

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

ICCA Kigali 2025: International Arbitration in Africa—Growth Beyond Numbers

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The [ICCA-KIAC Conference](#) is approaching, taking place on 5 June 2025, in Kigali, Rwanda. It will focus on the theme “Africa & International Arbitration: Untold Stories” and discuss legal reform processes being implemented across the continent to overcome historical obstacles, explore current challenges and opportunities for commerce, trade and investment in the region, and predict what the future holds for international arbitration in Africa.

In the lead up to the Conference, ICCA has organized a series of blog posts focusing on the growth of international arbitration in Africa and the challenges associated with it. In this inaugural post, we consider how to ensure that the remarkable growth seen in arbitral institutions in Africa in recent years continues to develop in the longer term into a resilient and reliable system. We will explore the increasing number of arbitral institutions in Africa, discuss the essential qualities of successful institutions beyond mere numbers, examine the importance of continental cooperation and centering African perspectives, and conclude with an outlook on the future.

1. The Proliferation of Arbitral Institutions in Africa

The arbitration landscape in Africa—a continent comprising 54 states with different legal traditions, commercial practices, and cultures—is rapidly evolving and [growing](#). As highlighted by Dr. Onyema in her [2024 SOAS Arbitration in Africa Survey Report](#), African jurisdictions have become increasingly friendly towards domestic arbitration—domestic courts tend to uphold arbitral awards, arbitration laws are often reformed to facilitate access to and use of arbitration, and the number of arbitration events and of firms offering services in the field of arbitration have multiplied. These developments have given rise to so-called regional arbitration hubs, which have an international reputation as being particularly supportive and well-equipped for arbitration.

These developments can also be seen in the growth in the number and relevance of arbitral institutions in the region. As of [20 March 2020](#) there were 89 arbitral institutions across 42 of the 54 African states. This is a substantial increase from the previous number of 72 institutions identified in [2016](#). These institutions are relatively new—the oldest one being the [Cairo Regional Centre for International Commercial Arbitration \(CRCICA\)](#), established in the late 1980s—but they have already made impressive strides, gaining the respect and trust of the international arbitration community. In addition to CRCICA, institutes such as the [Kigali International Arbitration Centre \(KIAC\)](#) and the [Arbitration Foundation for Southern Africa \(AfSA\)](#) have gained

reputation and trust among international practitioners.

While these numbers give rise to justifiable optimism, establishing an arbitral institution is just the first, and perhaps the easiest, step in creating a robust arbitral institutional framework. At its most basic level, this requires physical offices, large meeting rooms, computers, and smart people with knowledge of the field. Once those are in place, however, it is necessary to build robust structures that create enduring institutional resilience, reliability, and capacity in the region.

Despite their remarkable progress, African arbitral institutions face several challenges. Competition from established Western arbitration centers remains intense, particularly given their longer track records, established rules, and substantial resources. Many African centers operate with limited budgets, affecting their ability to invest in state-of-the-art facilities and attract top talent. Infrastructure constraints, including unreliable internet connectivity and power supply in some regions, can impact operations. Additionally, complex legal and regulatory frameworks across different jurisdictions can create obstacles for cross-border dispute resolution.

2. Growth Beyond Numbers: What Makes Great Arbitral Institutions?

While the quantitative growth of arbitral institutions in Africa is cause for celebration, it is the qualitative dimensions that build institutional strength. What transforms a center from a registry with a website into a trusted venue for resolution of high stakes international disputes? The answers for long-term, sustainable growth lie in three main pillars: governance, credibility, and capacity.

First, it is necessary to develop robust governance structures. These include transparent and professional structures that are insulated from external influence. Institutions must demonstrate independence in the appointment of arbitrators, the administration of cases, and in managing challenges to arbitrators or procedural disputes. Developing and publishing clear, consistently applied institutional rules and codes of ethics can help bolster this independence.

Second, institutions must earn the trust of their users—every, single day. Reputation is built slowly, through effective case management, fair case outcomes, and procedural predictability. As noted in the [SOAS 2020 report](#), many arbitral institutions are still in the phase of proving themselves in the international arena, while they are subject to substantial financial and reputational pressure. Offering bilingual or multilingual services, publishing anonymized awards (whenever possible), and forming partnerships with established institutions can go a long way in building such credibility.

Third, there is the question of capacity. Human resources, technical infrastructure, and knowledge are perhaps the most fundamental ingredients in building a great arbitral institution. It is important to invest in training not only of the staff in institutions themselves, but also of local arbitrators, counsel, and experts. Regional and institutional collaboration may be instrumental in sharing resources and creating best practices that will lead to more sustainable institutional development.

3. Continental Cooperation and Centering African Voices

A key challenge faced on the African arbitral landscape is the risk of fragmentation. While the proliferation of institutions reflects enthusiasm and commitment to arbitration, it can also lead to competition for caseloads, overlapping mandates, and the dilution of expertise, if not carefully managed. Rather than more institutions *per se*, it may be important to strengthen existing

institutions and ensure quality and consistency through inter-institutional cooperation.

Some regional initiatives have already moved to tackle these challenges. Enhanced regional cooperation frameworks are being developed to streamline cross-border arbitration processes, with organizations such as [OHADA](#) leading efforts to harmonize business laws across member states.

The continent has also excelled in its institutional and professional network and capacity-building initiatives. On the institutional front, Mauritius has advanced a collaboration with the Permanent Court of Arbitration to open a regional office in Mauritius. On the professional front, the [African Arbitration Academy](#) has invested heavily in fostering local expertise and best practices, building a pool of highly qualified African arbitrators and practitioners who are skilled in navigating international practices and standards, while deeply understanding local contexts. The [African Arbitration Association](#) has also emerged as a pan-African platform for dialogue, networking, and information-sharing.

It is fundamental that the development of these initiatives and institutions in Africa is not only externally driven (on intra-African arbitration, see, e.g., [SOAS 2024 Report](#), at p. 7). Rather, they should reflect local needs, commercial realities, and legal traditions. This is especially important in matters involving intra-African trade or commercial issues, where the ability to resolve disputes in culturally and legally familiar forums can be a major asset.

In line with continental initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, institutions that can offer fast, cost-effective, and contextually relevant dispute resolution services will play a vital role in unlocking regional economic potential. Ensuring that African voices are centered in this institutional design will be essential to building legitimacy and credibility.

4. Conclusion

The remarkable rise in arbitral institutions across Africa reflects not only increasing demand for cross-border dispute resolution, but also a growing confidence in the continent's legal and commercial ecosystems. Still, numbers alone do not tell the full story. Building institutions that are resilient, trusted, and responsive to local and international demands remains a long-term endeavor—one that calls for cooperation, innovation, and a deep understanding of African realities.

In the coming weeks, this series will delve deeper into the theme of the ICCA-KIAC Conference, from regional integration to the development of local arbitral expertise and African approaches to ongoing procedural dilemmas. We hope to shine a light on some of the “untold stories” that continue to shape the future of international arbitration in Africa.

Follow along and see all of *Kluwer Arbitration Blog*'s coverage of ICCA Kigali 2025 [here](#).

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