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**Megatrends and Conflict
Dynamics in Africa:
Multipolarity and
Delegation in Foreign
Interventions**

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Introduction

Megatrends such as climate change, digitalisation, and urbanisation are transforming all aspects of politics, economics and society in Africa. Consequently, they are also affecting conflict dynamics. This Working Paper focuses specifically on how megatrends are altering patterns of foreign intervention in African conflicts. Two aspects stand out: the range of intervening powers is widening, and they are intervening increasingly at arm's length by delegating to human or technical surrogates.

Several megatrends are at work behind this evolution. Global power politics is shifting towards a multipolar order. Technological innovation is driving the diffusion of new weaponry. Digitalisation is facilitating the spread of surveillance technology and disinformation through social media. Finally, globalisation, understood as the intensification and acceleration of transnational connections, has sustained a tendency in Western societies towards both more ubiquitous and more risk-averse intervention to tackle perceived threats worldwide.¹

The move towards the increased delegation of interventions takes various forms. There is the use of weaponry, such as drones, that reduces the risk to the military personnel wielding it; the use of private contractors and support for local proxies, including government forces but also armed groups; and digital influence operations undertaken by subcontractors, whether accompanying one's own hard power interventions or countering those of an adversary. In turn, these new patterns of foreign intervention raise questions about the reactions they provoke or are likely to provoke locally, and about how they will alter power relations between local actors in African conflicts.

The tendency towards multisided and delegated intervention have been on display in recent wars across the planet, becoming ever more pronounced in the last decade. Multipolarity has strongly affected conflicts in the Middle East in particular. Since 2017, the participation of a multitude of foreign actors has also become a more common feature of African wars. That year, Russian paramilitaries became engaged in Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan, and Turkish and Emirati military assistance to Somali parties increased substantially.² With great and middle power rivalries becoming ever more prominent against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, these trends in African conflict dynamics are likely to persist and could even become more pronounced on the continent in the future. While multipolarity and delegation are global phenomena in warfare, there are good reasons to focus on their consequences in Africa: the large number of active conflicts and the prevalence of weak states on the continent.

Multipolarity has manifested itself in a changing landscape of foreign interveners in Africa. For two decades after 1990, that landscape was dominated by Western powers, multilateral peace operations, a limited number of African states that, in most cases, bordered the conflict zones they intervened in, and private military companies run by Western nationals or those from South Africa. But in recent years, a growing number of African conflicts have seen interventions by new external actors, first and foremost among them United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia and Turkey.³

¹ Krieg, Andreas, and Jean-Marc Rickli. 2019. *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

² Lacher, Wolfram. 2022. "African Conflicts amid Multipolarity: Implications of a Changing Actor Landscape". *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 03*.

³ Ibid.

Technological innovation has facilitated both the multiplication of intervening powers and their resort to remote warfare. When compared to manned aircraft, the recent proliferation of Chinese, Iranian and Turkish-made drones has both significantly reduced the financial costs of intervention and the risk to pilots. Avoiding putting one's forces at risk, in turn reduces the political threshold to military operations abroad: it is less necessary – or even not necessary at all – to justify such foreign intervention to constituents at home. Several states have waged drone campaigns without acknowledging their intervention, including UAE in Libya and Ethiopia, and Turkey in Libya.

While drones allow for intervention to be delegated to technology, another way to reduce risk exposure while intervening is to have other actors fight in one's place. This logic has clearly contributed to the growing popularity of the slogan “African solutions to African problems” among Western states, and surfaced in experimentation with various models of Western support for African-led military operations, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) or the G5 joint force in the Sahel. But such delegation to African actors has also taken more problematic forms, such as support for militias or the mobilisation of armed groups as mercenaries in neighbouring states. Examples include France's cooperation with the MSA and GATIA armed groups in the Niger–Mali border area and UAE's financing of Sudanese fighters in the ranks of Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya.⁴ Russia has pioneered a particular type of delegation: ostensibly private military contractors whose combat interventions the Russian government denies or misleadingly portrays as training missions.⁵ This approach allows the Russian state to back interventions without having to be held to account for any casualties, war crimes or any other negative consequences stemming from its involvement in any given conflict.

Finally, lower thresholds for intervention by an increasing range of actors, combined with a trend towards arm's-length interference, also manifest in the growing prominence of influence operations waged primarily via social media, supplemented by more traditional outlets such as state-owned satellite TV channels or radio stations. Networks linked to Russia, Turkey, UAE and Saudi Arabia have been particularly prominent among the actors identified behind such disinformation campaigns. As such practices become more common, they are adopted by other actors too, as shown by the dismantlement of rival Russian and French disinformation networks targeting CAR.⁶ Many such campaigns target countries in conflict and combine with other forms of intervention in ways that have been referred to as “hybrid warfare”. But they also extend beyond crisis states to influence public opinion elsewhere on the continent.

This paper surveys the state of research on changing patterns of foreign intervention in African conflicts, focusing on two aspects that are directly linked to the aforementioned megatrends: the multiplication of interveners and their tendency to delegate warfare to technology or third parties. It is particularly concerned with the reactions of local actors towards these two tendencies, as well as with their impact on conflict dynamics, including on the balance of power between African governments and insurgents.

The next section provides an overview of key debates in the literature on the topic. Based on the review and relevant contributions from the Megatrends Afrika project, the third section identifies questions and topics that merit further investigation.

⁴ International Crisis Group. 2018. “Frontière Niger-Mali: mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique.” Report No. 261. Brussels: ICG; UN Panel of Experts on Sudan. 2022. “Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted in Accordance with Paragraph 2 of Resolution 2508 (2020 and 2021).” New York: UNSC.

⁵ Bobin, Frédéric et al. 2022. “La Stratégie Opportuniste de la Russie.” *Le Monde*. 31 January 2022.

⁶ Stubbs, Jacob. 2020. “French and Russian Trolls Wrestle for Influence in Africa, Facebook Says.” *Reuters*. 15 December 2020.

Causes and consequences of the delegation of warfare: The state of the literature

Conceptual controversies

Among the key changes in the character of state-led warfare over the past two decades has been a shift from the deployment of large troops on the ground towards the use of more distant and risk-adverse methods. Pioneered by the US and rapidly adopted by other Western states, this shift has recently been emulated by a number of non-Western powers.⁷ The set of military practices and technologies that have accompanied this development has given rise to a number of labels and concepts, of which “remote warfare” is the most prominent.⁸ Others include “delegation”,⁹ “proxy”, “surrogate”,¹⁰ “vicarious”,¹¹ “risk-transfer”,¹² “liquid”,¹³ “indirect”, “low-risk”, or “light-footprint” warfare. These terms are either neologisms or have undergone a revival in the recent debate.¹⁴ The proliferation of these terms has been criticised as creating “semantic confusion”¹⁵ or “buzzwords”,¹⁶ which remain conceptually vague and analytically weak.¹⁷

Two broad approaches to defining remote warfare can be differentiated in the literature. The first approach focuses in a more narrow sense on the use of new remote weapons technologies such as Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) or combat drones.¹⁸ The second approach follows a more expansive notion, which also includes other techniques for outsourcing ground operations to surrogates and thereby minimising the risk to one’s own military

⁷ Rogers, Paul. 2013. “Security by Remote Control: Can it Work?” *RUSI Journal* 158, no. 3: 14-20; Watson, Abigail and Alasdair McKay. 2021. “Remote Warfare: A Critical Introduction.” In *Remote Warfare. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoj-Pedersen, 7-33. Bristol: E-International Relations; Rogers, James and Delina Goxho. 2021. “Light Footprint – Heavy Destabilising Impact in Niger.” *International Politics* 2022; Lacher, Wolfram. 2020. “Drones, Deniability, and Disinformation: Warfare in Libya and the New International Disorder.” *War on the Rocks*, 3 March 2020.

⁸ Strachan, Hew. 2014. *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Karlén, Niklas et al. 2021. “Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars”. *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4: 2048-2078.

¹⁰ Krieg, Andreas and Jean Marc Rickli. 2018. “Surrogate warfare: the art of war in the 21st century?” *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2: 113-130.

¹¹ Waldman, Thomas. 2018. “Vicarious warfare: The counterproductive consequences of modern American military practice.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2: 181-205.

¹² Shaw, Martin. 2005. *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq*. Cambridge: Polity.

¹³ Demmers, Jolle and Lauren Gould. 2018. “An assemblage approach to liquid warfare.” *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 5: 364-381.

¹⁴ For a non-exhaustive overview and an attempt to classify more terms used to describe contemporary modes of warfare, see: Rauta, Vladimir. 2021. “A Conceptual Critique of Remote Warfare.” *Defence Studies* 21, no. 4: 545-572.

¹⁵ Rauta 2021.

¹⁶ Biegon, Rubrick, Vladimir Rauta and Tom F. A. Watts. 2021. “Remote Warfare – Buzzword or Buzzkill?” *Defence Studies* 21, no. 4: 427-446.

¹⁷ McKay, Alasdair. 2021. “Introduction.” In *Remote Warfare. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoj-Pedersen, 1-6. Bristol: E-International Relations; Biegon, Rubrick and Tom F. A. Watts. 2022. “Remote Warfare and the Retooling of American Primacy.” *Geopolitics* 27, no. 3: 948-971.

¹⁸ Gusterson, Hugh. 2016. *Drone: Remote Control Warfare*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press; Ohlin, Jens David, ed. 2017. *Research Handbook on Remote Warfare*. Northampton, MA and Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

forces.¹⁹ Such surrogates include private military companies, regional states and their security forces, or militias and insurgent groups.²⁰ Broader definitions also highlight an increased reliance on Special Operation Forces (SOF) for training, combat support to other military forces,²¹ or intelligence sharing.²² For the purposes of this paper, we adopt the expansive understanding of remote warfare as delegation to both technological and human surrogates.

Many of the phenomena that constitute remote warfare are not new.²³ Indeed, outsourcing ground operations to local forces or mercenaries is as old as warfare itself.²⁴ The employment of Special Forces was a prominent feature of so-called proxy wars during the Cold War-era.²⁵ And the 20th century saw a trend towards long-distance airstrikes with a high degree of accuracy.²⁶

Rather, what is new is the much greater extent to which states rely on techniques of remote warfare,²⁷ with the intention of shaping security environments rather than exercising direct control over territories.²⁸ Moreover, technological innovation has opened up new possibilities for outsourcing the burden of warfare.²⁹ New weapons systems, such as drone technology, have not only increased the ability to operate from afar. They also provide a view of the action in real-time and thus the ability to track and attack mobile targets.³⁰ Finally, private military and security companies (PMSCs) have become an important industry, with clients ranging from governments to transnational corporations.³¹

A parallel conceptual debate concerns the notion of “hybrid” warfare and related terms, which rose to prominence after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Although the concept of “hybrid warfare” had emerged out of debates on military strategic thinking,³² from 2014 onwards it became closely intertwined with analysis of Russian tactics in Ukraine, as well as with associated threat perceptions by Western and European actors.³³ The popular-

¹⁹ Watson, Abigail. 2018. “The Perils of Remote Warfare: Finding a Political Settlement with Counter-Terrorism in the Driving Seat.” *The Strategy Bridge*, 5 December 2018.

²⁰ Krieg and Rickli 2019; Waldman, Thomas. 2021. *Vicarious Warfare: American Strategy and the Illusion of War on the Cheap*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

²¹ Morrison, Scott. 2014. “Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2: 48–54.

²² Richards, Julian. 2021. “Intelligence Sharing in Remote Warfare.” In *Remote Warfare. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoj-Pedersen. Bristol: E-International Relations, 48–63.

²³ Watson and McKay 2021.

²⁴ Williams, Brian Glyn. 2012. “Fighting with a Double-Edged Sword? Proxy Militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya.” In *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates & the Use of Force*, edited by Michael Innes, 61–88. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Parrott, David. 2012. *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Watson and McKay 2021; Kinsey, Christopher and Helene Olsen. 2021. “Remote Warfare and the Utility of Military and Security Contractors.” In *Remote Warfare. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoj-Pedersen, 64–78. Bristol: E-International Relations.

²⁵ Rogers 2013.

²⁶ Gusterson 2016; Chamayou, Grégoire. 2015. *Drone Theory*. London: Penguin UK.

²⁷ Rogers 2013; Watson and McKay 2021.

²⁸ Demmers and Gould 2018; Watson 2018; Clausen, Maria-Louise and Albrecht, Peter. 2021. “Interventions since the Cold War: from statebuilding to stabilization.” *International Affairs* 97, no. 4, 1203–1220.

²⁹ Krieg and Rickli 2018. *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2.

³⁰ Rogers 2013; Davies, Shawn, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg. 2022. “Organized violence 1989–2021 and drone warfare.” *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 4: 593–610.

³¹ Rogers 2013; Kinsey, Christopher. 2006. *Corporate soldiers and international security: The rise of private military companies*. London: Routledge.

³² Hoffmann, Frank G. 2007. *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies; Reichborn-Kjennerud, Erik, and Patrick Cullen. 2016. “What Is Hybrid Warfare?” NUPI Policy Brief 1/2016; Tamminga, Oliver. “Hybride Kriegsführung. Zur Einordnung Einer Aktuellen Erscheinungsform des Krieges.” *SWP-Aktuell* 2015/A 27.

³³ Giegerich, Bastian. 2016. “Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict.” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15, no. 2: 65–72; Lawson, Ewan. 2021. “We Need to Talk About Hybrid.” *The RUSI Journal* 166 (3): 58–66; Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016; Tamminga 2015.

ity of the concept in the policy debate provoked a proliferation of differing conceptualisations.³⁴ As a result, the notion lacks a clear-cut definition, and is more akin to an umbrella term encompassing a variety of hostile actions by state or non-state actors.³⁵ As with remote warfare and related notions, a plethora of concepts close to hybrid warfare has circulated, including “grey zone”, “irregular”, “protracted” or “ambiguous warfare”, adding to confusion in the debate.³⁶

Hybrid warfare is generally associated with a strategic use of methods that bridge conventional and non-conventional, civil and military, overt and covert measures to target not only the state structures of an adversary but also its society.³⁷ As Frank G. Hoffman, who coined the term as it is currently understood, writes: “The blurring of modes of war, the blurring of who fights, and what technologies are brought to bear, produces a wide range of variety and complexity that we call Hybrid Warfare”.³⁸ The notion thereby concerns campaigns aiming to destabilise and confuse an adversary, as well as disrupting their ability to respond to attacks, both at the state and societal levels.³⁹

Hybrid warfare is relevant for this paper mainly in the form of cyber attacks – such as on critical infrastructure – and influence campaigns.⁴⁰ Influence or disinformation campaigns generally seek to expand one party’s influence by controlling narratives in the information ecosystem, thereby ideologically mobilising groups in society.⁴¹ Here, the concepts of hybrid warfare and information warfare intertwine.⁴²

As in the debate on delegation and remote warfare, academics have questioned the analytical value and the novelty of hybrid warfare.⁴³ Many note that violent conflicts have long involved a combination of regular military and non-conventional measures.⁴⁴ Moreover, all too broad a conceptualisation might easily lead to a wide range of actions being viewed as part of a larger hybrid warfare strategy and potentially as bellicose acts. Such a framing could contribute to escalation.⁴⁵

These controversies aside, we see value in integrating the concept’s concern with disinformation campaigns into our broader understanding of remote warfare. After all, foreign-

³⁴ Lawson 2021.

³⁵ Bachmann, Sascha-Dominik und Håkan Gunneriusson. 2015. “Hybrid Wars: The 21st-Century’s New Threats to Global Peace and Security.” *Scientia Militaria* 43, no. 1: 77-98; Bendiek, Annegret. 2018. “Die EU Als Friedensmacht in Der Internationalen Cyberdiplomatie.” SWP-Aktuell 2018/A 22; Faleg, Giovanni and Nad'a Kovalčíková. 2022. “Rising Hybrid Threats in Africa: Challenges and Implications for the EU.” EUISS Brief 3/2022.

³⁶ Banasik, Mirosław. 2016. “Unconventional War and Warfare in the Gray Zone. The New Spectrum of Modern Conflicts.” *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 7, no. 1: 37-46; Bendiek, Annegret, and Raphael Bossong. 2022. “Hybride Bedrohungen: Vom Strategischen Kompass Zur Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie.” SWP-Aktuell 2022/A 40; Hoffman, Frank G. 2015. “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War.” 2016 Military Strength Topical Essays; Nilsson, Niklas, Mikael Weissmann, Björn Palmertz, Per Thunholm, and Henrik Häggström. 2021. *Security Challenges in the Grey Zone: Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare*. London: I.B. Tauris; Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016.

³⁷ Lawson 2021; Popescu, Nico. 2015. “Hybrid Tactics: Neither New nor Only Russian.” EUISS Issue Alert 4/2015; Andersson, Jan Joel. 2015. “Hybrid Operations: Lessons from the Past.” EUISS Brief Issue 33/2015; Andersson, Jan Joel, and Thierry Tardy. 2015. “Hybrid: What’s in a Name?” EUISS Brief Issue 32/2015; Bendiek 2018; Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016.

³⁸ Hoffman 2007, 14.

³⁹ Bendiek and Bossong 2022. Briggs, Chad M. 2020. “Climate Change and Hybrid Warfare Strategies.” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 4: 45-57.

⁴⁰ Bendiek and Bossong 2022; Faleg and Kovalčíková 2022.

⁴¹ Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016; Nimmo, Ben. 2020. “The Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations.” *Brookings*, 25 September 2020; Wanless, Alicia. 2019. “We Have a Problem, but It Isn’t Technology.” *medium*, 29 May 2019.

⁴² Andersson, 2015.

⁴³ Gray, Colin. 2012. “Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges either as Irregular or Traditional.” *Monographs, Collaborative Studies, & IRPs*. US Army War College Press; Galeotti, Mark. 2016. “Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia’s “new way of war”?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2: 282-301; Elkus, Adam. 2015. “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense.” *War on the Rocks*, 15 December 2015; Lawson 2021; Nilsson et al. 2021; Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016.

⁴⁴ Andersson and Tardy 2015; Lawson 2021; Tamminga 2015; Galeotti 2016.

⁴⁵ Lawson 2021.

led influence operations in war zones involve low-cost, low-risk interventions at arm's length in ongoing conflicts – frequently with a strong element of delegation, as they are often outsourced to non-state actors.

Megatrends and delegation

The growing prominence of delegation in remote and hybrid warfare has close causal links with several megatrends, among them globalisation, shifts in global power relations, digitalisation and technological innovation in weaponry. Globalisation, understood as the acceleration and intensification of global connections, has caused heightened threat perceptions in Western states, in particular, with perceived threats emanating from across the world and driving states to intervene in multiple theatres.⁴⁶ At the same time, the increasing mediatisation of war through the global news media and social media have reinforced a trend among Western states to minimise the exposure of their own forces through a growing reliance on airpower, particularly on drones, as well as on local partners for ground forces.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, long-term trends in economic development and wealth accumulation have led to the rise of new great and middle powers such as China, Russia, India, the Gulf States and Turkey. The relative power of the US and European states has been in decline, as most prominently seen in the US's efforts to scale down its involvement in the Middle East in order to pivot to East Asia. As a result, some middle powers have pursued more independent and assertive foreign policies, including through military intervention. In other words, conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have increasingly been marked by multipolarity.⁴⁸ The growing interdependence between Western states and such middle powers has left Western states reluctant or unable to use multilateral institutions to enforce rules governing military intervention.⁴⁹ Delegation allows middle powers to intervene at relatively low cost and risk, and often while maintaining a degree of deniability at the international level.⁵⁰

Technological innovation has facilitated the trend towards arm's-length interventions through the development of combat drones, coupled with the growing sophistication of surveillance and reconnaissance technology. Advances in information technology and digitalisation, meanwhile, are an obvious factor behind the growing role of electronic warfare and influence operations.⁵¹ In Africa, in particular, digitalisation is accompanied by another megatrend: urbanisation. Taken together, societies that rapidly become more urban and reliant on digital technology for critical infrastructure and information ecosystems are increasingly vulnerable to the kind of hybrid warfare tactics seen in industrialised countries. Technological interdependence may be turned against those partaking in it. Today, authoritarian regimes such as China are in a position to shape such interdependence according to their interests.⁵²

⁴⁶ Gregory, Derek. 2011. "The Everywhere War." *The Geographical Journal* 177, no. 3: 238–50.

⁴⁷ Krieg and Rickli 2019.

⁴⁸ Rondeaux, Candace and David Sterman. 2019. "Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World Since the 2011 NATO Intervention." *New America*, 20 February 2019; Lacher 2020.

⁴⁹ Aksoy, Hürcan Asli, Muriel Asseburg, and Wolfram Lacher. 2021. "The Need for New Concepts to Address Conflicts in Europe's Broader Southern Neighbourhood." In *German Foreign Policy in Transition*, edited by Günther Maihold, Stefan Mair, Melanie Müller, Judith Vorrath, Christian Wagner. SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 10.

⁵⁰ Lacher 2020.

⁵¹ Schmitt, Olivier. 2020. "Wartime paradigms and the future of western military power." *International Affairs* 96, no. 2: 401–418.

⁵² Bendiek and Bossong 2022.

At the same time, it is worth noting that there are large disparities in internet connectivity and accessibility across states and regions in Africa. In CAR, for example, only a relatively small proportion consume news via the internet and social media, while the majority of the population resorts to traditional media outlets. Similarly, critical infrastructure on the continent is frequently not only far less developed, but also less reliant on digital interconnectivity. Such context is essential to grasp the threat posed by hybrid activities on the continent.⁵³ There have to date been few politically motivated cyber attacks on African states, though such attacks could become more common as digitalisation proceeds apace on the continent.⁵⁴

Consequences: Blurred boundaries, conflict dynamics, and accountability

In the growing body of literature on the socio-political consequences of remote and hybrid warfare, four interconnected themes emerge. They concern the blurring of boundaries between war and peace and the ubiquity of interventions; the impact on conflict dynamics; the consequences for civilian harm; and the challenge of accountability. So far, research focusing in particular on the consequences of remote and hybrid warfare in African contexts remains limited.

Blurred boundaries

Remote and hybrid warfare, one strand of the literature argues, have muddled the boundaries between war and peace by broadening the notion of the battlefield. The deployment of PMSCs has blurred the distinction between combatants and civilians.⁵⁵ Under the US-led “war on terror”, targeted killings through drone strikes outside active war zones were no longer conceived of as assassinations, but legitimised as national self-defence.⁵⁶ At the same time, traditional legal constraints on the use of force were applied less stringently in circumstances where there were few or no military personnel involved, setting a dangerous precedent.⁵⁷ Pre-emptive drone strikes thus turned into a constant threat for entire communities in areas designated for counterterrorism operations.⁵⁸ Considering the increased availability of drone technology to a range of state and non-state actors,⁵⁹ this constant open-ended threat may ultimately manifest itself on a global scale.⁶⁰

Critical scholarship has also questioned the notion of distance attached to remote warfare, by pointing to its social and political consequences within intervening states. Not only

⁵³ Faleg and Kovalčíková 2022.

⁵⁴ Allen, Nate, Matthew La Lime and Tomslin Samme-Nlar. 2022. “The Downsides of Digital Revolution. Confronting Africa’s evolving cyber threats.” Research Report December 2022. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

⁵⁵ Kinsey 2006.

⁵⁶ Calhoun, Laurie. 2018. “Totalitarian tendencies in drone strikes by states.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 2: 357-375.

⁵⁷ Corn, Geoffrey. 2017. “Drone warfare and the erosion of traditional limits on war powers.” In *Research Handbook on Remote Warfare*, edited by David Jens Ohlin, 246-272. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁵⁸ Riemann, Malte and Norma Rossi. 2021. “Outsourcing Death, Sacrifice and Remembrance: The Socio-Political Effects of Remote Warfare.” *E-International Relations*; Gregory 2011; Calhoun 2018.

⁵⁹ Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2022.

⁶⁰ Sonnenberg, Stephan. 2016. “Why drones are different.” In *Preventive Force: Drones, Targeted Killing, and the Transformation of Contemporary Warfare*, edited by Kerstin Fisk and Jennifer M. Ramos, 115-141. New York: NYU Press.

have terrorist attacks in the West been justified as a revenge for remote warfare,⁶¹ but the application of domestic counter-insurgency measures, aimed at regulating terrorist threats, has shown militarising effects on Western societies.⁶² Moreover, physical distance and remote control operations do not remove the bodily experiences of warfare.⁶³ For drone operators, for example, high-resolution images create a sense of proximity that can trigger severe post-traumatic stress disorder.⁶⁴ In sum, remote warfare becomes a ubiquitous condition, a broadening of the time and space of war that authors have branded as “unending war”⁶⁵ or “everywhere war”.⁶⁶

Through its reliance on ambiguity, ubiquity and diffusion, hybrid warfare also blurs the lines between war and peace.⁶⁷ Actors using hybrid tactics seek to leverage the vulnerabilities of their adversaries while staying below the level of outright and officially acknowledged war.⁶⁸ Influence operations, for example, seek to mould the socio-political environment in a way that gradually increases one’s own influence, instead of inflicting visible losses on the opponent. By definition, hybrid war does not therefore fit the peace-war dichotomy and makes it difficult to delineate the beginning or end of hostilities.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Riemann and Rossi 2021.

⁶² Dunlap, Alexander. 2016. “Counter-insurgency: let’s remember where prevention comes from and its implications.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, no. 2: 380-385; Sabir, Rizwaan. 2017. “Blurred lines and false dichotomies: Integrating counterinsurgency into the UK’s domestic ‘war on terror’.” *Critical Social Policy* 37, no. 2: 202-224; Owens, Patricia. 2015. *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶³ Chapa, Joseph. 2021. “Human Judgment in Remote Warfare.” In *Remote Warfare. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshoj-Pedersen, 199-217. Bristol: E-International Relations.

⁶⁴ Gregory, Derek. 2011. “From a View to a Kill. Drones and Late Modern War.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7- 8: 188-215; Holmquist, Caroline. 2013. “Undoing War. War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare.” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3: 535-552.

⁶⁵ Duffield, Mark. 2007. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

⁶⁶ Gregory 2011. The everywhere war.

⁶⁷ Andersson 2015; Brands, Hal. 2016. “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone - Foreign Policy Research Institute.” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 5 February 2016; Hughes, Geraint. 2020. “War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications.” *Survival* 62, no. 3: 131-158.

⁶⁸ Andersson and Tardy 2015; Briggs 2020; Faleg and Kovalčíková 2022; Giegerich 2016.

⁶⁹ Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016.

Remote warfare and delegation in Africa

African conflicts have become key theatres for remote warfare since the 2000s. From the perspective of Western governments, much of the continent had long been strategically peripheral. Military interventions in Africa were therefore often considered wars of choice rather than necessity, and countries tended to limit the exposure of their own forces. Moreover, the comparatively weak coercive capacities of many African states, and their loose control over often vast territories, meant that even minor changes in state military capacity could bring results, and airpower was an attractive option for policing remote areas.

As elsewhere, the move towards remote warfare in Africa was pioneered by the US. Intervening at arm's length became the preferred US approach in Africa even before the strategic stalemates and failures in Afghanistan and Iraq discredited the choice of large-scale interventions. This was due not least to the disastrous ending of the 1992–93 US humanitarian intervention in Somalia, which had a lasting effect on the US posture on the continent.⁷⁰

US remote warfare in Africa has concentrated on counterterrorism. It has relied on a combination of security assistance to local partners and, increasingly, drone strikes. Somalia, Libya and the Sahel have been key areas of operation. Another prominent case of remote warfare has been the US assistance to Ugandan forces in their regional operation against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from 2008 to 2017. The latter effort is considered to have successfully degraded the LRA and improved security for civilians.⁷¹

Since the eruption of conflict in Mali in 2012, the Sahel region has become a particular focus of arm's length intervention by Western states. While France has deployed forces for ground operations, it has also sought to enlist African partners such as Chad, and pursued an overall exit strategy that relied on building the military capacities of the Sahel states. More recently, France has also increasingly relied on drone strikes. Its European allies, meanwhile, pursued capacity building with several EU training missions, the unsuccessful attempt to form a joint force among the G5 Sahel states, and with bilateral assistance.⁷² These efforts could not stem the dramatic escalation in violence that occurred even as the foreign presence continued to expand. Whether remote warfare and capacity building fare better in Niger – which has emerged as a key partner for Western states in the region – remains to be seen.⁷³ The proliferation of actors involved has had unintended consequences, such as increasing inter-agency rivalry among security forces.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Hathaway, Oona A. and Luke Hartig. 2022. "Still at War: The United States in Somalia." *Just Security*, 31 March 2022.

⁷¹ Arieff, Alexis, Lauren Blanchard, and Tomas Husted. 2015. "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response." Congressional Research Service, 28 September 2015; Human Rights Watch. 2017. "Ten Questions about the drawdown of the US Counter LRA-Operation." HRW. 19 July 2017.

⁷² Reeve, Richard and Zoe Pelter. 2014. "From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-terrorism Operation in the Sahel-Sahara." In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* The Remote Control Digest, October 2014; Tull, Denis. 2021. "Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel." SWP Comment 2021/C 05; Goxho, Delina. 2021. "Remote Warfare in the Sahel and a Role for the European Union." In *Remote Warfare: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by McKay, Alasdair; Abigail Watson and Megan Karlshøj-Pedersen, 96-109. Bristol: E-International Relations.

⁷³ Rogers and Goxho 2021.

Conflict dynamics

Research on the impact of remote and hybrid warfare on conflict dynamics is still in its infancy. Several fields of inquiry emerge from that research: first, there is a widespread assumption that remote warfare in general, and covert or deniable intervention in particular, lowers the threshold for military intervention and thereby contributes to the escalation of conflict.⁷⁵ Counter-arguments, however, maintain that a lower threshold could also mean a greater likelihood of intervention to stop mass casualty conflict, such as genocide.⁷⁶ The empirical evidence supporting either side of the argument remains largely anecdotal to date.

Second, empirical studies of arms-length intervention show that remote warfare can have unintended and counterproductive consequences on conflict dynamics. In Pakistan, US drone strikes gave rise to a proliferation of terrorist attacks directed against the civilian population.⁷⁷ As extremist groups relocated geographically, drone strikes led to radicalisation and a surge in violence and crime in other parts of the country.⁷⁸ Similarly, French-led counter-terrorism efforts in Mali have at times displaced rather than dismantled jihadi groups, leading to destabilising effects for neighbouring countries.⁷⁹ The multitude of external actors involved in remote forms of warfare and the combination of their “light footprint” interventions has shown “heavy and saturating” effects in Niger, with potentially destabilising effects.⁸⁰

A third field of inquiry concerns the consequences of remote warfare for power relations: between foreign powers and governments in target or host countries, as well as between governments and insurgents. Regarding the former question, the proliferation of intervening powers employing remote warfare undoubtedly improves the negotiating position of host governments vis-à-vis foreign partners.⁸¹ Intervening powers, meanwhile, have to deal with the well-established principal-agent problem when pursuing their interventions through proxies, including host governments.⁸²

Remote warfare would also seem to tilt the balance of power between governments and insurgents in favour of the latter, except in cases where insurgents also receive foreign support. A case in point is the stabilising impact of the Wagner Group’s deployment on the Touadera regime in CAR.⁸³ Drones and sophisticated air defence systems, moreover, are typically available to states rather than insurgents, though there are exceptions to this rule. Relatively affordable Turkish and Iranian drones allow cash-strapped African governments to acquire or expand airpower capacity.⁸⁴ A prominent example where this proved critical in altering the balance of power is the Ethiopian government’s defeat of a Tigrayan advance

⁷⁴ Wilén, Nina. 2021. “The impact of security force assistance in Niger: meddling with borders.” *International Affairs* 98, no. 4: 1405-1421; Marsh, Nicholas and Øystein H. Rolandsen. 2021. “Fragmented We Fall: Security Sector Cohesion and the Impact of Foreign Security Force Assistance in Mali.” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 5: 614-629.

⁷⁵ Lacher 2020.

⁷⁶ Ohlin, Jens David. 2017. “Remoteness and Reciprocal Risk.” In *Research Handbook on Remote Warfare*. Northampton, edited by Jens Ohlin, MA and Cheltenham, 15-49. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁷⁷ Gill, Paul. 2014. “The Impact of Drone Attacks on Terrorism: The Case of Pakistan.” In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* The Remote Control Digest, October 2014.

⁷⁸ Aslam, Wali. 2014. “Terrorist Relocation and the Societal Consequences of US Drone Strikes in Pakistan.” In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* The Remote Control Digest, October 2014.

⁷⁹ Reeve and Pelter 2014.

⁸⁰ Rogers and Goxho 2021.

⁸¹ Lacher 2022.

⁸² Karlén et al. 2021.

⁸³ International Crisis Group. 2021. “Russia’s Influence in the Central African Republic”. *Commentary / Africa*. 3 December 2021.

⁸⁴ Donelli, Federico. 2022. “UAVs and beyond: Security and defence sector at the core of Turkey’s strategy in Africa.” *Megatrends Policy Brief* 02, 31. March 2022.

on the capital in 2021.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, ongoing conflicts with clear air superiority against insurgents, including through the use of drones, show that insurgent groups can prove resilient or even retain an advantage by resorting to cover, concealment and dispersion.⁸⁶ A prime example is the jihadist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso that have continued to expand since 2020, despite French and US drone strikes.

Civilian casualties

While advocates of remote warfare embrace the reduced exposure to violence of their own military forces, and the enhanced ability to inflict precise damage upon the target, critics remind us that there are no “clean” wars.⁸⁷ Case studies indicate that the civilian harm caused by remote warfare remains underestimated by intervening states. In Yemen⁸⁸ as in Afghanistan⁸⁹ or Iraq,⁹⁰ the number of civilian casualties officially recognised as linked to drone strikes, or Special Forces operations are significantly lower than accounts compiled by local activists, NGOs or the media. None of the states employing or being targeted by drones runs a systematic data collection mechanism,⁹¹ and official statistics on civilian casualties neglect the severe economic, educational and mental health implications of the operations.⁹²

Meanwhile, new intervening powers deploying remote warfare, often under the cover of deniability, have shown even less restraint in targeting civilians than Western states. Emirati drone strikes in Libya and Ethiopia have caused large numbers of civilian casualties, while the deployment of the Wagner Group to Libya, Mali and CAR have been accompanied by indiscriminate, large-scale killings of civilians and the use of other internationally banned tactics, such as the mining and booby-trapping of residential areas.⁹³

Deniability and accountability

The use of drones, the delegation to proxies, and military operations of SOFs or PMSCs are either classified or secretive activities. The possibility of public scrutiny or prosecution under international law is therefore limited, increasing the opportunity for the abuse of power.⁹⁴ Difficult security situations in intervention contexts as well as conceptual and methodological challenges further hamper the collection of reliable and timely data on the

⁸⁵ Walsh, Declan. 2021. “Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia’s Civil War.” *New York Times*, 20 December 2021.

⁸⁶ Calcara, Antonio et al. 2022. “Why Drones Have Not Revolutionized War.” *International Security* 46, no. 4: 130-171.

⁸⁷ Ohlin 2017, p. 1-2; Carvin, Stephanie. 2022. “How not to war.” *International Affairs* 98, no. 5: 1695-1716.

⁸⁸ Shiban, Baraa and Camilla Molyneux. 2021. “The Human Cost of Remote Warfare in Yemen.” *E-International Relations*, 16. February 2021.

⁸⁹ Ross, Alice K., Jack Serle and Tom Wills. 2014. “Drones in Afghanistan: A Scoping Study”. In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* The Remote Control Digest, October 2014.

⁹⁰ Gould, Lauren and Nora Stel. 2022. “Strategic ignorance and the legitimization of remote warfare: The Hawija bombardments.” *Security Dialogue* 53, no. 1: 57-74.

⁹¹ Hofstra, Kate and Elizabeth Minor. 2014. “Losing Sight of the Human Cost: Casualty Recording and Remote Control Warfare.” In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* The Remote Control Digest, October 2014.

⁹² Shiban and Molyneux 2021.

⁹³ Lacher 2022.

⁹⁴ Hofstra and Minor 2014; Calhoun 2018; Meier, Vanessa. 2021. “Making Clandestine Public: Challenges in Collecting Data on External Support and Ways Forward.” In “Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars”, edited by Karlén, Niklas et al. *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4: 2048-2078; Donnellan, Caroline, and Esther Kersley. 2014. “Executive Summary.” In *New Ways of War: Is Remote Control Warfare Effective?* *The Remote Control Digest*, October 2014. London: Remote Control Project.

consequences of remote warfare.⁹⁵ Intervening forces, in turn, exploit this difficulty of access to obstruct investigation into civilian harm and to legitimise future interventions.⁹⁶ Accountability is even more difficult to achieve where intervening powers do not admit to their responsibility for particular actions, or even actively deny having a military presence at all. Plausible and implausible deniability have been a particular hallmark of recent interventions by powers such as Russia and UAE.⁹⁷

Deniability is also an integral feature of hybrid warfare.⁹⁸ Hybrid tactics tend to involve the employment of private and proxy actors. Perpetrators seek to conceal their own involvement as well as the strategic nature of their hybrid attacks. This ambiguity serves to undermine the opponent's ability to counter the assaults.⁹⁹

According to several authors, the secrecy and lack of accountability associated with remote warfare, in turn undermines "the legitimacy of states and governments at the receiving end of these interventions".¹⁰⁰ In the case of Niger, remote warfare by a multitude of foreign actors has been shown to erode the trust between governments and citizens, due to the lack of transparency associated with the activities of foreign forces.¹⁰¹ In such a context, the presence of foreign actors gives rise to rumours and conspiracy theories – both due to a lack of transparency and to the ambiguous communication policies associated with arm's length intervention.¹⁰² Such environments are vulnerable to disinformation campaigns.¹⁰³ A case in point are Russian-affiliated influence campaigns in CAR and the Sahel, aimed at discrediting multilateral institutions, capitalising on existing anti-French narratives, and furthering pro-Russian sentiment.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁵ Ross, Serle and Wills 2014; Meier 2021.

⁹⁶ Gould and Stel 2022.

⁹⁷ Lacher 2020; 2022.

⁹⁸ Andersson 2015; Popescu 2015.

⁹⁹ Lawson 2021; Popescu 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Boyle, Michael J. 2013. "The Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare." *International Affairs* 89, no. 1: 1–29.

¹⁰¹ Rogers and Goxho 2021.

¹⁰² Rogers and Goxho 2021; McCullough, Aoife. 2022. "Au Niger, les thèses complotistes ne viennent pas que de Moscou" *afriquexxi*, 11 May 2022.

¹⁰³ Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016; Nimmo 2020; Wanless 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Lawal, Shola. 2022. "Russian trolls and mercenaries win allies and good will in Africa." *Coda Story*, 25 August 2022; Otte-Witte, Nina. 2022. "Disinformation on the front lines: 'War is not just bombs and tanks'." *DW Akademie*, 04 May 2022.

Multipolarity and delegation in Africa: Questions for future research

The above review of the literature on delegation reveals a twofold gap between the focus much of the research has taken, and developments in the Global South in general, and in Africa in particular. First, work on remote warfare not only emerged from critical studies of foreign interventions by the US and other Western nations, but has continued to focus overwhelmingly on the actions of Western powers in recent years. It has largely neglected the growing role of remote warfare by non-Western powers.¹⁰⁵ Second, studies of hybrid warfare have been to a large extent concerned with Russian interference in Western or eastern European states. In both respects, the research has yet to grapple fully with the advent of multipolarity, particularly in Africa and the Middle East.

Multipolarity and motivations for remote warfare

Multipolarity requires a reconsideration of the causes of the trend towards remote warfare. With its focus on Western states, the literature has emphasised the growing aversion to large-scale foreign intervention among the public, and its increased sensitivity to the negative consequences of such intervention abroad, owing to the growing mediatisation of war. By contrast, many of the middle powers engaging in remote warfare today – such as Turkey or UAE – have no recent history of public backlash against drawn-out foreign intervention. Moreover, their media landscape is often tightly controlled – as in the case of Russia or UAE – and displays little to no interest in the adverse consequences of their governments' actions abroad. Indeed, to the extent that states such as UAE are worried about public perceptions of their interventions, this appears to concern their international reputation rather than domestic attitudes.¹⁰⁶

How, then, do motivations for engaging in remote warfare differ between such powers and Western states? One hypothesis is that the changing international system may play a more important role in sustaining this trend among the middle powers. As Wolfram Lacher argues in a Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief, multipolarity means that the US and Western states are less able to uphold and enforce norms of non-intervention where it suits them. Non-Western powers therefore incur lower political costs for their foreign interventions. At the same time, receding US and European influence also provokes tensions among regional powers struggling to fill the void, with warzones in the Middle East and Africa becoming the theatres for proxy wars between rival powers.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ For this argument, also see Stoddard, Ed and Sorina Toltica. 2021. "Practising remote warfare: analysing the remote character of the Saudi/UAE intervention in Yemen." *Defence Studies* 21, no. 4: 447-467.

¹⁰⁶ Krieg, Andreas. 2021. "The UAE's Tactical Withdrawal from a strategic engagement in Yemen." *Responsible Statecraft*, 06 March 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Lacher 2022.

In another contribution to Megatrends Afrika, Federico Donnelly argues that, in this new international context, remote warfare also becomes part of a mercantilist strategy by Turkey's politically influential military-industrial complex: a way of demonstrating the effectiveness of Turkish-made weaponry to a global audience.¹⁰⁸

But such arguments are still based on comparatively cursory examinations of the motivations driving remote warfare by non-Western powers in the Middle East and Africa. The closed nature of regimes such as Russia's or the Emirate's undoubtedly pose a challenge to such research. Nevertheless, the question of which conditions are encouraging non-Western middle powers to intervene through remote warfare could guide important additions to the literature.

Consequences of remote and hybrid warfare amidst multipolarity

The multiplication of states deploying remote warfare in Africa raises questions that largely await systematic examination. To begin with: is the proliferation of remote warfare tactics and the multiplication of actors using such tactics driving an increase in violent conflicts in Africa – whether by encouraging escalation into open conflict, or by increasing the intensity of existing conflicts? Does remote warfare really undermine state legitimacy and trust in the state in target countries to a greater extent than was the case with overt interventions on the ground? Does the intervention of an increasing range of actors in one theatre have a different impact in this regard from remote warfare by a single foreign ally? Does remote warfare by non-Western states have fundamentally different consequences from that of its Western pioneers? Do “new” interveners such as UAE or Russia pursue entirely different strategies? For example, what to make of the fact that UAE support has in several cases gone to separatists rather than incumbent governments, and that Russia has supported coup leaders in Sudan and Mali?¹⁰⁹ These questions, too, are methodologically challenging to pursue, but nonetheless critical.

The consequences of hybrid warfare, and influence operations in particular, could also be explored more systematically. This would mean moving away from what has been an overwhelming focus on Russian actions, including when it comes to influence operations in Africa. As with the protagonists of remote warfare, state actors sponsoring influence operations in Africa have proliferated in recent years to include the Gulf States, Turkey and France.¹¹⁰ What impact, then, does the interference of multiple foreign actors in a country's information ecosystem have?

Generally speaking, while foreign-led influence operations via social media have attracted much interest in recent years, the question of impact remains largely under studied. In fact, the assessment of impact is generally limited to tracing how users engaged with disinformation on social media platforms.¹¹¹ It is largely unknown to what extent such engagement matters for public opinion, particularly given that internet penetration varies widely

¹⁰⁸ Donnelly 2022.


¹⁰⁹ Ahran, Ariel and Ranj Alaaldin. 2022. “Separatists and Spoilers: The UAE's Way of Proxy Warfare.” *Orbis* 66, no. 3: 373-390.

¹¹⁰ Stubbs, Jack. 2020. “UPDATE 1-French and Russian trolls duke it out in Central Africa election, Facebook says.” *Reuters*, 15 December 2020; *The Economist*. 2022. “Turkey is making a big diplomatic and corporate push into Africa.” *The Economist*, 23 April 2022; Meta. 2019. “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in UAE, Nigeria, Indonesia and Egypt.” 3 October 2019.

¹¹¹ Nimmo 2020; Wanless 2019; Wanless, Alicia. 2021. “What's Working and What Isn't in Researching Influence Operations?” *Lawfare*, 22 September 2021.

both between and within African countries; in many regions, radio remains the only accessible medium for most people. Examining the link between online disinformation campaigns and political outcomes therefore requires an awareness of particular local and national settings. Such caveats aside, detailed studies of the spread of rumours, false information and narratives at the local level could provide a fruitful way forward.

Megatrends Afrika is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.
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IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability

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ISSN 2747-4275

DOI 10.18449/2022MTA-WP02

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