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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The organisational dimension of executive authority in the Global South: Insights from the AU and ECOWAS commissions

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## Abstract

The growing importance of executive authority at the international level has fuelled scholarly debate about the level of autonomy enjoyed by international public administration (IPA), that is, the executive arms of international organisations. Insights from IPAs in the West or Global North, such as the European Union, have largely shaped these debates, whereas data from IPAs in the Global South are largely missing in the discussion. This article seeks to remedy this imbalance and contribute to an organisational-theory-inspired conceptualisation of IPA autonomy: We draw insights from survey data from the commissions of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). We demonstrate that, although both commissions are embedded in inter-governmental organisations, they demonstrate remarkably strong features of actor-level autonomy. Thus, this study suggests that even IPAs constrained by an inter-governmental environment may still wield some degree of autonomy. Finally, the article draws practical implications for reforming IPAs.

## 1 | INTRODUCING THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The rise of political order after the Second World War through organisational capacity building and the growth of bureaucratic autonomy has been identified as a key ingredient of state formation (Bartolini, 2005). This period has also seen the rise of political order above the level of the nation state, reflected in the increasing number of international organisations (IOs) with some autonomous capacity in policy-making and/or policy implementation. Although the dynamics of order formation above nation states in the West are well studied and documented, less scholarly attention has been paid to IOs headquartered in the Global South.[1] We remedy this shortcoming by analysing the commissions of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The article responds to a call for comparative studies of non-Western administrative systems (Haque et al., 2021). Although the AU has established itself at the very core of African political order today (Abdulqawi & Ouguergouz, 2012; Hardt, 2016; Tieku, 2018), ECOWAS has developed into a paramount IO of Western Africa both in economic and security terms (Coleman, 2007; Lokulo-Sodipe & Osuntogun, 2013; Plenk, 2014). The study reveals that the AU and ECOWAS commissions, which are indeed constrained by an inter-governmental environment, may in practice yield some degrees of autonomy. Theoretically, two mechanisms are shown to matter in

this regard: organisational specialisation of IPAs and the organisational affiliation of staff.

Since the end of the Second World War, the rise of the executive authority of IOs worldwide has increased capacity for global problem-solving but also challenged the sovereignty of nation-states (Coen et al., 2022; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2020; Haas, 1964; Trondal, 2010). As public administration at the international level serves as a backbone to emerging supranational orders, that is, going beyond the nation-state, scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding the scope of autonomy of international public administration (IPA), which is the executive arm of IOs (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Bauer et al., 2019; Cox & Jacobson, 1973; Fleischer & Reiners, 2021; Haas, 1964; Heady, 1998; Herold et al., 2021; Knill & Bauer, 2016; Marcussen & Trondal, 2011; Ness & Brechin, 1988; Stone & Moloney, 2019; Thorvaldsdottir et al., 2021). Although extant literature has advanced our knowledge of the *independent* role of IPAs in the provision of public goods (Bauer et al., 2019; Christensen & Yesilkagit, 2018), the organisational dimension of IPA autonomy has received scant attention (Weiss, 1982; Heady, 1998; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2006). The ambition of this contribution is to extend an emergent organisational literature to IPA autonomy (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018) by way of exploring two central cases of regional organisations of the Global South, the AU and ECOWAS. Both instances are hard cases, as their executive commissions must be considered as least likely candidates for IPA autonomy because they are not only solidly embedded in an inter-governmental environment but also small in size and thus in executive capacity. In this contribution, we define autonomy as 'discretion, or the extent to which [an IPA] can decide itself about matters that it considers important' (Verhoest et al., 2010, pp. 18–19). As elaborated below, this study applies an actor-level research strategy. We operationalise actor-level autonomy in two (ideal-type) 'behavioural profiles': (i) The task profile as a 'policy-maker', which focuses on drafting policy proposals; providing scientific, technical and/or legal advice; giving political advice; providing background information; and (ii) the profile as an 'organisational manager', which is oriented towards facilitating compromises—between departments and units, between organisations, and between member states. Both profiles are focused on the 'in-house' role of an IPA civil servant relatively detached from member-state influence. This operationalisation of autonomy strongly underlines the capacity of executive-level IO administrators to set the agenda in the policy areas which fall under the legal or technical responsibility of the IO. In times of crisis, there might even open windows of opportunity that allow IPAs to—temporarily or permanently—expand their competences.

The overall ambition of the study is twofold: The first and most important is to theorise conditions for autonomy of bureaucratic organisations. Thus, we are interested in the display of those features effectively constraining inter-governmentalism, such as a strong reliance on departmental or epistemic concerns among IPAs. We argue that the autonomy of IPAs is supplied endogenously by their organisational architecture. In particular, two mechanisms from organisational studies are shown to matter: organisational specialisation of IPAs and the organisational affiliation of staff inside IPAs. Our secondary ambition is to offer empirical illustrations of how IPA officials of two paramount IOs in the Global South perceive the autonomy of their respective organisation. With this as background, the article poses two interrelated research questions:

1. To what extent do the AU and ECOWAS commissions feature actor-level autonomy?

**Policy implications**

1. The autonomy of international bureaucracies is safeguarded even under less likely conditions, such as when these institutions are embedded in inter-governmental IOs. IPA administrators may thus profoundly alter the policy agenda of their IOs by redesigning the internal organisational structures of the secretariat.
2. Because actor-level autonomy reflects organisational designs of international bureaucracies, it is also subject to organisational (re) design. This implies that the autonomy of individual civil servants of IPAs may be nuged by reforming the substructures of IPAs, such as organisational units and divisions.
3. The likelihood of IOs crafting their own policy agendas is systematically shaped by the autonomy of their bureaucratic arms. This study outlines organisational conditions that enable international bureaucracies to mobilise their own policy agendas quite separate from member state governments. The level of policy autonomy of IPAs may thus be partly affected by organisational design/engineering by the heads of IPAs.
4. Because international bureaucracies harbour stable organisational resources, and because our study establishes substantial effects of organisational structure on actor-level autonomy among IPA staff, our study illuminates the organisational basis for robust global governance. One take-away is that the level of robustness in global governance is subject to organisational design among IPA heads.

2. How and to what extent is actor-level autonomy forged endogenously within them?

Modern governments formulate and execute policies with significant consequences for society on a day-to-day basis (Hupe & Edwards, 2012). With the gradually increasing role of IPAs, one unresolved question is to what extent and under what conditions such administrative bodies may formulate their 'own' policies and thus transcend a mere intergovernmental role empowered by their respective member states. Arguably, the craft of IOs is largely *supplied* by the autonomy of its bureaucratic arm, that is, by the ability of IPAs—and their staff—to act *relatively* independently of mandates and decision premises from member-state governments (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Biermann & Siebenhuner, 2009, 2013; Cox & Jacobson, 1973; Gänzle et al., 2018; Reinalda, 2013; Tieku et al., 2020; Trondal, 2013). Recent studies—using cases from the UN and EU systems—demonstrate that IPAs are both policy entrepreneurs and rule makers, and sometimes rule implementers (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Bauer & Ege, 2016). Thus, IPAs have taken on policy-making roles that transcend the role of a mere passive supply chain for IOs (Bauer et al., 2017; Tieku, 2018). More recently, scholars have started to causally identify conditions under which IPAs may become autonomous bodies. Some studies suggest how the organisational architectures of IPAs shape how they interpret and process behavioural discretion during everyday decision-making processes (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Trondal, 2016; Trondal et al., 2010) and how requisite administrative capacities serve as scope conditions for governance responsiveness (Van Hecke et al., 2021). Others suggest that organisational characteristics of IPAs matter for their overall survival in the long run (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Jones & Hameiri, 2022). Extant literature thus illustrates the extent to which IPAs *may* act autonomously vis-à-vis member-state governments. However, this literature offers inconclusive findings (see Beyers, 2010; Checkel, 2007; Moravcsik, 1999) and, more importantly, lacks broader empirical scope beyond established cases from Western-based IPAs. In the case of ECOWAS, Müller has recently demonstrated that the commission has been used 'as a tool for its member-states, as an autonomous actor as well as a cooperation partner for external actors'—a multifaceted nature of the ECOWAS Commission, which has led the author 'to label the institution a *nexus* for policy making' (Müller, forthcoming). Balogun (2022) challenges the very idea that ECOWAS civil servants are the mere servants to their respective national governments. In our study, the AU and ECOWAS commissions serve as hard cases of IPA autonomy, given that these are inter-governmental IOs that constrain the possibility of these commissions acting autonomously.

The article proceeds in the following steps: The next section outlines the organisational approach and derives four testable propositions. Then, core features of the AU and ECOWAS commissions are outlined by function and staff. The subsequent three sections discuss the data and methodology, outline main findings from the surveys and draw some tentative conclusions about the study of IPAs in global governance.

## 2 | THEORISING BUREAUCRATIC AUTONOMY

This article argues that organisational structures are likely to shape the discretionary behaviour of organisational members towards actor-level autonomy. The general theoretical prediction is that variation in actor-level autonomy reflects variation in the organisational embedment of IPA staff.

Interestingly, the act of organising has often been neglected and contested in much social sciences literature (Olsen, 2010). Extant literature harbours competing ideas on the extent to which actual decision behaviour reflects the organisational structure within which actors are embedded—for example, in public choice, organisational sociology and representative bureaucracy literatures (Meier & Capers, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Niskanen, 1971). Although some observers ascribe lack of government action to political leaders' lack of will, this article advocates that actor-level autonomy is shaped endogenously by organisational positions. Consequently, organisational factors help explain the behaviour of government officials at the micro level and affect the pursuit of domestic public governance at the macro level (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; March & Olsen, 1989; Olsen, 2008; Trondal & Bauer, 2017). An organisational approach thus posits that organisations are not merely expressions of symbol politics (Brunsson, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) but systematically influence human behaviour and decision-making processes by allocating actors' *attention* towards certain problems and solutions (Gulick, 1937; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Contemporary organisation-theory literature focuses on the explanatory power of organisational factors for two reasons (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). First, empirical studies demonstrate that organisation structure triggers systematic and significant effects on decision-making behaviour (Christensen & Lægreid, 2008; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; Trondal et al., 2008). Second, organisational structure is available to deliberate (re)design and may thus be applied as a design instrument of the context of choice in public governance (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009).

An organisational structure is a normative composed set of rules and roles specifying who is expected to do what, how and when (Scott & Davis, 2016). It regulates actors' access to decision processes, broadly defines the preferences that are to be pursued, delimits the types of considerations and alternatives that should be treated as relevant and establishes action capacity by assigning certain tasks to certain roles. It influences decision-making behaviour by providing individuals with 'a systematic and predictable selection of problems, solutions and choice opportunities' (March & Olsen, 1976). The organisational structure consists of a set of routines for attention allocation that makes some choices more *likely* than others (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). This occurs by allocating actors' access to decision situations, mobilising attention to certain problems and solutions, structuring patterns of conflict and cooperation (and thus influencing power relationships) and enabling coordination and steering along certain dimensions rather than others. An organisational approach also acknowledges the multiple causal mechanisms that may connect role expectations to actor-level behaviour. Among these are notably rule and role compliance based on actors' calculation of their own self-interest in which organisations are incentive structures that administer rewards and punishments (Ostrom & Ostrom, 2015), bounded rationality which helps simplify actors' cognitive overload by directing attention towards a selection of possible problems and solutions and ways to connect them (March, 1981; Simon, 1957), and a logic of appropriateness which views human action as driven by internalised normative perceptions (March & Olsen, 1989).

To account for variation in actor-level autonomy of IPA staff, two organisational variables—vertical organisational specialisation and organisational affiliation—will be specified in what follows.

## 2.1 | Vertical organisational specialisation

Given the hierarchical structure of IPAs, the attention of staff is likely to reflect their organisational belonging in the hierarchy. Hierarchy in organisations is likely to lay the foundation for decision biases, for example, by offering a more general view of policy solutions and policy problems in hierarchically superior units than is offered by lower ranked units. Vertical specialisation within organisations installs organisational boundaries between hierarchically 'superiors' and 'subordinates'. Hierarchy within organisations is measured by the respective official's position or rank (see below). Vertical specialisation denotes the division of responsibility and labour within and between organisations. This is both an organisational tool and an organisational signal to anchor relatively independent expertise in certain organisational units—such as government agencies—and thereby balance political loyalty and professional neutrality (e.g. Bach et al., 2015; Egeberg & Trondal, 2017; Lægreid & Verhoest, 2010; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004). *Inter*-organisational vertical specialisation enables agencies to operate relatively insulated from political steering on one hand but relatively influenced by affected interests and professional concerns on the other, often organised into advisory systems (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009; Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008; Veit et al., 2017). *Intra*-organisational vertical specialisation denotes the division of responsibility and labour *within* levels of authority. In this study, we measure this variable by officials' ranks within their respective IPA. Studies reveal that higher ranked staff in governmental organisations are more attentive to political signals than lower ranked personnel and that those in higher ranks usually face more and various 'audiences' than do those at lower ranks (e.g. Christensen & Lægreid, 2009; Egeberg & Sætren, 1999). Studies also demonstrate that top-ranked staff have a wider range of attention and identify more frequently with organisations as wholes than staff located at lower echelons. Executive heads of IPAs are likely to interact more frequently across organisational units and are exposed to broader flows of information than their subordinates and thus may be more attentive to broader organisational perspectives than lower ranked personnel and are often more attentive to political signals (Egeberg & Sætren, 1999; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; Christensen & Lægreid, 2008). One implication is that IPA officials with lower ranks are more loosely coupled to the political leadership and have more local perspectives on task execution than higher ranked staff. This has one important empirical implication: It seems that some degree of insulation from political leadership makes lower ranked officials more sensitive to receiving impulses from stakeholder groups (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). Concomitantly, higher ranked staff are exposed to a broader range of information than lower level staff and thus may be more attentive to broader organisational perspectives than lower ranked personnel (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). It follows that IPA officials with lower ranks are more loosely coupled to the political leadership and are more likely to enact a local perspective on task execution than higher ranked staff. Focusing on vertical specialisation *within* the AU and ECOWAS commissions, the role of a policy-maker is thus likely to emerge among higher ranked than lower ranked staff (March & Olsen, 1984). It thus follows that:

> P1: Actor-level autonomy in general, and the role of 'policy-maker' in particular, is positively associated with the professional rank of staff (as measured by 'employment category').

## 2.2 | Organisational affiliation

Top level (international) public servants often serve in multiple structures and have multiple affiliations (van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019). Some of these affiliations are sequential when officials experience mobility between departments within their own organisations, whereas others are simultaneous when officials occupy several affiliations at the same time. In conceptual terms, we may distinguish between primary and secondary organisational affiliations (Bertels & Schulze-Gabrechten, 2021). A 'primary structure' is the macro structure of organisations, defined as the structure to which participants are expected to devote most of their loyalty, time and energy. In both our cases, we expect the AU and ECOWAS commissions to be the primary affiliations of staff. A 'secondary structure', in turn, is defined as the structure to which participants are expected to be 'part-timers'. Secondary structures are the substructures of organisations, such as collegial bodies, committees, think tanks, expert groups and administrative networks. These are 'weak' organisations that are unlikely to shape actors' decision behaviour to the same extent as primary structures (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018), yet they may contribute to flexible and informal cooperation and coordination (Benz & Goetz, 2021). Empirical studies demonstrate that interdepartmental committees, public–private governing arrangements, regional councils, and expert committees improve interaction and coordination among actors, and erect trust relationships among the participants; however, the effects are moderate (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Egeberg et al., 2003; Lægreid et al., 2016). International civil servants who operate within such a multi-affiliational system are exposed to complex behavioural premises stemming from both primary and secondary structures. In general, a *logic of primacy* suggests that primary affiliations are likely to affect the behaviour of staff more extensively than secondary affiliations (March, 1994). It thus follows that:

> P2: When taking part in both primary and secondary structures, actor-level autonomy is likely to be shaped mainly by primary structures (as measured by 'employment status').

Some organisational affiliations, however, may be *sequential* as when bureaucrats experience mobility between departments within their own organisation. International public administration staff that experience such interservice mobility are exposed to a broader set of information and decision premises than staff with no such interservice mobility. Concomitantly, one may expect that having a broader outlook on the organisation through organisational mobility is more conducive to a policy-making role than staff with no inter-organisational mobility. The latter group is more likely to enact the role of an organisational manager within their administrative unit. It thus follows that:

> P3: International civil servants experiencing interservice mobility are likely to be involved in policy-making processes and thus evoke a 'policy-maker' role compared with international civil servants experiencing low interservice mobility (as measured by work experience from a 'number of departments').

Before we turn to the empirical section, the subsequent sections present our methodology as well as our cases in general, sketching both the functioning and staff demography in the AU and ECOWAS commissions.

## 3 | DATA AND METHODS

Our research strategy is to explore actor-level autonomy as enacted by international civil servants. This study presents data from two surveys conducted among civil servants in the headquarters of the AU and ECOWAS, Addis Ababa and Abuja, respectively, in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019. There are at least two rationales for applying an actor-level focus. First, the discretion available to bureaucracies is made real by individual officeholders (Cox & Jacobson, 1973); second, international civil servants' 'preferences and conceptions of themselves and others ….' are likely to shape their discretionary choices (Olsen, 2005, p. 13). Having operationalised actor-level autonomy in two (ideal-type) behavioural profiles—the task profile as a policy-maker and as an organisational manager—the empirical analysis of these profiles benefits from what we term a multi-proxy probe based on the use of multiple variables (see below). Finally, to measure controlled effects, the two datasets are combined to enable ordinary least square (OLS) regression models. The data reveals that staff at the AU and ECOWAS commissions, both being embedded in inter-governmental IOs, serve as more than the neutral civil servants for member states by acting as policy-makers and organisational managers. The data thus establishes that international civil servants of both IPAs are biased towards the *internal* affairs of their institutions by leaning extensively towards their own organisation, administrative units, policy sectors and expertise more than towards external affairs of member states and other IOs. These data establish how international civil servants may leave independent marks on the policy processes of IPAs. We admit that, although self-perception displayed by officials does not necessarily translate into de facto action, it may still serve as a proxy for action capacity. Furthermore, we probe several proxies to minimise these bias effects. In short, our

survey enables measuring *perceptions* of autonomy through the judgement of international civil servants.

As one of our ambitions is to expand the empirical scope of IPA literature, the dataset consists of data from the headquarters of two African IPAs, the commissions of ECOWAS and the AU. The first survey was distributed manually among ECOWAS officials in 2016; the second dataset was collected electronically from AU officials in 2018. The surveys have been kept nearly identical in terms of their questions. For this study, both datasets have been combined. Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents in both organisations ($N = 204$) in which the AU represents 67% ($N = 137$) and ECOWAS 33% ($N = 67$) of the respondents. Although surveys may offer great insights and are amenable to quantitative data analysis, they also come with significant challenges. First and foremost, response rates tend to be low in the study of IOs, in our cases hovering around 10%. Still, these numbers are comparable with other studies of IPAs (Bauer et al., 2019). Second, respondents may be prone to misperceptions and perceptional bias. To make up for these challenges, we offer a multiproxy probe based on several variables: The *task profile* of staff (Tables 2–5), the *considerations and concerns* they emphasise (Tables 6–8), *whose arguments* they deem important (Tables 9–11) and their *role perceptions* (Table 12). In sum, these proxies are likely to establish robust measures of the two behavioural profiles of autonomy. Each of these proxies will be outlined in greater detail throughout the empirical analysis. Moreover, when interpreting findings, biases on certain variables weight less in the overall analysis. As outlined above, actor-level autonomy is measured by two behavioural profiles: The task profile of policy-maker, which focuses on drafting policy proposals, providing scientific, technical and/or legal advice, giving political advice, providing background information, and the profile of an organisational manager, which focuses on facilitating compromises—between departments and units, between organisations, and between member states.

A dichotomous variable was created to group higher and lower level staff. A total of 30% are higher level staff, whereas 70% are lower level staff. This variable is, however, unevenly distributed between the two IPAs with 62% of higher level staff in ECOWAS against 16% in the AU. A similar pattern emerges regarding organisational affiliation ('employment status'). Although 60% of ECOWAS officials report being permanently employed, only 35% of AU staff have permanent positions. As shown elsewhere, the AU Commission (AUC) is rather 'bottom-heavy'[2] (Tieku et al., 2020) in which most staff are placed at lower levels of the pay scale. Both IPAs share a similar educational profile among the staff in which a majority report having an educational background in economics or business, followed by social sciences. Surprisingly, only a small proportion of the respondents report a law degree. This may reflect a low regulatory competence and activity of these IPAs as compared with the European Commission (Kassim et al., 2013). Most respondents are male and hold a master's degree as their highest academic degree achieved (Tieku et al., 2020).

In addition to the organisational variables, we control for prerecruitment effects by including the educational profiles of staff. Extant literature on

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics, respondents, percent (*N*)

| | | ECOWAS | AU | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Respondents (*N*) | - | 33 (67) | 67 (137) | 100 (204) |
| Category of staff | High level | 62 (38) | 16 (21) | 30 (59) |
| | Low level | 38 (23) | 84 (114) | 70 (137) |
| Employment status | Permanent | 60 (30) | 35 (48) | 42 (78) |
| | Temporary | 40 (20) | 65 (89) | 58 (109) |
| Gender | Male | 72 (48) | 58 (48) | 64 (96) |
| | Female | 28 (19) | 41 (34) | 36 (53) |
| Education | Law | 6 (4) | 12 (10) | 9 (14) |
| | Economics/business | 42 (28) | 48 (39) | 45 (67) |
| | Social science | 18 (27) | 30 (25) | 29 (43) |
| | Humanities | 24 (16) | 15 (12) | 19 (28) |
| | Technical/ engineering | 21 (14) | 10 (8) | 15 (22) |
| Highest academic degree | PhD | 23 (15) | 10 (8) | 16 (23) |
| | Masters | 62 (40) | 71 (56) | 67 (96) |
| | Bachelor | 15 (10) | 18 (14) | 17 (24) |
| | None | 0 (0) | 1 (1) | 1 (1) |

Source: own compilation.

**TABLE 2** Time spent on the following tasks (mean [*N*] and standard deviation (SD), min = 1 max = 5)

| Tasks | ECOWAS | AU | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Drafting policy proposals | 2.3 (64) | 3.2 (91) | 2.8 (155) | 1.4 |
| Giving scientific, technical and/or legal advice | 2.2 (62) | 3.1 (92) | 2.8 (154) | 1.4 |
| Giving political advice | 3.6 (61) | 3.8 (88) | 3.8 (149) | 1.4 |
| Providing background information | 2.4 (62) | 2.9 (89) | 2.7 (151) | 1.4 |
| Contacting and meeting people | 2.0 (64) | 2.3 (91) | 2.2 (155) | 1.1 |
| Facilitating compromises between departments and units | 2.5 (63) | 2.8 (91) | 2.7 (154) | 1.2 |
| Facilitating compromises between different bodies within the organisation | 2.9 (60) | 3.3 (89) | 3.2 (149) | 1.4 |
| Facilitating compromises with member states | 2.6 (63) | 3.2 (89) | 3.0 (152) | 1.5 |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very much, (2) Much, (3) Somewhat, (4) Little, (5) Very little/none.

**TABLE 3** Intercorrelation matrix on task profile (Pearson's r)

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Drafting policy proposals | | 0.59** | 0.47** | 0.53** | 0.35** | 0.19* | 0.32** | 0.38** |
| 2. Providing scientific, technical and/or legal advice | | | 0.35** | 0.46** | 0.22** | 0.17* | 0.15 | 0.24** |
| 3. Giving political advice | | | | 0.51** | 0.43** | 0.23* | 0.43** | 0.46** |
| 4. Providing background information | | | | | 0.44** | 0.26* | 0.40** | 0.44** |
| 5. Contacting and meeting people | | | | | | 0.37** | 0.35** | 0.38** |
| 6. Facilitating compromises between departments and units | | | | | | | 0.66** | 0.50** |
| 7. Facilitating compromises between different bodies within the organisation | | | | | | | | 0.68** |
| 8. Facilitating compromises between member states | | | | | | | | |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very important, (2) Fairly important, (3) Somewhat important, (4) Less important, (5) Not important.
*$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.

**TABLE 4** Loading matrix of factor solution after orthogonal varimax rotation (salient loading values are printed in bold)

| | Factor 1: Policy-maker | Factor 2: Organisational manager |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Drafting policy proposals | **0.8144** | 0.1897 |
| 2. Providing scientific, technical and/or legal advice | **0.7952** | −0.0229 |
| 3. Giving political advice | **0.6170** | 0.4060 |
| 4. Providing background information | **0.7468** | 0.3126 |
| 5. Contacting and meeting people | 0.4642 | 0.4605 |
| 6. Facilitating compromises between departments and units | 0.0341 | **0.8281** |
| 7. Facilitating compromises between different bodies within the organisation | 0.1621 | **0.8846** |
| 8. Facilitating compromises between member states | 0.3178 | **0.7653** |

representative bureaucracy argues that the behaviour of staff may be influenced by prerecruitment factors—that is, their demographic profiles and beliefs (Pfeffer, 1982; Selden, 1997). According to the idea of individual presocialisation outside organisations before recruitment, international civil servants may be 'prepacked' before entering organisations (Pfeffer, 1982, p. 277; Selden, 1997; Trondal et al., 2018). However, studies suggest that background factors, except for educational background, seem to have only a modest impact on officials' actual behaviour, also among international civil servants embedded in IPAs (Christensen & Lægreid, 2009; Egeberg, 2003, 2006; Meier & Nigro, 1976; Olsen, 1983; Trondal, 2010; Trondal et al., 2010). This study uses educational background as proxy for individual presocialisation in the

postrecruitment phase and probes if international civil servants with different expertise are likely to perceive their bureaucratic role much differently. In short, the length of staff education is likely to be positively associated with taking on a policy-making role.

## 4 | STRUCTURES, DEVELOPMENTS, AND FUNCTIONING OF THE AU AND ECOWAS COMMISSIONS

Despite being essentially inter-governmental IOs, both the AU and ECOWAS are quite different in size and staff. As of 2022, the AU, founded in 2011, encompasses all states of the African continent, that is, 55 countries (when Morocco rejoined in 2017, having left the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1982, rejoined in 2017) and 1.3 billion people; the ECOWAS consists of 15 members totalling 407 million inhabitants. Both the AU and ECOWAS commissions are relatively small and differ significantly in employment structure: Whereas the appointed staff of the AUC number approximately 1,700 at the headquarters in Addis Ababa and at the representative missions around the world (African Union, 2019, p. 232), the ECOWAS Commission consists of approximately 730 staff members, that is, two-thirds of the total number of staff in ECOWAS organisations overall. ECOWAS relies on permanent contracts whereas the AUC is characterised by 'short-termism' (see Tieku et al., 2020) for employment contracts.

The AU was founded in May 2001, and eventually launched in Durban, South Africa, in July 2002. It replaced its predecessor, the OAU, of 1963. It is the prime organisation for continental economic and political cooperation and integration. After the AU member states had adopted the statutes, the AUC eventually became operational in 2002. It is mandated to represent the AU and defend its interests under the guidance of, and as mandated by the Assembly and Executive Council; initiate proposals to be submitted to the AU's organs, as well as implement decisions taken by them; act as the custodian of the AU Constitutive Act and OAU/AU legal instruments; provide operational support for all AU organs; assist member states in implementing the AU's programmes; draft common African positions and coordinate member-states' actions in international negotiations; manage the AU budget, resources and strategic planning; elaborate, promote, coordinate, and harmonise the AU's programmes and policies with those of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs); ensure gender mainstreaming in all AU programmes and activities; take action as delegated by the Assembly and Executive Council (African Union, 2014, p. 46). These

**TABLE 5** Index variables on policy-making and organisational manager (*N*, mean and standard deviation (SD), min = 1, max = 5)

| | *N* | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Policy-making | 145 | 3.0 | 1.1 |
| Organisational manager ('Facilitating compromises') | 147 | 3.0 | 1.2 |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very much, (2), Much, (3) Somewhat, (4) Little, (5) Very little/none.

**TABLE 6** Importance ascribed to the following considerations and concerns (mean (*N*) with standard deviation (SD), min = 1, max = 5)

| Considerations/concern | ECOWAS | AU | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political/ideological | 3.3 (61) | 3.2 (86) | 3.2 (147) | 1.5 |
| Particularly affected parties | 2.5 (62) | 2.6 (88) | 2.5 (150) | 1.3 |
| Professional/scientific/expertise | 1.6 (61) | 1.8 (94) | 1.7 (155) | 1.0 |
| Policy sector | 1.6 (62) | 2.0 (89) | 1.9 (155) | 1.1 |
| National | 2.2 (62) | 3.1 (91) | 2.8 (153) | 1.4 |
| Overall African | 2.1 (63) | 1.7 (87) | 2.0 (152) | 1.1 |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very important, (2) Fairly important, (3) Somewhat important, (4) Less important, (5) Not important.

**TABLE 7** Intercorrelation matrix on considerations and concerns (Pearson's r)

| Considerations/concern: | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Ideological/political | | 0.62** | 0.23* | 0.30** | 0.46** | 0.31** |
| 2. Affected parties | | | 0.37** | 0.41** | 0.43** | 0.26** |
| 3. Professional | | | | 0.65** | 0.28** | 0.44** |
| 4. Policy sector | | | | | 0.42** | 0.54** |
| 5. National | | | | | | 0.32** |
| 6. Overall African | | | | | | |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very important, (2) Fairly important, (3) Somewhat important, (4) Less important, (5) Not important.
**$p \leq 0.01$.

functions highlight the AUC's central role in contributing to pan-African integration and management of African affairs.

Functionally, the AUC has been described, albeit somewhat vaguely, as the 'engine room' (Fagbayibo, 2012, p. 15) of the AU as it is responsible for the day-to-day management of AU affairs. The AUC consists of a political and an administrative wing: Politically, the AUC comprises ten elected officials (Commissioners) and appointed corps of administrative and technical staff (African Union, 2002). The elected officials include the Chairperson of the Commission, the Deputy Chairperson of the Commission, and eight commissioners. Each of the five African regions (i.e., Central Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa), is entitled to two commissioners (Tieku et al., 2020). African Union officials are categorised into two groups: Professional Staff (ranked from P1 to D1) and General Service Staff. The General Service Staff people are grouped into General Service A and General Service B. The General Service A people are primarily administrative, clerical, maintenance, and paramedical personnel, whereas the General Service B, or what the AUC calls the Auxiliary Staff, are mainly drivers and security personnel.

**TABLE 8** Loading matrix of factor solution after orthogonal varimax rotation (salient loading values are printed in bold)

| | Factor 1: Inter-governmental | Factor 2: Supranational |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Ideological/ political | 0.1190 | **0.8810** |
| 2. Affected parties | 0.2287 | **0.8084** |
| 3. Professional | **0.8360** | 0.1256 |
| 4. Policy sector | **0.8575** | 0.2327 |
| 5. National | 0.2918 | **0.6851** |
| 6. Overall African | **0.7348** | 0.2143 |

In turn, ECOWAS was established on 25 May 1975, and its founding treaty—the Treaty of Lagos—was signed by 15 member states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde (joined in 1976), Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo (Mauretania withdrew from ECOWAS in 2000). Although first and foremost concerned with matters of economic integration—pursuing the goal of currency union—ECOWAS has gained considerable clout both as a proponent of free trade and labour migration as well as a security actor in the region. During the 1990s and 2000s, after a spate of controversies inside the Community, ECOWAS eventually engaged on a track leading to several regional peacekeeping interventions (Coleman, 2007, pp. 73–115). ECOWAS's primary stated objective remained to promote 'economic integration and the realisation of the objectives of the African Economic Community' (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Article 2[1]) in all fields of economic activity including labour and capital. To achieve these goals, ECOWAS's member states have not only established 'Community Institutions […] *with relevant and adequate* powers' but are also convinced 'that the integration of the Member States into a viable regional Community *may* demand the partial and gradual pooling of national sovereignties to the Community *within the context of a collective political will*' (Preamble to ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Article 1, *emphasis added*).

At the head of the executive arm of ECOWAS is the commission, responsible for providing policy drafts to both the Assembly and the Council and executing decisions and regulations adopted by the ECOWAS member states. Organisational reforms agreed by the Assembly, that is, the heads of state and government of ECOWAS in 2006 have also sought to strengthen the applicability of Community legal acts within the member states. Consequently, the commission has been allowed, in principle, to assume a more significant role in

**TABLE 9** Importance assigned to arguments from the following (mean [*N*] and standard deviation (SD), min = 1, max = 5)

| Group/organisation/authority | ECOWAS | AU | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Colleagues in the same department | 1.4 (65) | 1.9 (91) | 1.7 (156) | 0.9 |
| Head of unit/director | 1.3 (65) | 1.7 (89) | 1.5 (154) | 0.9 |
| Colleagues in other departments | 1.9 (64) | 2.4 (89) | 2.2 (153) | 1.1 |
| Commissioner(s) | 1.5 (63) | 2.8 (84) | 2.2 (147) | 1.3 |
| Own organisation | 1.6 (63) | 2.1 (86) | 1.9 (149) | 1.1 |
| RECs | 2.2 (58) | 2.8 (82) | 2.5 (140) | 1.7 |
| National governments | 1.9 (63) | 2.9 (80) | 2.5 (143) | 1.2 |
| Interest organisations | 2.4 (60) | 3.2 (83) | 2.9 (143) | 1.2 |
| Industry/business | 2.3 (59) | 3.4 (80) | 3.0 (139) | 1.4 |
| University | 2.3 (59) | 3.1 (80) | 2.8 (139) | 1.2 |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very important, (2) Fairly important, (3) Important, (4) Less important, (5) Not important.

**TABLE 10** Intercorrelation matrix on weight assigned to arguments (Pearson's r)

| Arguments from | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Colleagues in same department | | 0.72** | 0.60** | 0.39** | 0.40** | 0.37** | 0.39** | 0.29** | 0.28** | 0.27** |
| 2. Head/Director of own unit | | | 0.58** | 0.53** | 0.53** | 0.40** | 0.41** | 0.30** | 0.31** | 0.34** |
| 3. Colleagues in other departments | | | | 0.57** | 0.42** | 0.44** | 0.40** | 0.38** | 0.31** | 0.23** |
| 4. Commissioner(s) | | | | | 0.61** | 0.45** | 0.54** | 0.42** | 0.54** | 0.47** |
| 5. Own organisation | | | | | | 0.49** | 0.52** | 0.46** | 0.47** | 0.57** |
| 6. RECs | | | | | | | 0.67** | 0.66** | 0.50** | 0.64** |
| 7. National governments | | | | | | | | 0.69** | 0.55** | 0.60** |
| 8. Interest organisations | | | | | | | | | 0.70** | 0.72** |
| 9. Industry/ business | | | | | | | | | | 0.74** |
| 10. University | | | | | | | | | | |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very important' (2) Fairly important, (3) Important, (4) Less important, (5) Not important.
**$p \leq 0.01$.

**TABLE 11** Loading matrix of factor solution after orthogonal varimax rotation (salient loading values are printed in bold)

| Arguments from | Factor 1: Intra- organisational arguments | Factor 2: Inter-organisational arguments |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Colleagues in same department | 0.1531 | **0.8283** |
| 2. Head/Director of own unit | 0.1828 | **0.8719** |
| 3. Colleagues in other departments | 0.2483 | **0.8027** |
| 4. Commissioner(s) | 0.5271 | **0.5800** |
| 5. Own organisation | 0.5131 | **0.5822** |
| 6. RECs | **0.7320** | 0.3234 |
| 7. National governments | **0.7749** | 0.3163 |
| 8. Interest organisations | **0.8734** | 0.1740 |
| 9. Industry/business | **0.8502** | 0.1903 |
| 10. University | **0.8768** | 0.1689 |

**TABLE 12** Role perceptions (mean [(*N*] with standard deviation (SD), min = 1, max = 5)

| | ECOWAS | AU | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent expert | 3.0 (54) | 2.8 (70) | 2.9 (124) | 1.6 |
| Representative of national government | 3.8 (53) | 4.3 (64) | 4.0 (117) | 1.1 |
| Representative of their organisation | 1.5 (62) | 2.2 (84) | 1.9 (146) | 1.3 |
| Representative of own department (policy sector) | 1.6 (60) | 1.8 (82) | 1.7 (142) | 1.1 |

*Note*: Applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (4) Disagree, (5) Strongly disagree.

policy shaping and agenda setting. In addition, it is responsible for 'Community development programs and projects, as well as regulating multinational enterprises of the region' (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Article 19[3]).

The ECOWAS Commission President is appointed by the Authority, the meeting of heads of state and government, for a nonrenewable term of 4 years (except for the *transitional* 2016–2018 Commission). The president is assisted by a vice president and 13 commissioners elected for a period of four nonrenewable years. The vice president and commissioners are appointed by the Council of Ministers 'following the evaluation of the three candidates nominated by their respective Member States to whom the posts have been allocated' (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Article 18[4]). Altogether, *16 statutory employees of the political Commission are appointed by the member states*. *At the administrative level*, *there is an equal ratio of professional staff (including 40 directors) and local staff (Financial Controller's Annual Report*, *2017)*. *At the level of such* professional staff, 'equitable geographical distribution of posts among nationals of all Member States' is an explicit consideration (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993, Article 18[5]).

## 5 | ACTOR-LEVEL AUTONOMY IN THE AU AND ECOWAS COMMISSIONS

This section offers a multiproxy analysis of actor-level autonomy among AU and ECOWAS staff. As outlined above, the analysis benefits from several variables from the survey: The *task profile* of staff (Tables 2–5), the *considerations and concerns* they emphasise (Tables 6–8), *whose arguments* they deem important (Tables 9–11) and their *role perceptions* (Table 12).

Tables 2–5 suggest equally distributed task profiles of policy-maker and organisational manager among AU and ECOWAS commission officials, which is conducive to actor-level autonomy. Staff tend to be involved directly in political tasks, such as providing political advice, drafting policy proposals, as well as managers and coordinators ensuring the running of everyday business, such as providing background information, facilitating compromises, and providing scientific, technical and/or legal advice. This suggests prima facie that respondents are *more than* only organisational managers and coordinators and that they assume autonomous policy-making roles and tasks within their respective organisations. The data thus subscribe to the thrust of extant literature on Western IPAs exhibiting significant policy-making roles for IPA staff (Bauer et al., 2019; Eckhard & Parizek, 2022; Mele & Cappellaro, 2018; Trondal et al., 2010, 2018). Next, compatible with an organisational approach, IPA staff are generally preoccupied with *internal tasks* over external ones. Reflecting the organisational boundaries within IPAs, officials report that they are less involved in *inter*-organisational processes such as facilitating compromises between different bodies (3.2) or between member states (3.0) than *intra*-organisational processes.

Table 2 also suggests that the blend of policy-making and organisational management is reflected in patterns of networking (2.2), provision of background information (2.7), facilitating compromises between different departments and units of their respective IPA (2.7), and providing political advice (3.8). These observations suggest co-existing task profiles as both policy-makers and organisational managers. Moreover, ECOWAS officials are slightly more involved in providing policy advice and providing scientific and legal advice (2.2) than AU staff (3.1). Ostensibly, this may reflect a larger proportion of high-level staff among ECOWAS respondents than among AU respondents (*P1*).

Moreover, Tables 3–5 (below) reveal substantial association between variables associated with the task profiles of staff. Studying covariance by using factor analysis (principal component analysis), two factors display eigenvalues greater than 1. Items with factor loadings close to 0.6 (and above) were retained to measure the specific constructs. Factor 1 comprises Items 1–4; Factor 2 comprises Items 6–8. The former denotes an equally distributed task profile of policy-maker and organisational manager in both AU and ECOWAS commissions, which together is conducive to actor-level autonomy.[3]

Next, respondents were asked which *considerations and concerns* they emphasise during everyday work. Tables 6–8 map the compound sets of considerations and concerns emphasised by the staff and offers a factor analysis that brings these considerations into two main groupings—supranational/sectoral concerns that indicate actor-level autonomy and inter-governmental/ideological concerns that denote the reverse. Showcasing the fragile autonomy of these IPAs, the tables suggest that inter-governmentalism is generally more strongly emphasised than supranationalism among AU and ECOWAS commission staff. Yet, these data also suggests that respondents tend to emphasise a *compound* set of concerns and considerations that transcends inter-governmentalism, which is conducive to actor-level autonomy.

However, Table 6 also shows that professional considerations rather than politico-ideological concerns are prioritised among both ECOWAS and AU officials (1.0). This aligns with an extensive literature documenting epistemic dynamics as a primary behavioural logic within IPAs and the importance of the organisational-manager role in ECOWAS and AU (Bauer et al., 2019; Trondal et al., 2010). In the same vein, concerns relating to their own policy sectors (1.9) as well as overall African concerns (2.0) are being given substantial weight. Less attention is assigned to political or ideological concerns (3.2). Similar findings on actor-level autonomy are revealed in studies of Western IPAs and in studies of national government administrations (Eckhard & Parizek, 2022; Trondal, 2008; Trondal et al., 2010). Interestingly, ECOWAS officials appear to ascribe more importance to national concerns (2.2) than AU officials (3.1) and conversely, AU officials assign slightly more weight to overall African concerns (1.7) than their peers in ECOWAS (2.1). This variation may be the result of the AU's pan-African vocation as well as a higher percentage of lower level and, above all, nonpermanent staff among AU respondents (*P1*). Studies reveal that higher level staff have a broader task profile and a broader outlook than lower ranked staff—compatible with the role of policy-maker (Kühn & Trondal, 2018). Also, in line with our first proposition (*P1*), lower level staff are generally more engaged with task-specific managerial portfolios and less with overall African policy challenges. As predicted, behavioural profiles thus reflect *intra*-organisational vertical specialisation of these IPAs.

Moreover, correlation analyses (Tables 7 and 8) reveal substantial correlation between items associated with the concerns and considerations emphasised, which indeed goes counter to actor-level autonomy. Table 8 suggests that 'inter-governmentalism' is

emphasised more firmly than 'supranationalism' among both AU and ECOWAS commission staff. Factor analysis again demonstrates that two factors have eigenvalues greater than 1. Items with factor loadings around 0.6 and above were retained to measure the specific constructs. Factor 1 comprises Items 1, 2 and 5; Factor 2 comprises Items 3, 4 and 6. Factor 1 suggests an emphasis on inter-governmental and ideological considerations and concerns, whereas Factor 2 suggests an emphasis on supranational and sectoral considerations and concerns.[4]

Next, Tables 9–11 map whose *arguments* are deemed important by AU and ECOWAS commission staff, and a factor analysis reduces these observations into two main groups—arguments from actors outside their own organisation (*inter*-organisational arguments) and actors inside own organisation (*intra*-organisational arguments), in which the latter is conducive to actor-level autonomy. Compatible with this assumption and in line with an organisational approach, these tables suggest that IPA staff are more attentive to *intra*-organisational arguments than to *inter*-organisational ones. In line with our second proposition (*P2*), these observations suggest actor-level autonomy as driven by the organisational embedment of staff within the primary organisations of IPAs. These primary organisational affiliations seem to direct the attention of staff to in-house arguments and concerns above arguments from actors outside their own organisation.

Next, to measure the effect of organisational structuring, the importance attached to different arguments are grouped into three organisational categories. The first category is one's 'own department or unit': respondents tend to assign most weight to the head/director of their own unit (1.5) and colleagues in their department (1.7). Second, substantial weight is also assigned to arguments deriving from the 'organisation as a whole' (1.9), commissioners (2.2) and colleagues in other departments (2.2). The third category encompasses 'actors outside the IPA', that is for example, RECs (2,5), national governments (2.5), universities (2.8), interest organisations (2.9) and industry/business (3.0). Moreover, comparing the two IPAs, ECOWAS officials assign significantly more weight to arguments from commissioner(s) (1.5) as well as from national governments (1.9) than AU officials. As Table 9 suggests, the less structural distance there is between actors, the more likely they are to emphasise each other's argumentation.

Moreover, correlation analyses (Tables 10 and 11) reveal substantial correlations between items related to which arguments officials tend to emphasise. Our study of covariance using factor analysis (principal component analysis) suggests two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Items with factor loadings around 0.6 and above were retained to measure the specific constructs. Factor 1 comprises Items 1–5; Factor 2 comprises Items 5–10. The former suggests that weight is assigned to *intra*-organisational arguments, that is, to arguments from actors within their IPA. In accordance with *P2*, staff are likely to emphasise arguments originating from within their primary organisational structure.[5]

Finally, Table 12 reports *role perceptions* among IPA staff. Reflecting their primary organisational affiliations (*P2*), Table 12 suggests that staff primarily identify as being a representative of their own department and policy sector (1.7), followed by affiliation to the IPA as a whole (1.9) and their own expertise (2.9). By contrast, most respondents do not identify as a representative of their national government (4.0). All these observations consistently suggest actor-level autonomy as regards staff's role perceptions, including both the roles of policy-maker and organisational manager. Moreover, these observations align with most studies of IPAs by establishing how international civil servants tend to adopt a compound set of behavioural patterns that transcends an *inter*-governmental one (Bauer et al., 2019; Müller, forthcoming).

Although the tables above demonstrate systematic effects of organisational specialisation (*P1*) and organisational affiliation (*P2*), they do not offer controlled effects. To provide controlled effects, the two datasets were combined to allow an OLS regression model. Table 13 estimates the relative impact of vertical organisational specialisation (employment category [*P1*]), organisational affiliation (employment status [*P2*]), intra-organisational mobility (number of departments [*P3*]), and organised demography (academic degree) on the task profile of staff.

The regression model suggests that respondents occupied with policy-making tasks tend to be temporarily employed (–0.23*) and enjoy *intra*-organisational mobility (0.24**). The policy-maker profile is positively associated with having several sets of portfolios and competences across IPAs. A positive relationship is also found for educational background (0.33**): The higher the academic degree, the more likely it is that international civil servants are involved in the policy-making processes of IPAs, and thus enacting the policy-making profile. Finally, being an organisational manager is associated primarily with educational background (0.21*). Moreover, partly to the result of a small number of observations, the explained variance in this model is low and therefore less emphasised in our overall conclusion. Unfortunately, the moderate *N* in the dataset rendered no other regression models significant. By running similar OLS models with *P1*, *P2*, and *P3* on two other dependent variables ('*consideration and concerns*' and '*weight assigned to arguments*'), no significant findings were established. As such, the empirical probes of *P1* and *P2* are primarily made by the above multiproxy analysis (Tables 2–12) and conclusions are drawn with caution.

**TABLE 13** Multivariate regression analysis on task profile[a] (using index variables—standardised beta coefficients)

| | Policy-making | Organisational manager (e.g. facilitating compromises) |
|---|---|---|
| Employment category[b] | −0.11 | 0.03 |
| Employment status[c] | −0.23* | −0.02 |
| Number of departments[d] | 0.24** | −0.09 |
| Academic degree[e] | 0.33** | 0.21* |
| $R^2$ | *0.28* | *0.07* |
| *Adjusted* $R^2$ | *0.25* | *0.04* |
| *F-statistic/F* | *10.187* | *2200* |
| *Significance F* | *0.000* | *0.074* |

*Note*: *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.

[a]Task profile applies the following 5-value scale: (1) Very much, (2) Much, (3) Somewhat, (4) Little, (5) Very little/none.

[b]Employment category is a dichotomous variable with values (1) high level and (0) low level.

[c]Employment status is a dichotomous variable with values (1) permanent and (0) temporary.

[d]Number of departments is a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 17.

[e]Academic degree applies the following 4-value scale: (1) PhD., (2) Master's, (3) Bachelor, (4) none.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOKS

Building on a steadily growing scholarship on IPAs (Fleischer & Reiners, 2021; Trondal, 2016), this study extends this strand of literature to include non-Western IPAs with the case of the commissions of the AU and ECOWAS. Theoretically, this study advances this literature with an organisation theory approach, which is particularly useful in two respects. First, it adds new knowledge of how governance architectures shape actor-level autonomy within IPAs. Arguably, actor-level autonomy cannot be captured adequately without including the organisational dimension of it. Second, it also adds practical value for managing reforms inside IPAs as organisational variables may be 'nudged' to achieve desired outcomes. In this way, theoretically informed empirical research may provide guidance to policy intervention and reforms. This is of particular importance at a time when an increasing number of global challenges, such as mitigating climate change, are left to IOs—and their administrations—to be addressed and eventually solved. Because common global problems that migrate across states would need some element of administrative (and political) tools beyond the nation-state to be effectively solved, it may be essential to understand conditions under which IPAs—and their staff—may act relatively independently (see below).

Our findings demonstrate that AU and ECOWAS commission officials converge on several indicators that are conducive to actor-level autonomy. Officials report that they are mostly involved in *intra*-organisational processes rather than *inter*-organisational processes that involve other bodies in these IPAs and their member states. ECOWAS officials are slightly more engaged in providing policy advice and providing scientific and legal advice than AU staff. We thus found equally distributed task profiles of policy-maker and organisational manager among both the AU and ECOWAS commission staff, which together is conducive to actor-level autonomy. AU and ECOWAS commission officials are also likely to emphasise arguments originating from within their primary organisational structure and far more attentive to arguments arriving from within than outside their own IPA. In sum, these observations align with most studies of IPAs, establishing how international civil servants tend to adopt a compound set of behavioural patterns that transcends an *inter*-governmental one. Still, although inter-governmentalism is generally more strongly emphasised than supranationalism among both the AU and ECOWAS commission staffs, the data also suggests that respondents tend to emphasise a *compound* set of concerns and considerations. The autonomy of AU and ECOWAS staff is thus profoundly constrained by the inter-governmental organisational environment of these IOs. Yet, the study does suggest that these IPAs are more than just neutral secretariats for member states and may act as autonomous policy-makers and organisational managers in their own right. As a hard case of actor-level autonomy of IPAs, these findings are significant contributions to extant literature on IPA autonomy. Supporting observations from Western IPAs, the study establishes that international civil servants are quite strongly featured by actor-level autonomy.

Our study also demonstrates that organisational factors are structuring elements in the autonomy perceptions of IPA staff. A multiproxy analysis establishes that the behavioural and role perceptions of these IPA officials are biased towards *internal* affairs of IPAs by leaning extensively towards their own organisation, administrative units, policy sectors and expertise. Moreover, these observations suggest that the conduct of international civil servants is systematically shaped by in-house organisational structures. These findings are also conducive to IPAs leaving *autonomous*

imprints on the policy processes of the IOs in which they are embedded. However, based on the design of survey research, we cannot tie these observations directly to concrete cases of policy-making. Yet, what this study indeed accomplishes is unpacking the actor-level behavioural patterns that are conducive to policy implications.

By using organisation theory, insights from the study may be used to set out design implications (see also Coen et al., 2022, p. 7). Insights into how organisational factors affect public governance is arguably a necessary precondition for using organisation theory to metagovern (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). 'Metagovernance' denotes activity aiming at deliberately shaping the organisational setting itself. This study thus advocates that organisation theory as a craft requires organisation theory as science. Craft and science are thus complementary endeavours, not opposing, parts of a theory on the organisational dimensions of IPAs and global policy-making. As such, the pursuit of knowledge is not necessarily the enemy of the pursuit of relevance. Providing policy recommendations is a two-sided sword depending on the objective that should be pursued. If the policy challenge is how to cope organisationally with societal challenges that transcend national borders, transborder issues related to, for example, water supply, transport and energy infrastructure, migration, climate change and security trigger a need for coordination and joint decision-making. A traditional organisational answer to such challenges is to form secondary structures at the international level, such as networks, committees and collegial bodies that encompass representatives from the affected territories. Such organisational measures tend to enhance actual information exchange, coordination and trust, although to a modest degree. The limits of horizontal organisation structures follow from the secondary nature of such structures: The network or collegial body constitutes a setting in which participants are expected to be only part-timers whereas the member organisations make up their primary structures. Compared with setting up networks and collegial bodies across geographical borders, adding a new level of government represents a radical, but more effective, reform. By establishing a level of government above the existing level, one endows policy-makers with broader decision horizons and preferences that reflect the interests of the larger territory, provided that the new bodies constitute the *primary* structure of those policy-makers. Studies demonstrate that, for designing a supranational organisation such as the European Commission, the relative independence of executive politicians and bureaucrats from national governments is further underpinned by specialising the organisation according to nonterritorial principles, for example, purpose/sector (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). In addition, if interested in increasing in-house conditions for rising actor-level autonomy of IPA civil servants, one option would be to increase inter-departmental staff mobility in a structured way—allowing international civil servants to acquire a more comprehensive organisational perspective, which may then increase organisational autonomy writ large.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] We use the term Global South to mean broadly the regions of Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Latin America and Oceania.

[2] Most AU respondents are lower level employees because the AU is a ´bottom-heavy´ organisation. As Tieku et al. (2020) have noted, more than 74% of AU staff are in the bottom half of the organisation.

[3] Cronbach's alpha for the four items in Factor 1 is 0.79 and 0.83 for the three items in Factor 2. An index variable was created for both factors.

[4] Cronbach's alpha is 0.75 (Factor 1) and 0.78 (Factor 2). An index variable was created for both factors.

[5] Cronbach's alpha for the five items is 0.85 (Factor 1) and 0.91 (Factor 2). An index variable was created for both factors.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**Table S1** Index variables on inter-governmental and supranational considerations and concerns (*N*, mean and standard deviation, min = 1, max = 5)

**Table S2** Index variables on inter-—and extra-—organisational arguments (*N*, mean and standard deviation, min = 1, max = 5)

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