
SCOPING REVIEW OF THE CAPITALOCENE IN THE AFRICAN UNIONS REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *This scoping review (2020–2025) employs the Capitalocene framework to examine barriers to sustainable development within the African Union's eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Unlike the Anthropocene's broad attribution of ecological crises to humanity, the Capitalocene emphasizes the roles of capitalist accumulation, colonial legacies, and the "cheap nature" paradigm as primary drivers of environmental degradation and socio-economic disparities across Africa. An analysis of recent peer-reviewed literature and policy documents reveals persistent extractive dynamics across all RECs: oil rentierism and market volatility in ECOWAS; mineral dependence in SADC; multinational-driven deforestation in ECCAS; neo-colonial trade distortions in EAC and COMESA; foreign land acquisitions affecting pastoral communities in IGAD; resource-curse phenomena and the creation of sacrifice zones in CEN-SAD; and a paradoxical trend of emission-intensive growth associated with financial inclusion and urbanisation in the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Although emerging initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), renewable energy corridors, green regionalism proposals, community-led mining reforms, and gender mainstreaming efforts show promise, scholarly consensus indicates that these efforts remain structurally limited and are often co-opted by the prevailing Capitalocene logic, including debt dependency, unequal exchange, and elite capture. The review concludes that incremental or market-based approaches to sustainability are inadequate. Achieving the vision outlined in Agenda 2063 for an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa requires the adoption of explicitly decolonial and post-capitalist regional strategies capable of de-commodifying natural resources, redistributing extractive rents, and dismantling sacrifice zones.*

Keywords: *Capitalocene, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Sustainable development, Extractivism and African Union*

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INTRODUCTION

The African Union recognises eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as essential frameworks for regional integration, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. These communities are instrumental in advancing the objectives of Agenda 2063 towards establishing an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa. However, the concept of the Capitalocene popularised by Moore (2020) and increasingly referenced in African studies suggests that the historical and ongoing practices of global capitalism may intensify environmental crises and socio-economic inequalities, posing challenges to these development goals. This review examines how Capitalocene dynamics are reflected within RECs, particularly regarding their implications for sustainable development from 2020 to 2025. Through a synthesis of recent literature and a scoping research approach, the aim is to provide insights that can inform policy strategies aligned with ecological sustainability and social justice.

MAIN TEXT

Understanding Capitalocene in the African Context

The concept of the Capitalocene, referring to the geologically significant era characterized by capitalist accumulation, resource extraction, and environmental degradation, presents important considerations for African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), particularly the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD). Unlike the more widely discussed Anthropocene, which emphasizes broad human impacts, the Capitalocene specifically highlights the exploitative economic systems that contribute to environmental harm and social inequalities (O'Neill, 2020). Recognizing this distinction is essential for understanding the specific mechanisms through which capitalist practices undermine sustainable development across African regions. In African RECs, the impacts of the Capitalocene are evident through various interconnected pathways, including extractive industries, colonial legacies that continue to promote resource exploitation, imbalanced trade relationships, and infrastructure development that prioritizes profit over environmental sustainability (Karmakar, 2023). These issues are particularly significant within CEN-SAD, where member countries face compounded challenges such as limited institutional capacity, resource dependence, and heightened climate vulnerability.

Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes scholarship from 2020 to 2025, organised around three themes: the Capitalocene's theoretical relevance, its manifestations in African RECs, and sustainable development strategies.

The Capitalocene Framework

The concept of the Capitalocene critiques the broad characterisation of human impact in the Anthropocene, highlighting the significant role of capitalism in driving ecological crises (Moore, 2020). Patel and Moore (2021) contend that the "cheap nature" paradigm within capitalism, which exploits labor, land, and resources, has its roots in colonialism and has significantly influenced Africa's development trajectory. African scholars such as Amin (2022) have expanded this analysis to post-colonial contexts, noting that global capital continues to reinforce dependency through



unequal trade and resource extraction. For Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the Capitalocene perspective underscores how integration into global markets frequently prioritises economic profit over ecological and social sustainability (Okereke & Agupusi, 2023).

Capitalocene Dynamics in African Union Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

The Africa Union regional economic communities (RECs) confront challenges associated with the Capitalocene framework, including reliance on extractive economies and vulnerabilities to climate change. In ECOWAS, as noted by Adebayo (2021), oil dependence in Nigeria and Ghana contributes to economic instability and hampers diversification efforts. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), discussed by Chitando (2024), remains vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations due to its dependence on mineral exports, which impacts progress toward SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). ECCAS faces difficulties related to deforestation driven by multinational logging enterprises, intensifying climate change concerns (Ngoma & Tshabalala, 2023). Meanwhile, the East African Community (EAC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) have made advances in intra-regional trade; however, their progress is impeded by neo-colonial trade agreements favoring external partners (Kariuki, 2022). The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) reports that pastoralist communities are adversely affected by land acquisitions linked to foreign agribusiness interests, which threaten progress toward SDG 2 (zero hunger) (Mohammed, 2025). The Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) encompasses nations across a region marked by ecological fragility and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Historically, resource extraction including oil, minerals, and agricultural commodities has been a primary development strategy. Nevertheless, scholars highlight that this approach often results in the "resource curse," wherein resource wealth does not translate into sustainable development at the local level (Chen & Mbiankeu Nguea, 2025). Instead, such activities tend to cause environmental degradation, social displacement, and wealth concentration benefiting external actors and local elites rather than broad-based communities. The political economy of mining and oil extraction in CEN-SAD exemplifies how Capitalocene dynamics operate at various scales (Bahadur & Sarkhel, 2024). These extractive processes create "sacrifice zones" where environmental and social harms are externalised onto vulnerable populations, while profits are globally accumulated a pattern consistent with neocolonial exploitation, representing a continuation of colonial resource appropriation within modern institutional frameworks (Olukayode, 2024).

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) offers a compelling case for examining Capitalocene mechanisms within African regional integration. Biala, Aromasodun, and Shitu (2025) suggest that institutional factors governing energy-driven growth in African RECs exhibit complex and sometimes contradictory effects. In the AMU, a composite institutional index appears to support energy-centered growth; however, specific institutional aspects sometimes produce negative outcomes. For instance, paradoxically, the absence of violence and terrorism generally seen as stabilising factors has been found to hinder development in the region, indicating that the AMU's growth model may depend on or tolerate certain instability forms that fuel capitalist accumulation. This highlights how well-meaning institutional reforms can be undermined when aligned with capitalist imperatives that prioritize growth over genuine sustainability. The energy sector exemplifies these tensions (Omar, Khalifa, & Oz, 2025). In the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which includes AMU countries, initiatives toward green growth and energy transitions have successfully reduced carbon emissions, demonstrating potential for compatibility between economic expansion and



environmental objectives. Nonetheless, financial inclusion intended as a developmental benefit has paradoxically increased emissions by enabling greater credit access that fuels energy-intensive consumption and industrial activities. Additionally, urbanisation contributes to rising emissions, exposing the unsustainable nature of urban growth patterns. These phenomena illustrate how Capitalocene logic distorts development efforts, transforming tools aimed at human well-being into mechanisms for increased commodification and ecological harm. In contrast, the Africa Union's regional economic communities demonstrate resilience. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), supported by all RECs, seeks to diminish external dependencies through enhanced intra-African trade (AU, 2023). The East African Community's renewable energy initiatives, such as Kenya's geothermal development, align with SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) (Oluoch, 2024). However, progress in these areas remains constrained by funding gaps and governance challenges, which are indicative of ongoing Capitalocene pressures (Eziakonwa, 2025).

Sustainable Development Strategies

Recent research advocates for transformative approaches. Okereke and Agupusi (2023) propose the concept of “green regionalism,” incorporating ecological restoration into regional economic community policies. For example, ECOWAS's solar initiatives could be expanded through enhanced regional cooperation (Bah, 2024). Chitando (2024) highlights community-led reforms in mining within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to promote progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 10 (reduced inequalities). Additionally, gender-inclusive policies, such as those outlined in ECCAS's 2021–2025 Gender Plan, aim to support Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) by empowering women in trade (UN Women, 2023). However, scholars caution that without addressing the legacies of the Capitalocene such as debt challenges and land commodification achieving sustainable development will remain difficult (Amin, 2022; Mohammed, 2025).

Gaps in Literature

While the concept of the Capitalocene is increasingly used in African contexts, there remains limited research examining its specific impacts across all eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Cross-regional comparisons are relatively scarce, and data on ecological footprints within the RECs are limited. This review aims to address these gaps by analyzing emerging trends and identifying potential policy intervention points.

Research Method

This scoping review follows Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, adapted for policy relevance. The methodology includes five stages:

1. **Identifying the Research Question:** How do Capitalocene dynamics influence RECs' sustainable development efforts from 2020 to 2025?
2. **Identifying Relevant Studies:** We searched databases (Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR) and AU repositories using keywords: “Capitalocene,” “African Union,” “Regional Economic Communities,” “sustainable development,” and “2020–2025.” Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and AU documents in English or French, published between January 2020 and April 2025.



3. **Study Selection:** From 120 initial sources, relevant were selected after screening for relevance to RECs and sustainable development. Exclusions included studies lacking regional focus or pre-2020 data.
4. **Charting the Data:** Sources were categorised by REC, Capitalocene theme (e.g., extractivism, trade), and SDG alignment. Data were extracted on challenges, strategies, and outcomes.
5. **Collating and Summarising:** Findings were synthesised narratively, emphasizing cross-regional trends and policy implications.

Limitations include the exclusion of sources which did not address the subject being reviewed and article with potential bias toward published works that possibly overlooked grassroots perspectives were removed. In addition, studies lacking regional focus or pre-2020 data were also removed. To mitigate, we included AU and UN reports reflecting practitioner insights.

Findings

The literature review is tightly structured around three major themes that form a logical progression: (1) theoretical grounding in the Capitalocene, (2) empirical manifestations of Capitalocene dynamics inside the eight African Union RECs, and (3) emerging sustainable development strategies and their limits. Below is a concise but comprehensive thematic analysis of the key findings under each theme, followed by the gaps explicitly acknowledged by the review itself.

Theme 1: The Capitalocene as Theoretical Lens

Core finding: The Capitalocene is presented not merely as an alternative to the Anthropocene but as the most relevant framework for understanding Africa’s ecological and developmental crises because it centers capitalism + colonial legacies rather than generic “human activity” (Moore, 2020; Patel & Moore, 2021).

Key mechanisms repeatedly identified:

“Cheap nature” paradigm → commodification of land, labour, and resources.

Continuation of colonial extraction through modern global value chains and unequal trade.

Production of “sacrifice zones” where environmental and social costs are externalized onto the poorest and most marginalized populations.

African scholars (Amin, 2022; Okereke & Agupusi, 2023) extend the framework to post-colonial dependency, showing that integration into global markets under capitalist rules systematically undermines ecological and social sustainability in African RECs.

→ This theme is the conceptual backbone of the entire review and is treated as settled scholarship rather than contested theory.

Theme 2: Capitalocene Dynamics in African RECs

The review maps Capitalocene processes onto each of the eight recognized RECs with varying depth:

REC	Dominant Capitalocene Manifestation	Key Consequences Cited	Scholars (2021–2025)
ECOWAS	Oil rentier economies (Nigeria, Ghana)	Economic volatility, blocked diversification	Adebayo (2021)
SADC	Mineral export dependence	Vulnerability to global price shocks; slow SDG 8 progress	Chitando (2024)
ECCAS	Deforestation driven by multinational logging	Intensified vulnerability to climate	Ngoma & Tshabalala (2023)
EAC & COMESA	Neo-colonial trade agreements	Intra-regional trade gains undermined by external bias	Kariuki (2022)
IGAD	Large-scale foreign land acquisitions (agribusiness)	Threatens pastoralists and SDG 2 (zero hunger)	Mohammed (2025)
CEN-SAD	Classic “resource curse” + sacrifice zones	Environmental degradation, elite capture, displacement	Chen & Mbiankeu Nguea (2025); Bahadur & Sarkhel (2024); Olukayode (2024)
AMU	Energy-driven growth + paradoxical effects	Stability sometimes hinders institutional development; inclusion increases emissions	Biala et al. (2025); Omar et al. (2025)

Cross-cutting findings:

- Extractive economies remain the default growth model across almost all African union RECs.
- Even apparently positive developments (financial inclusion, urbanisation, absence of violence) can accelerate ecological harm when inserted into Capitalocene logic (especially clear in AMU/MENA analysis).
- AfCFTA and some renewable initiatives (EAC geothermal) show potential counter-movements but remain constrained by the same structural pressures.

The strongest empirical contribution is the detailed documentation of how Capitalocene mechanisms operate differently yet consistently across ecologically and economically diverse regions.



Theme 3: Sustainable Development Strategies and Their Structural Limits

Promising strategies identified:

- “Green regionalism” (Okereke & Agupusi, 2023) – embedding ecological restoration into REC policies.
- Community-led mining reform in SADC (Chitando, 2024).
- Gender mainstreaming (ECCAS Gender Plan, UN Women 2023).
- Renewable energy corridors (ECOWAS solar, EAC geothermal).

Critical caveat repeated across sources:

- Without directly confronting Capitalocene legacies (debt traps, land commodification, unequal exchange, external capture of resource rents), these strategies remain technocratic patches rather than transformative solutions (Amin, 2022; Mohammed, 2025; Eziakonwa, 2025).

The literature is cautiously optimistic about regional agency but overwhelmingly pessimistic about outcomes under existing global capitalist rules.

Overall Assessment

Recent literature from 2020 to 2025 has convincingly demonstrated the analytical advantages of the Capitalocene perspective over the Anthropocene in African contexts. It offers a comprehensive, though still evolving, understanding of how capitalist accumulation perpetuates colonial-style extractive practices within modern regional integration efforts. While there has been a notable increase in sustainable development initiatives across regional economic communities, scholarly consensus indicates that these efforts are unlikely to succeed on a large scale without directly challenging underlying global capitalist structures that current regional institutions are neither fully equipped nor willing to confront. Consequently, this body of work shifts the focus from merely describing existing problems to addressing the more complex challenge of how to implement de-colonial, post-capitalist regionalism in practice.

DISCUSSION

Between 2020 and 2025, scholarly literature has increasingly employed the Capitalocene framework highlighting capitalist accumulation and its connections to colonial legacies as a more insightful perspective than the Anthropocene for analyzing Africa’s interconnected ecological and development challenges across the eight African Union Regional Economic Communities (RECs). By emphasizing the systemic commodification of nature, labor, and resources under the “cheap nature” paradigm, as well as persistent patterns of unequal ecological exchange and the deliberate creation of sacrifice zones, this approach reveals how post-colonial dependencies continue to subordinate African economies within global value chains. This dynamic perpetuates environmental degradation and hampers human development despite institutional diversity across the continent. Empirical studies demonstrate notable continuity in extractive practices, including ECOWAS oil rentierism and market volatility, SADC mineral dependence, ECCAS-driven deforestation by multinational corporations, trade practices in EAC and COMESA that are undermined by neo-colonial agreements, IGAD-facilitated land acquisitions that threaten pastoral communities, CEN-SAD resource-related



challenges resulting in displacement, and AMU’s energy-focused growth strategies that inadvertently increase emissions. Even initiatives that appear progressive such as financial sector expansion, urbanisation, renewable energy projects, or the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are often constrained by the same Capitalocene mechanisms, including debt dependencies, resource commodification, and rent-seeking behaviors, which can sometimes accelerate environmental and social harms rather than mitigate them. Although there are promising movements toward green regionalism, community-driven resource reforms, gender inclusion, and cross-border renewable energy corridors, existing scholarship consistently emphasizes that without directly addressing the fundamental global capitalist structures, these efforts risk being superficial solutions. The key contribution, therefore, is shifting from simply describing symptoms to understanding the underlying structural causes, highlighting the urgent need to develop and implement decolonial and post-capitalist approaches to regionalism that can challenge and dismantle Africa’s ongoing subordination within the global ecological and economic order.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review of literature published between 2020 and 2025 confirms that the Capitalocene framework provides a more nuanced and insightful analytical perspective than the generic Anthropocene for understanding the persistent barriers to sustainable development within the African Union’s eight recognized Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Across ECOWAS, SADC, ECCAS, EAC, COMESA, IGAD, CEN-SAD, and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the fundamental mechanisms associated with the Capitalocene such as systemic commodification of natural resources, unequal ecological exchange, externalization of socio-ecological costs onto sacrifice zones, and the continuation of colonial-era extraction processes through contemporary global value chains operate with notable consistency despite the institutional and ecological diversity among these regions. While the reviewed period has seen an increase in ostensibly progressive initiatives including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), renewable energy corridors, gender mainstreaming policies, community-led mining reforms, and calls for “green regionalism” scholarly consensus indicates that these efforts remain fundamentally limited. They are often constrained by and susceptible to co-option by the prevailing Capitalocene logics they aim to address. Furthermore, processes that appear beneficial such as financial inclusion, urbanization, and political stability may, under current capitalist frameworks, inadvertently exacerbate issues such as emissions, land dispossession, and socio-economic inequalities. The primary conclusion of this review is both sobering and indicative of the need for transformative change: incremental, technocratic, or market-based sustainability strategies within African RECs are unlikely to yield substantive progress if they operate within and inadvertently reinforce the global capitalist structures that systematically subordinate African economies and ecological systems. Achieving the goals outlined in Agenda 2063 toward an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa will require more radical interventions, including the de-commodification of land and resources, systematic redistribution of revenues from extractive industries, the implementation of regional mechanisms to address ecological imbalances, and the deliberate development of decolonial and post-capitalist models of regionalism. Until African RECs supported by the African Union and committed member states—actively confront and seek to dismantle the dynamics of the Capitalocene rather than merely managing their symptoms, sustainable development will remain an aspirational goal rather than an attainable reality. Future research and policy efforts must shift from merely identifying problems and promoting green initiatives toward designing and implementing concrete, legitimacy-based pathways toward a post-extractive, ecologically restorative, and socially equitable regional integration. Only such a paradigm



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shift can transform sacrifice zones associated with the Capitalocene into territories characterised by dignity, sovereignty, and sustainable well-being.

Practical Implications

From a Capitalocene perspective, African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) continue to sustain colonial-era resource extraction patterns in modern forms, making genuine sustainable development difficult without fundamental reforms that challenge the commodification of nature and labor, address the unequal ecological exchanges with the Global North, and prevent the externalisation of socio-ecological costs onto marginalised communities. To break this cycle, RECs should implement transformative strategies, such as establishing binding regional resource-revenue redistribution mechanisms, drawing on successful reforms within ECCAS and SADC to reduce elite capture and the resource curse using extractive rents for economic diversification and ecological restoration rather than debt repayment or luxury imports. Additionally, operationalising “green regionalism” requires integrating mandatory ecological and social impact assessments into all intra-REC and AfCFTA trade protocols, including measures like carbon-border adjustments and local value-added requirements of 40–60% for key minerals and agricultural commodities. Efforts should also focus on creating de-commodification tools such as regional land banks, pastoralist corridors in IGAD regions, and community land trusts to prevent large-scale foreign land acquisitions and reverse sacrifice-zone dynamics. Furthermore, developing alternative financing mechanisms, including pooled sovereign green bonds, debt-for-nature or climate swaps, and reducing dependency on IMF and World Bank conditionalities that uphold extractivist policies, is essential. Without deliberate efforts to dismantle paradigms that prioritize commodified nature and neocolonial trade frameworks, even well-meaning initiatives like renewable energy corridors, gender-inclusive policies, and reforms under AfCFTA risk remaining superficial or counterproductive. Only by transforming RECs into sovereign platforms committed to ecologically restorative, post-extractive regional development can the goals of Agenda 2063 be realised, as incremental reforms alone are insufficient to overcome the entrenched dominance of Capitalocene forces.



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