0183 (−0.90)
MID	−0.00409* (−1.85)	−0.00454* (−1.93)	−0.00310 (−1.17)	−0.00548† (−1.72)
Civil wars	−0.000770 (−0.60)	−0.000804 (−0.60)	−0.000427 (−0.31)	−0.000274 (−0.23)
Colonial homogeneity			0.0327† (1.58)	
Lagged delegation	0.902*** (27.01)	0.885*** (24.10)	0.889*** (26.63)	0.816*** (16.00)
Constant	0.0567 (1.08)	0.115* (1.86)	−0.00562 (−0.22)	0.144* (2.00)
N	668	662	662	483
R^2	0.946	0.947	0.947	0.921
REO FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

t statistics in parentheses.
† $p < 0.1$ (one-sided), * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

and Model 2 adds the overlap measure. Model 3 substitutes *GDPpc* and *STD GDPpc* with *Polyarchy* and *STD Polyarchy* and Model 4 repeats Model 2 for the post-Cold War period. Table 2 presents parallel models for *Dyadic MEPOS* and *Difference in Delegation*.

The findings strongly support our theoretical argument. In line with the expected capping dynamic, REO overlap is always negative and statistically significant at a ninety percent level of confidence or higher in most models. Thus, African REOs that experience greater overlap with their peers tend to have lower levels of delegated authority. This is a notable finding given that additional policy competencies, in and of themselves, tend to exert *upward* pressure on delegation, a result in line with existing literature (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2015). These pressures *reverse*, however, when REOs overlap in both policy scope and membership with other REOs, indicating that member states distribute delegation across several of them in this IO overlap scenario.[22] As the various models indicate, these results remain intact when restricting the sample

Table 2. The sources of *difference in delegation* in african REOs, 1970-2020.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	MEPOS excluded	GDP per capita variables	Polyarchy variables	Post-Cold war period
Difference in number of Policy competencies	0.00108*** (2.69)	0.00121*** (3.15)	0.00119*** (3.13)	0.00150*** (3.20)
Difference in Number of Members	−0.000334 (−0.86)	−0.000360 (−0.90)	−0.000322 (−0.81)	−0.000330 (−0.74)
Dyadic MEPOS		0.0770† (1.57)	0.0697† (1.40)	0.119* (1.88)
Difference in REO trade Share	−0.000575* (−1.86)	−0.000535* (−1.70)	−0.000523* (−1.67)	−0.000707** (−2.02)
Difference in mean GDPpc (LN)	−0.00151 (−0.19)	0.000138 (0.02)		−0.00134 (−0.11)
Difference in STD GDPpc (LN)	−0.00383 (−1.29)	−0.00393† (−1.30)		−0.00229 (−0.46)
Difference in mean polyarchy			−0.0109 (−0.78)	
Difference in STD polyarchy			0.00796 (0.44)	
Difference in concentration	0.0128** (2.04)	0.0128** (2.00)	0.0142** (2.28)	0.0115† (1.57)
Difference in MID	−0.00469*** (−3.10)	−0.00474*** (−3.10)	−0.00465*** (−2.96)	−0.00533*** (−2.88)
Difference in civil wars	−0.000900* (−1.80)	−0.000987* (−1.94)	−0.00104** (−1.99)	−0.000225 (−0.45)
Difference in colonial Homogeneity			−0.00877 (−1.23)	
Lagged difference in Delegation	0.881*** (67.71)	0.879*** (66.21)	0.879*** (65.16)	0.847*** (59.51)
Constant	0.0302*** (4.55)	0.0267*** (4.07)	0.0282*** (4.34)	0.0278*** (3.42)
N	4500	4500	4500	3665
R^2	0.871	0.871	0.871	0.846
REO Dyad FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

t statistics in parentheses.
† $p < 0.1$ (one sided), * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

to the post-Cold War era or changing the sets of control variables. Substantively, based on Model 2 in Table 1, a one-unit decrease in the value of *Monadic MEPOS* leads to an increase of about sixteen percent of a unit in *Delegation* (this value rises to thirty percent for the post-Cold War era).

Thus, for example, we should expect that moving from the maximum value of 0.21 to the minimum value of zero on *Monadic MEPOS* will result in a rise of about 0.03 in the value of *Delegation* (which ranges from zero to 0.62 in the sample). This is consistent with African REOs that have below average levels of IO overlap and high, and increasingly so, levels of delegation, e.g., ECOWAS that scores around 0.06 on *Monadic MEPOS* and has witnessed an increase of more than 0.5 on delegation (from 0.09 in the late 1970s to 0.62 in the late 2010s). In contrast, MRU (which is nested within ECOWAS), with an average *Monadic MEPOS* more than twice as high (around 0.16 in the 2000), has a low and static level of delegation: 0.06 for almost five decades.

Table OA9 reports results for distinct components of delegation. Across all components, higher levels of overlap are associated with lower delegation, with most estimates reaching conventional levels of statistical significance. The negative effect is particularly pronounced for the delegation to DSMs, suggesting that states are especially cautious about empowering regional courts in contexts of overlapping authority. Delegation concerning accession and constitutional rules is also strongly affected by overlap, whereas delegation in budgetary and policy domains exhibits weaker (though still near-significant) effects. Overall, this disaggregated analysis closely aligns with the findings obtained using the aggregated delegation measure.

The results reported in Table 2 are broadly consistent with the differentiation dynamic, though the empirical support is weaker. The estimated coefficients for MEPOS Dyad are positive, as expected, achieving statistical significance at the 90 percent level in some specifications and coming close to this threshold in others. It appears, then, that pairs of REOs with higher overlap tend to show a greater difference in their levels of delegation: as one African REO gains greater delegated powers, its counterpart remains institutionally weaker. Substantively, based on Model 4 in Table 2, a one-unit increase in the value of *Dyadic MEPOS* results in an increase of about eight percentage points in the value of *Delegation Difference*. Thus, moving from the minimum value of zero to the maximum value of 0.41 on *Dyadic MEPOS* will result in a rise of about 0.03 in the value of *Delegation Difference*.

The CEMAC–ECCAS dyad, which exhibits the highest level of overlap in the sample, provides an illustration of this dynamic. While CEMAC has experienced a steady increase in delegation—reaching a value of 0.47 in the 2010s—delegation within ECCAS has stagnated at 0.06 throughout its entire existence, as depicted in Figure 2 above. Because CEMAC is nested within ECCAS, member states appear to have prioritized investing their limited institutional and political resources in CEMAC, at the expense of ECCAS. Even so, the weaker results in the dyadic analysis, compared to the monadic analysis, warrant caution. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that the constraining effect of institutional overlap on delegation operates primarily at the level of the organizational complex rather than through isolated dyadic relationships. As overlapping memberships and policy competencies accumulate across multiple IOs, states face sharper tradeoffs in how they allocate authority and resources, which in turn dampens delegation. This suggests that analyses of delegation should account for IOs' embeddedness in wider organizational complexes, rather than or alongside treating overlap as a series of seperate bilateral relationships.

An examination of the effect of dyadic overlap on differences across distinct components of delegation, reported in Table OA10, refines our

interpretation of a differentiation dynamic among overlapping pairs of IOs. Although the estimated effects of overlap are positive in most models, they are statistically insignificant in many cases. Two components of delegation stand out as notable exceptions: budgetary authority and, to a lesser extent, policy delegation, for which the effects are statistically significant. In line with our theoretical expectations, budgetary and policy competences directly implicate the allocation of scarce financial and political resources and thus heighten the delegation tradeoffs across overlapping IOs. Unlike more procedural forms of delegation that are constrained more strongly by national veto power at the final decision-making stage, such as the decision to revise founding treaties or accept new member states (Hooghe et al. 2017), these components entail concrete allocational tradeoffs, making them especially sensitive to competitive pressures generated by institutional overlap. Consequently, differentiation is expected to manifest itself most clearly in the allocation of budgetary authority and discretion over day-to-day decision-making, as states empower some IOs while constraining others.[23]

Turning to control variables, as expected, the number of policy competencies, or the difference thereof, is positive and statistically significant in all models. The number of members, on the other hand, is mostly negative and reaches statistical significance in the dyadic setup. Thus, REOs with responsibilities in more issue areas generate demand for greater delegation, as the functional logic expects. The same does not hold for growing membership, at least in Africa. Possibly, additional members also complicate efforts to delegate power to IOs as reaching agreement on such matters becomes more difficult.

Surprisingly, the estimates of *Trade Share* are negative and statistically significant in all models. In contrast to conventional integration theory, it appears that higher levels of regional interdependence result in lower levels of delegation. One possible explanation for this finding is that African REOs are less concerned with intra-regional trade, which tends to be miniscule compared to Africa's trade with the rest of the world, and more focused on other economic policy areas, such as development and finance as well as non-economic matters, such as security. This question requires further attention in future research.

The regional distribution of power appears to have no effect on the level of delegation. Nevertheless, *Difference in Concentration* is positive and statistically significant in all models in Table 2, indicating that greater difference on this measure is associated with a greater gap in the respective levels of delegation. The average level of economic development has a negative coefficient, but it is statistically significant only for the sample restricted for the post-Cold era. The mean level of democracy has a positive coefficient that falls just short of statistical significance. These results

suggest, weakly, that REOs created by less developed, but more democratic, African countries tend to enjoy higher levels of delegation. The dyadic differences on these two domestic variables are statistically insignificant in all models, however. We also find limited support for the role of membership heterogeneity, whether based on economic development, regime type, colonial legacy, or vote allignment in the UNGA.

The effect of armed conflict on delegation is mixed. Unsurprisingly, we find that African states embroiled in militarized interstate disputes are more hesitant to delegate authority to their REOs. There appears to be no parallel effect of civil wars, however: the coefficients are negative but statistically insignificant. Finally, the lagged dependent variables are highly statistically significant, as expected, reflecting the temporal persistence of the delegation measure. Importantly, the negative association between overlap and delegation is robust to the inclusion of this variable, fixed effects, year dummies, and various potential confounders, lending strong support to the hypothesized capping and differentiation dynamics.

Conclusion

Organizational overlap is one of the core characteristics of contemporary international relations, and this article shows, drawing on the dense African complex of REOs, that it differentially interacts with IO delegation. We find substantial empirical support for a capping dynamic—African IOs that overlap extensively with others tend to have lower levels of delegation than those that do not—but less support for a complementary differentiation dynamic—pairs of African IOs with a high degree of overlap tend to exhibit greater divergence in their levels of delegation. While these findings bolster the idea that overlap among functionally similar IOs with overlapping membership and the allocation of delegation across IOs are related, they also suggest that overlap is better viewed as a *systemic* property of organizational complexes in their entirety rather than the sum of dyadic relationships between IO pairs, at least concerning aggregate delegation decisions that constitute the core of our empirical analysis.

These findings have three important theoretical implications. First, they bolster recent analyses of IOs that emphasize the organizational environment as an important determinant of IO design and behavior (Morin 2020). Yet, instead of focusing on structural characteristics of populations, our analysis emphasizes specific relationships between IOs in a shared governance space—the African complex of REOs. Our analysis also aligns with recent studies that view IO design as contextual and dependent on the wider institutional status quo (Jupille et al. 2013; Copelovitch and Putnam 2014; Reinsberg and Westerwinter 2023) and extends these to understand a particular class of design elements related to delegation. In

so doing, our findings complement existing studies emphasizing 'endogenous' determinants of IO delegation. They suggest that, in addition to the effects of institutional and membership characteristics, a systemic logic emerges from shifting member state incentives in situations of IO overlap.

Second, this study contributes to the debate among scholars on the consequences of IO overlap in regime complexity. While some studies argue that overlap undermines cooperation through turf wars, inefficiency, and rule conflict (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009; Panke and Stapel 2018; Hofmann 2019), others contend that it strengthens cooperation through mutual reinforcement and effective inter-institutional coordination (Gehring and Faude 2014; Pratt 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen and Zürn 2020; Haftel and Hofmann 2025). Empirical evidence bearing on this debate is scarce. Our analysis of African REOs offers greater support to the more pessimistic view, showing that greater overlap weakens delegation and possibly the benefits associated with it. This aligns with the widespread perception that many African REOs are ineffective, driving calls for rationalizing overlapping organizations in the region. At the same time, the presence of differentiation dynamics suggests that African countries prioritize their REOs and use them to serve different objectives, at least to an extent.

Third, our analysis highlights organizational overlap as an institutional force shaping IO delegation, complementing existing research focused on prominent political dynamics. Recent debates on IOs and the liberal international order emphasize cultural and economic backlash in the Global North (Walter 2021) (internal challenge) and the rise of authoritarian states that seek more sovereignty-focused IOs (external challenge) (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021) as two prominent "political" challenges to the liberal international order. We add to this body of research by showing how IOs are constrained not just by political challenges but also by growing organizational overlap as a different 'systemic' property amplifying pressures on both IOs and the broader world order.

These results and implications stem from an analysis of one regional organizational complex, which has unique characteristics and history, and one type of institution—formal regional economic organizations. As noted earlier, African economic cooperation through REOs is influenced by the colonial and post-colonial legacies of its countries, the absence of a continental hegemon, dependence on substantial external funding, and general geopolitical weakness and marginalization in the international system. Therefore, exploring the relationship between overlap and delegation in other organizational complexes—while considering key regional differences—presents a promising direction for future research. In addition, incorporating a broader range of international institutions—such as informal IOs, linked

IOs, and emanations—into analyses of organizational complexes would further clarify the relationship between overlap and delegation.

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