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Fixing the African Union's Funding System



Advancing meaningful and impactful African integration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The African Union needs a financing compact that preserves equitable burden-sharing but delivers much stronger payment discipline, cash predictability, and African-controlled resources.

The current three-tier assessed-contribution system remains necessary, but it is not sufficient on its own to meet the four above stated objectives. It distributes obligations in a politically defensible way, yet it has not reliably generated timely payment by most member states, predictable cash flow, or the level of internally controlled financing that the Union requires. The result is a widening gap between what the AU approves, what it can execute during the financial year, and what it can finance on terms that preserve strategic autonomy.

This advisory, therefore, recommends a revised three-tier financing compact. It retains differentiated contribution levels, broadens the pool of serious contributors, protects smaller and more fiscally constrained states, and adds earned, reviewable incentives tied to full and timely payment. The case for reform is not that incentives alone will solve arrears. It is that the present system needs a stronger political economy of compliance than sanctions and burden-sharing rules can provide by themselves.

The recommendation is deliberately phased. A first phase should introduce procedurally modest incentives that are easier to defend politically and legally, including stronger access to oversight roles, structured consultative standing in regional nomination and rotation processes, priority hosting opportunities, formal recognition for compliance, and practical support measures for states facing verified liquidity stress. A second phase, to be considered only after formal review, could examine more sensitive measures such as structured roles around selected top offices and a one-time reconsideration procedure for exceptionally high-cost decisions. No phase should create permanent privilege or any single-state veto.

CONTEXT

The financial needs of the AU

The AU's financing requirement has three distinct dimensions. The first is the approved annual budget. The second is cash at hand. The third is the strategic autonomy requirement, the share of financing that must come from African-controlled sources if the Union is to act with credibility, predictability, and policy independence. These dimensions should be kept analytically distinct because they answer different questions: how much the Union needs, how much it actually has when required, and how much of that financing it controls. Burden-sharing then enters as a related but separate question, namely how the responsibility for meeting those financing needs is allocated across Member States.

On the Union's own approved figures, the African Union's financing needs are already substantial and rising. The AU approved an overall budget of US\$608,248,546 for 2025 and US\$796,028,694 for 2026. Within the 2026 regular budget, US\$169,686,285 is allocated to operations, US\$296,970,153 to programmes, and US\$225,699,812 to peace support operations. On approved figures alone, the AU now requires roughly US\$0.6 billion to US\$0.8 billion annually to operate at its planned level, and the trajectory is upward.¹

This matters because the current assessed-contributions cap is far below that requirement. Even if every Member State paid fully and on time, the existing US\$200 million ceiling would still leave a very large financing gap of US\$596 million against the 2026 approved budget. The implication is that compliance reform, while necessary, cannot by itself solve the Union's resource problem. Better payment discipline would improve predictability and reduce arrears, but it would still leave the AU materially short of the resources required to finance its mandates, sustain its institutions, and act with strategic autonomy.

The challenge becomes even sharper when measured against the Union's own burden-sharing commitments. Under the Johannesburg and Kigali financing decisions, Member States committed to finance 100 per cent of operations, 75 per cent of

programmes, and 25 per cent of peace support operations.² Yet by February 2025 the Assembly acknowledged that these targets remained unmet, with Member States financing only 24 per cent of the programme budget and peace support operations still heavily dependent on external partners. This shows that the problem is not simply one of delayed payment under an otherwise adequate system. It is also a structural mismatch between the level of financing the Union says it needs, the share it has committed to fund from its own resources, and the amount it is presently able to raise.

The 2026 financing structure illustrates that mismatch clearly. Of the US\$296.97 million programme budget, only 22.6 per cent is expected from Member States, African institutions, and other internal sources. Of the US\$225.70 million allocated to peace support operations, US\$210.70 million is expected from international partners, while only US\$15 million is projected from Peace Fund interest. The central problem, therefore, is not only that the AU budget is ambitious. It is that the Union's ambitions, approved commitments, and actual self-financing capacity remain misaligned. As a result, the AU faces not just a funding gap, but a persistent gap between what it has decided to do and what it can reliably finance on its own, in full and on time.³

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How the African Union is funded

The AU currently uses a three-tier assessed-contribution system that classifies Member States by economic size. Tier 1 covers Member States whose share of total combined AU GDP is 4 per cent

or more. Tier 2 covers those with a share of at least 1 per cent but less than 4 per cent. Tier 3 covers those below 1 per cent. Under the current formula, Tier 1 carries 45.151 per cent of the assessed-contribution burden, Tier 2 carries 32.749 per cent, and Tier 3 carries 22.100 per cent, subject to a floor of US\$350,000 and a ceiling of US\$35 million per state.

The design logic is defensible. It seeks to balance solidarity, ability to pay, and equitable burden-sharing. In principle, it is fairer than a flat contribution model and more politically sustainable than asking a very small number of large states to fund the Union. It also reflects an important continental principle, a Union financed by all its members is likely to be more legitimate and more independent.

The weakness of the current system is that fairness in design has not translated into financial reliability in practice. Economic size does not automatically produce fiscal space, foreign-exchange availability, or willingness to pay. Some Member States do not pay in full, others pay late, and some payments arrive too unevenly to support effective cash planning. The current system has therefore operated more successfully as a politically correct formula than as a working financing strategy.

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Additionally, the enforcement model is tilted more toward punishment than reward. It sanctions arrears and restricts participation, but it does little to reward full and timely payment, or to change the incentive structure for fiscally capable states that see little benefit in paying more or early.⁴

AU efforts to improve funding

The AU has pursued two broad responses to its financing challenge. The first is to expand funding from African-owned sources through levies and taxes. The second is to make it easier for Member

States to meet their obligations under the assessed-contribution system, including through proposals on paying part of assessed contribution in local-currency.

The most prominent levy proposal is the 0.2 per cent import levy adopted in 2016. In principle, AU estimates suggested that, if fully implemented, it could generate about US\$1.2 billion annually and support operations, programmes, part of peace support operations, and the capitalisation of the Peace Fund.⁵

Implementation, however, has been partial and uneven. By mid-2024, the AU reported that 17 countries were implementing the levy, with a total percentage contribution standing at around 30 per cent as the baseline for measurement. Legal alignment problems, customs-system weaknesses, administrative constraints, political resistance, and concerns about trade-law compatibility have limited performance.⁶ The levy remains important, but its record shows that formal adoption is not the same as reliable collection and remittance.

At the 2025 High-Level Review meeting on APSA and AGA, additional financing proposals were tabled. These included a 5 per cent levy on national defence budgets, a 1 per cent levy on air tickets for flights entering AU airspace, and a 1 per cent levy on outgoing financial transactions from the AU economic zone.⁷ These ideas widen the debate, but they are not yet agreed AU policy and would require legal, political, and technical scrutiny before adoption.

An EU-style tax- or GNI-based financing model is difficult for the AU to implement, not because the concept is unsound, but because the institutional conditions that sustain it in the European Union are not yet fully developed at continental level in Africa. The EU model depends on strong supranational legal authority, harmonised tax and statistical systems, robust customs and treasury administration, and the capacity of the Commission to require regular remittances from Member States. The AU remains primarily intergovernmental and operates in a far more uneven administrative environment.⁸

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That difficulty is reinforced by the uneven strength of domestic revenue systems across the continent. Tax-based options are attractive because they promise ownership, predictability, and reduced dependence on partners. Their weakness is that they depend on domestic fiscal systems whose reach and efficiency vary sharply across Africa. That unevenness is reflected in Africa’s average tax-to-GDP ratio, which stood at 16.1 per cent in 2023, with 20 of the 38 countries covered remaining below 15 per cent.⁹ Therefore, the fiscal base for a tax-heavy continental financing system remains too uneven to deliver equitable and predictable revenue at scale. This matters because, where fiscal space is already tight, a new AU levy does not come from surplus resources but competes directly with debt service, wages, health, education, and core state functions, making a member-state tax-based financing model less a sustainable new resource stream.

For that reason, tax measures should be treated as complementary rather than primary instruments. The stronger policy direction is a hybrid model, more credible ability-to-pay contributions, tighter incentives for timely payment, selective levies where collection is administratively feasible, efficiency gains, and greater transparency over what AU financing delivers.

Peace and security financing pressures

The sharpest expression of the AU’s financing weakness is in peace support operations. The Peace Fund, while important, remains small relative to the real cost of AU-led missions. In January 2024, its balance stood at a little over US\$388 million, and after new commitments announced in early 2025 it

rose to an estimated US\$610 million. Even at that higher level, it remains below what is needed to sustain complex peace operations over time. The result is continued dependence on external packages, earmarked support, bilateral pledges, and ad hoc fixes.¹⁰

These weaknesses have operational consequences. In Somalia, ATMIS and AUSSOM have faced major financing shortfalls and transition pressures. Similar problems have affected other African-led missions.¹¹ This matters because peace-support costs are continuous, dollar-denominated, and operationally unforgiving. Uncertain financing delays reimbursements, weakens procurement, and undermines mission planning.

The financing imbalance is also visible within the AU's own institutional structure. In the 2026 budget, the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security was allocated about US\$41.76 million, while Peace Support Operations alone accounted for about US\$225.70 million. This reinforces the tilt toward crisis response and operations relative to governance and prevention.¹² Weak financing is therefore not only a resource problem. It also shapes institutional priorities in ways that make future crises more expensive.¹³

The use of local currencies

Allowing Member States to pay part of their assessed contributions in local currencies is best understood as a compliance and liquidity measure, not as a full shift away from the AU's operating currency. Its attraction is practical. It may ease foreign-exchange pressure, reduce payment delays, and lower the risk of arrears for some Member States.¹⁴

The main risk is that local-currency payment could create the appearance of compliance without giving the AU usable funds. If the Union receives local currency but cannot convert it quickly, it inherits exchange-rate, convertibility, and liquidity risks that currently sit with Member States. A state could then be recorded as having paid while the AU still lacks hard currency for salaries, procurement, and peace operations.

The more workable approach is a facility-based model under which Member States can initiate payment in local currency, but the AU receives hard currency rapidly through conversion, swap, or settlement arrangements.¹⁵

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The evidence points to a structural gap between approved budgets, execution finance, and strategic autonomy, with programmes and peace support remaining especially vulnerable to external dependence.

The AU is becoming more important, not less, in an international environment shaped by great-power rivalry, coercive external influence, and intensified competition over markets, resources, and strategic space.¹⁶ The Union is increasingly expected to act as the continent's collective voice, a platform for common governance, and a provider of continental public goods.¹⁷

Yet the AU is being asked to play this larger role at the very moment when fiscal pressure across Africa is tightening, and external funding is becoming more uncertain and more conditioned.¹⁸ The issue is no longer only whether the Union needs more money. It is whether it can secure timely, predictable, and African-controlled financing on terms that strengthen strategic autonomy rather than deepen dependency.

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That challenge calls for renewed solidarity in practical terms. Larger and wealthier African states will need to carry a greater share of the burden for continental action. Smaller states, for their part,

may need to accept limited and carefully bounded forms of recognition for states carrying exceptional financing burdens, provided those forms of recognition are clearly defined, legally constrained, periodically reviewable, regionally balanced, and incapable of creating permanent domination or unilateral veto power.

The existing system already recognises differentiated responsibility through unequal assessed burdens and the AU already links financial compliance and eligibility for election to the Peace and Security Council. What it does not do well enough is govern the political economy of financing. In practice, financially significant states and external funders already affect timing, scope, and bargaining dynamics.¹⁹ The present system acknowledges unequal financial weight, but it does not convert that reality into a transparent compliance incentives.

The case for reform should therefore be stated with care. The available evidence supports stronger measures to improve payment discipline, liquidity planning, and the practical value of compliance. It does not yet prove that any single incentive will transform payment behaviour across all Member States. The defensible claim is narrower, a bounded package of positive incentives, combined with clearer enforcement, payment scheduling, and practical support for states in temporary difficulty, is more likely to improve compliance than the current system acting alone.

Comparative lessons and critiques

Comparative practice supports this qualified incentives-driven proposal. Across multilateral institutions, payment behaviour tends to improve where consequences and 'benefits' are specific, visible, and credible.²⁰ The lesson is that compliance improves when obligations, the costs of non-compliance, and the benefits of compliance are clearer.²¹

It would be too simplistic to explain late or non-payment under the current system only by the absence of positive incentives. The problem is broader. Some arrears reflect real fiscal stress, debt-service pressures, or foreign-exchange shortages, not merely a lack of political will.²² Political

perception matters as well. States are less likely to pay when they see the burden as too high, the budget as weakly aligned with their priorities, or standing, voice, and influence within the AU carrying too little practical value.²³

This advisory does not deny those wider problems. Rather, it focuses on positive incentives as a complementary mechanism that can strengthen the current system alongside these other reforms.

The proposed incentives are designed primarily for states that possess the fiscal space to pay on time but currently see little benefit in doing so beyond avoiding sanctions. For states facing genuine liquidity constraints, the existing AU system offers practical support measures, including structured payment schedules, graduated sanction regimes and time-bound arrears-clearance arrangements.

One of the strongest critique that the proposal in this advisory could face is constitutional and political. Linking financing performance to institutional advantage can be read as creating an inner circle of financially dominant states within the Union and therefore placing pressure on sovereign equality and regional balance. A related critique is that the proposal may overestimate the power of positive incentives and underestimate the fiscal and administrative drivers of arrears. These objections are serious. They do not defeat the case for reform, but they do require discipline in design.

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That discipline leads to four conclusions. First, incentives should be bounded, reviewable, and

expressly non-permanent. Second, the first phase should focus on procedurally modest forms of recognition rather than high-visibility constitutional symbolism. Third, the framework must distinguish unwillingness to pay from inability to pay and provide a support track for states facing verified temporary distress. Fourth, more politically sensitive measures should be considered only after a formal review shows that earlier measures have improved payment performance without undermining sovereign equality.

POLICY OPTIONS

The reform proposal aims to improve payment discipline, cash predictability, and modestly strengthen African-controlled financing without undermining sovereign equality. The central policy choice is whether to retain and improve enforcement mechanism under the current fairness-based framework only, or to retain it while adding earned, reviewable incentives tied to full and timely payment.

This advisory recommends that the AU keep the current three-tier contribution system but strengthen it so that it works better as a financing system. Economic capacity should remain the main basis for contribution levels. At the same time, the system should also recognise payment performance. Member States that are willing and able to take on higher financial obligations should be able to do.

The options below should therefore be read not as a claim that incentives alone are sufficient, but as a bounded attempt to identify forms of recognition that are politically meaningful, institutionally relevant, and compatible with AU legal and political constraints.

Principles and safeguards

The proposed reform builds on the existing system, but it also modifies it in important respects. It retains the principle of differentiated contribution based on capacity to pay, while redesigning the tier structure and incentive framework so that the system works not only as a fairness formula but also as a more effective financing instrument. It

combines capacity to pay with willingness to pay and adds positive incentives alongside sanctions. At the same time, the reform remains carefully limited. It does not create permanent constitutional privilege. Any tier-based recognition is legally bounded, periodically reviewed, regionally balanced, and subject to AU law, merit, and existing election or appointment rules. No single Member State should have a veto. On exceptionally costly decisions, any safeguard should take the form of a one-time reconsideration procedure used collectively and across regions, not a permanent blocking power.²⁴

The purpose of the proposal is not to convert financial weight into constitutional privilege. It is to recognise exceptional payment performance through limited, reviewable, and non-automatic forms of institutional recognition. Any role linked to tier status should remain mediated through regional processes, subject to merit and election rules, and incapable of displacing the equal legal status of Member States. The reform should therefore be understood as a compliance mechanism within the existing constitutional order, not as a restructuring of sovereign equality.

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Improved three-tier contribution structure

The revised structure is designed around an annual assessed-contributions ceiling of US\$0.8 billion. It broadens the pool of serious contributors, reduces excessive concentration of the burden, and protects smaller and more fiscally constrained states by limiting Tier 3 contributions to US\$1.5 million per state.

Table 1. Proposed three-tier contribution structure, based on an annual assessed-contributions ceiling of US\$0.8 billion

Tier	States	Annual burden	Average per state	Share of ceiling
Tier 1	15 Member States (3 per region)	US\$469.0 million	US\$31.3 million	58.6%
Tier 2	18 Member States	US\$298.0 million	US\$16.6 million	37.3%
Tier 3	22 Member States	US\$33.0 million	US\$1.5 million	4.1%

Movement between tiers should be rules-based and periodic, not discretionary. A Member State should move upward only where it meets the financial threshold for the relevant tier, remains in full and timely payment over a defined review period, and can be accommodated within the regional balance rules of that tier. A Member State should move downward where payment performance materially deteriorates over the same review period, subject to a transparent notice and adjustment process. Where a region cannot fill a higher-tier place, the vacancy should remain open until the next review rather than being filled through *ad hoc* political bargaining.

The system should also distinguish between unwillingness to pay and genuine inability to pay. Member States facing verified foreign-exchange shortages, debt stress, or similar temporary liquidity constraints should have access to practical support measures, including payment schedules, temporary adjustment arrangements, local-currency settlement through an approved conversion facility, and time-bound arrears-clearance plans.²⁵

Common rules

- All tier-based incentives should be earned through full, regular, and timely payment.
- No incentive should be permanent. All incentives should be reviewed periodically.
- Any Member State in serious arrears should lose tier-based incentives until compliance is restored.
- No single Member State should exercise a veto. No tier should enjoy a single-state veto.

- Any safeguard on exceptionally high-cost decisions should take the form of a one-time reconsideration procedure supported by a fiscal impact assessment.
- Tier-based recognition should not create automatic nomination, guaranteed appointment, or reserved entitlement to AU office.
- Regional representation, rotation, merit, and all applicable AU legal instruments should continue to apply.

The incentives proposed in this advisory were not selected arbitrarily. They were chosen because they meet four practical tests. First, they create forms of recognition that Member States are likely to value politically, including voice, visibility, agenda influence, and standing within the Union. Second, they can be linked to institutional responsibility rather than treated as private rewards. Third, they can be designed in a bounded and reviewable way without creating permanent constitutional privilege or a single-state veto. Fourth, they are more feasible for the AU than cash-based rewards, rebates, or broad entitlement schemes, because they rely mainly on procedural recognition, structured access, and defined institutional roles rather than additional financial outlays.

The specific roles, offices, and procedures identified here were selected because they sit closest to budget oversight, strategic direction, and stewardship of Union-wide priorities. Oversight access, structured nomination opportunities, hosting priority, and limited reconsideration on exceptionally high-cost decisions are more closely connected to financing responsibility than diffuse symbolic benefits would be. The reconsideration mechanism, in particular, is included not to create a veto, but to ensure that Member States carrying exceptional financing obligations have a defined and collective voice before the Union takes on decisions with major and recurring cost implications. Even so, the logic of the proposal remains phased and cautious. More modest incentives such as oversight roles, consultative standing, hosting opportunities, and formal recognition should come first, while more politically sensitive measures should be approached only if earlier phases improve payment performance and remain consistent with sovereign equality and regional balance.

Positive incentives

the AU would introduce a stronger but still carefully limited package of incentives for full and timely payment. These incentives would remain subject to AU law, regional balance, rotation, merit, and decision by the competent organs. They would not create automatic entitlement to office or a veto for any state.²⁶

Tier 1

Tier 1 states may be given a structured role in regional consultation, nomination, and rotation processes for selected senior AU positions. These may include:

- a) Chairperson of the Union
- b) Chairperson of the AU Commission
- c) President of the Pan-African Parliament
- d) President of the African Court of Justice and Human and Rights

Tier 1 states may also receive stronger rotational representation on selected finance, budget, audit, reform, and strategic oversight bodies.

For exceptionally high-cost decisions, Tier 1 states should not have a unilateral blocking power. However, if an agreed percentage of Tier 1 and Tier 2 states act together and meet the required cross-regional threshold, they may trigger one formal reconsideration of the decision.

Tier 2

Tier 2 states may be given a structured role in regional consultation, nomination, and rotation processes for selected executive and specialised institutional positions. These may include:

- a) Deputy Chairperson of the AU Commission
- b) Chief Executive Officer of AUDA-NEPAD
- c) Chief Executive Officer of APRM
- d) Director-General, or equivalent head, of Africa CDC and other specialised agencies.

Tier 2 states may also receive stronger rotational access to selected finance, programme, technical, and oversight bodies.

In addition, Tier 2 states should participate jointly with Tier 1 states in any limited reconsideration procedure for exceptionally high-cost decisions.

Tier 3

Tier 3 states should retain all ordinary rights of membership under AU law.

Their contribution status may be recognised through priority consideration, on a rotational and regionally balanced basis, for:

- a) hosting selected AU conferences and technical meetings
- b) hosting training activities, field offices, and specialised platforms
- c) chairing or serving as rapporteurs in selected PRC and technical committee processes

Tier 3 states may also receive targeted technical support and a clear pathway to move into Tier 2 where willingness and capacity are demonstrated over time.

RECOMMENDED POLICY POSITION

Integrate Africa Advisory Services recommends that the AU may wish to revise the existing three-tier contribution structure to ensure that it broadens the pool of contributors, protects smaller states, and introduces positive and bounded incentives for stronger compliance.

Complementary measures

The improved tiered scheme should complement, not displace, other financing measures. Tax-based options such as the 0.2 per cent levy, peace and security levies, or other continental charges may remain useful in limited contexts, but they should not be treated as the primary pillar of AU financing given uneven implementation, administrative complexity, and constrained domestic fiscal space across much of the continent. Local-currency settlement should also be treated as a complementary compliance and liquidity instrument rather than a substitute for reform.²⁷

Positive incentives should therefore be treated as one part of a broader compliance package, alongside sanctions, payment schedules, liquidity-support arrangements, and continued work on longer-term African-owned financing instruments.

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Conclusion

The AU's financing problem is not only that it needs more money. It is that it needs timely, predictable, and African-controlled financing on terms that support strategic autonomy rather than prolong dependency. The current three-tier assessed-contribution system remains useful as a fairness rule, but it is not yet a full financing strategy. It allocates burdens, but it does not reliably produce the level of compliance, cash predictability, and internal resource mobilisation that the Union requires.

The reform is therefore not to abandon the current framework, but to improve it through a carefully designed incentive-based compact that preserves differentiated burden-sharing while placing any resulting privileges within clear, reviewable, regionally balanced, and legally defensible rules. Properly designed, it would not undermine sovereign equality. It would strengthen African ownership by aligning burden-sharing, responsibility, and accountability more transparently and more effectively than the current system does.

The AU now needs a financing compact that is not only equitable on paper, but operationally effective in practice.

In the longer term, the AU should also consider whether separate assessed contributions to the AU and to multiple RECs create avoidable fragmentation. A consolidated contribution account, with distribution under an agreed formula, could improve transparency and reduce duplication. That is a longer-horizon reform. The more immediate task is to make the current AU framework work better.

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