



# Regional Negotiations from a Social Constructivist Perspective: The Case of Angola's Accession to the SADC-Free Trade Area

*As Negociações Regionais numa  
Perspectiva Construtivista Social:  
O Caso da Adesão de Angola à Zona  
de Comércio Livre da SADC*

*Las Negociaciones Regionales desde  
una Perspectiva Constructivista Social:  
El Caso de la Adhesión de Angola a la  
Zona de Libre Comercio de la SADC*

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## Abstract

Regional negotiations involve more than material or rational factors, as illustrated by Angola's delayed accession to the Southern African Development Community Free Trade Area (SADC-FTA) and the willingness of its regional partners to accommodate Angola's position. Drawing on a social constructivist perspective, this paper treats Angola's accession as a case study to examine how social interactions and ideational factors play a constitutive role in shaping states' interests in regional negotiations. Based on documentary sources and nine interviews with members of the Angolan government,

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senior officials from SADC, and representatives of Angolan industrial associations, the study adopts an analytical and descriptive standpoint. It concludes that Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA cannot be explained solely by power politics or the rational calculation of economic resources; rather, it is embedded within a social structure that shapes the meaning of power distribution and the dynamics of the negotiation process itself.

**Keywords:** Regional Negotiations, Constructivism, Social Interaction, Free Trade Area, Southern Africa.

## Resumo

As negociações regionais não se limitam a fatores materiais ou racionais, como demonstra a adesão tardia de Angola à Zona de Comércio Livre da Comunidade de Desenvolvimento da África Austral (ZCL-SADC) e a disposição dos seus parceiros regionais em acomodar a posição angolana. Numa perspectiva construtivista social, este artigo trata a adesão de Angola como um estudo de caso para examinar como as interações sociais e os fatores ideacionais desempenham um papel constitutivo na formação dos interesses dos Estados nas negociações regionais. Com base em fontes documentais e em nove entrevistas, o estudo adota uma abordagem analítica e descritiva e conclui que a adesão de Angola à ZCL-SADC não pode ser explicada apenas pela política de regulação do poder ou pela racionalização dos recursos económicos. Com efeito, a adesão está inserida numa estrutura social que confere significado à distribuição do poder e aos próprios processos negociais.

**Palavras-chave:** Negociações Regionais, Construtivismo, Interação Social, Zona de Livre Comércio, África Austral.

## Resumen

Las negociaciones regionales no se limitan a factores materiales o racionales, como lo demuestra la adhesión tardía de Angola al Área de Libre Comercio de la Comunidad de Desarrollo de África Austral (ALC-SADC) y la disposición de otros Estados miembros para acomodar la posición angoleña. Desde una perspectiva constructivista social, este artículo considera la adhesión de Angola como un estudio de caso para examinar cómo las interacciones sociales y los factores ideacionales desempeñan un papel constitutivo en la configuración de los intereses de los Estados. Basado en fuentes documentales y nueve entrevistas, el estudio adopta un enfoque analítico y descriptivo y concluye que la adhesión de Angola no puede explicarse únicamente por la política de regulación del poder o por la racionalización de los recursos económicos. Más bien, se inscribe en una estructura social que otorga significado a la distribución del poder y a las propias dinámicas de negociación.

**Palabras clave:** Negociaciones Regionales, Constructivismo, Interacción Social, Área de Libre Comercio, África Austral.





## 1. Introduction

Negotiation is widely regarded as an alternative to the use of force (Mautner-Markhof 1989; Kremenjuk 2002) and, in the context of international trade, plays a decisive role in leading states to join free trade agreements, as demonstrated by Hungary's accession to GATT (Nyerges 1989)<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, negotiations remain a central phenomenon in the study of international relations (Kremenjuk 2002; Odell 2009; Odell and Tingley 2013), and theoretical approaches to negotiation have proved particularly valuable (Pely and Shimoni 2019; Olekalns et al. 2020). Research by Dinar (2000), Niemann (2006), Earnest (2008), Jackson (2009), Odell (2009), Odell and Tingley (2013), and Faizullaev (2014) reflects a growing concern with applying international relations theories to understand, explain, and even predict negotiation processes with an international dimension. Despite this growing body of work, the ideational foundations of negotiation have not yet received the same level of systematic treatment as themes such as war, globalization, international political economy, or international organizations.

Historically, studies on negotiation have relied predominantly on rationalist perspectives, shaped by the epistemological environment in which they emerged (Winham 1979; Niemann 2006; Odell 2009). A closer examination of the literature on international negotiation reveals a notable gap: the lack of systematic studies that examine negotiation, particularly regional negotiation, through the lens of social constructivism.

Constructivism, which examines how international norms and identities shape global relations (Dessler 1989; Wendt 1992, 1999; Poku 1998, 2001; Okafor 2004; Ngoma 2005; Shannon and Kowert 2012), contributes significantly by highlighting non-material and ideational factors, thereby addressing the core social-scientific debate on agency and structure. As a procedural social theory, constructivism emphasizes that reality, including international relations, is socially constructed and grounded in ideational rather than material forces (Jackson and Sørensen 2006). This constructed reality inherently encompasses norms, which early constructivist studies examined through normative behavior, socialization, and normative emergence (Hoffmann 2010). Siles-Brügge (2014) shows how social constructions sustain free trade; Heron and Murray-Evans (2017) demonstrate

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2 Hungary was one of the first socialist countries in Eastern Europe to join GATT, in 1973, to support its economic reforms, expand trade with Western economies, secure better access to international markets, and integrate more deeply into the global trading system while remaining a socialist state.





how discourse mediates asymmetrical bargaining; Murray-Evans (2020) challenges materialist accounts of trade power; Munyi (2013) highlights the normative foundations of state behavior; and Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002) explain EU enlargement through both rationalist and constructivist lenses.

Although these perspectives also address trade negotiations and regional integration, including in Africa, this research focuses specifically on the internal dimension of regional relations through the lens of economic partnership agreement negotiations. Accordingly, I adopt a social constructivist approach to analyze regional negotiations, using Angola's accession to the Southern African Development Community Free Trade Area (SADC-FTA) as a case study. Indeed, understanding why Angola's regional partners in SADC were willing to accommodate a non-immediate adherence to the FTA is challenging from a rationalist or materialist perspective, which makes a constructivist approach particularly relevant.

Established in 1992, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is an organization for political cooperation and economic integration, involving 16 States: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eswatini, Mauritius, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Taking into account that the *SADC Treaty* provides for the promotion of economic integration, the member States signed, in 1996, the *Protocol on Trade*, which came into force in 2000; and approved, in 2003, the *Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan* (RISDP). This plan provides for a schedule of actions, including the creation of a Free Trade Area, launched in 2008. Yet, Angola did not immediately join the area, having postponed its accession.

Angola's decision for non-immediate accession and its roadmap were negotiated within the region's history of conflict and cooperation. The shared struggle for independence and liberation from minority rule in Southern Africa has shaped social interactions in regional relations and continues to influence negotiations. This context frames regional negotiations as processes shaped by states' social and historical interactions, which are endogenous to the negotiation itself.

Considering that a purely rationalist perspective cannot fully account for the willingness of Angola's regional partners in SADC to accept its non-immediate adherence to the terms of the FTA, this research addresses the following question: What explanatory power does social constructivism offer for understanding regional negotiations such as Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA?







Accordingly, this paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the applicability of constructivism to the analysis of international negotiations at the regional level;
- To describe the social and historical interactional dimensions that shaped Angola's negotiating position in the context of the SADC-FTA.

Regarding methodology, this study acknowledges the diversity of approaches available for analyzing negotiations (Carnevale & De Dreu 2006) and adopts a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm to examine how social meanings shape negotiating behavior. Designed as a case study, it focuses on Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA, enabling an in-depth analysis of negotiation dynamics in a specific regional context. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine key participants (including Angolan government officials, SADC Secretariat representatives, and experts from economic associations) complemented by policy documents, communiqués, and regional trade reports.

The article is structured as follows: first, it explores the relevance of a constructivist approach to regional negotiations, highlighting how shared norms and social meanings shape inter-state interactions; second, it details the methodological procedures; third, it examines Angola's accession process, emphasizing the social dimension of negotiations, including identities, beliefs, and practices; fourth, it reflects on constructivist insights for understanding regional negotiation dynamics; and finally, it concludes with a synthesis of findings and their implications for regional negotiations studies.

## **2. The Relevance of a Constructivist Approach to Regional Negotiations**

Although negotiations are as old as human interaction, their systematic study dates only to the 1930s (Zartman 2008) and spans disciplines such as Law, Psychology, Communication, Management, and Political Science (Faure et al. 1998; Kremenjuk 2002; Thompson 2006). In international negotiations, realist and rationalist approaches have predominated. However, as Zartman (2008) and Winham (1979) note, realism alone cannot explain key aspects of international negotiations. Institutions, particularly governments, are not unitary actors but plural entities, generating multiple negotiation levels across domestic and external arenas (Fisher 1993a; Lax & Sebenius 1986; Putnam 1988; Kremenjuk 2002).





Within realism, Waltz's (1979) structural neorealism analyzes how international structures condition actors, emphasizing power and resource distribution (Bacharach & Lawler 1981; Fisher 1993b), forming the basis for a structural approach to negotiation (Schelling 1980; Zartman 1993, 2002). Neoliberal institutionalism, while acknowledging structures, posits that rational actors can shape institutions to modify interaction patterns; yet, as Adler (1997) observes, it similarly views behavior as primarily determined by external, material forces. Although there is some degree of convergence between liberal institutionalism and constructivism, particularly in their shared emphasis on ideas, institutions, non-state actors, and goals that are not reducible to a strictly rationalist logic of power, the two perspectives offer distinct interpretations of how norms, institutions, and practices shape state interactions.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, international institutions play a central role in facilitating cooperation by providing formal structures, rules, and procedural frameworks that reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs, and enable compliance monitoring (Keohane 1984; Keohane & Nye 1977). Constructivism, by contrast, argues that both the propensity for cooperation and the likelihood of conflict are socially constructed: positive patterns of interaction can generate cooperative systems, whereas negative patterns tend to produce hostile environments more consistent with realist assumptions (Wendt 1999).

Constructivism directly challenges several realist premises, some of which are implicitly adopted by liberal institutionalism, by contending that identities, interests, and behavioral norms are socially constituted rather than determined by predefined material structures (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Wendt 1992; Perachi & Daldegan 2025). Therefore, while liberal institutionalism recognizes the influence of social factors, such as trust, shared expectations, and norms of conduct, it treats them instrumentally, regarding the social sphere as relevant only insofar as it strengthens the formal institutions that regulate political behavior. Constructivism, by contrast, views the social sphere as constitutive of the political sphere itself. Within this framework, identities, beliefs, and shared practices shape state interests and orient political decision-making. The social dimension thus operates not merely as a supporting element for institutions, but as the very source of political legitimacy, meaning, and behavior.

Cognitive rationalist theories provide tools to analyze actors' interactions based on choices, contextual conditions, and levels of information and uncertainty. As Wendt (1992, 392) notes, "rationalism offers a fundamentally behavioral





conception of both process and institutions: they change behavior but not identities and interests.” From this perspective, structure is decisive, leaving the formation of identities and interests unexplained. Neorealist and rationalist approaches have dominated negotiation studies, emphasizing international structures shaped by resource distribution. Even procedural perspectives, such as Dupont and Faure (2002), adopt a rationalist framework, treating identities and interests as exogenous (Winham 1979; Odell 2009). Janusch (2018) similarly integrates rational and interactional dimensions into a combined theoretical perspective.

In contrast, constructivism emphasizes non-material and social factors in international relations. Negotiations, as mechanisms for managing international relations, are shaped not only by actors’ rational choices or preferences (Adler 1997) but also by shared knowledge and collective meanings. Studies by Cross (1977), Niemann (2006), and Faizullaev (2014) illustrate this approach, while Jackson (2009) highlights its relevance for conflict resolution, showing that constructivism complements rather than opposes other frameworks. Understanding structure and process as interaction offers significant explanatory power, particularly in regional organizations such as SADC, where historical patterns and regional identity shape negotiation dynamics.

In this article, *regional negotiation* is operationalized as a process through which states within the same region, or sharing institutional values, transform divergent or conflicting positions into agreement through dialogue. In economic policy harmonization, where identities gain prominence, it is crucial to consider not only the rational decision-making structures shaping negotiations but also the social interactions influencing negotiators’ choices (Kesting & Nielsen 2020).

Constructivism considers identities and interests as endogenous to interaction, since “structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process” (Wendt 1992, 395). This perspective underpins the analysis of negotiations, emphasizing “the imprecision of parties’ interests in their own minds” (Zartman 1993, 153). In this sense, negotiated identities and interests are neither pre-existing nor exogenous; and cooperative or competitive positions (Walton & McKersie 1965; Lax & Sebenius 1986, 2006; Pruitt 1993, 2002; Lewicki Hiam and Olander 1996) emerge through the process itself. A state’s negotiating stance reflects not only power structures but also the perceptions, expectations, and social interactions that confer meaning.





### 3. Methodological Procedures

This study followed a systematic set of methodological procedures aligned with a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, aimed at understanding how social meanings shape negotiating behavior. The procedures were designed to ensure rigor, transparency, and reliability of findings.

The study employed a qualitative research design, consistent with a constructivist perspective. It was structured as a case study, focusing on Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of social phenomena, the construction of meaning, and the contextual understanding of actors' behaviors in negotiations (Druckman 2002). By concentrating on a single, well-defined case, the study allows for an in-depth examination of negotiation dynamics and the role of social and normative factors shaping outcomes.

Documentary analysis was employed as a primary methodological technique, drawing on bibliographic sources related to constructivist theory, the literature on negotiation processes, and materials pertinent to the case under examination. We triangulated a wide range of official documentary sources concerning Angola's accession negotiations to the SADC-FTA, including reports, press releases, official statements, testimonies, and interviews published by various media outlets. The documentary analysis emphasized both the substantive content of these materials and the contextual conditions in which they were produced.

To further elucidate the historical regional context and its influence on Angola's accession negotiations, we also applied discourse analysis in the sense proposed by Putnam (2010). This analytical lens enabled us to examine how discourse shapes negotiators' interpretations of identity, interests, and patterns of interaction. By analyzing official speeches and statements, we sought to identify the processes through which meanings were constructed around the negotiation, encompassing its political, technical, and social dimensions.

As the primary data collection instrument for the negotiation under study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with key participants. This method was selected to capture the depth and nuance of participants' perceptions while allowing for the cross-validation of responses, an approach also recommended by Winham (1979).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the specific research questions, the literature on international negotiations and regional relations, and a preliminary analysis of public statements issued by Angola's Ministers of







Foreign Affairs and Planning regarding the SADC-FTA accession process over nine years (2008-2017). These official statements highlighted recurring themes: on one hand, concerns about entering an uneven competitive environment; on the other, a deliberate commitment to engage with regional states while maintaining a cooperative regional framework.

The interviews were designed to explore three overarching dimensions: strategic vision, structural analysis, and actor interaction. While the study primarily focuses on interaction, the inclusion of the other three dimensions provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. From the same perspective, Zartman's framework on international negotiation (1999) had also employed those dimensions to highlight their pivotal role in analytically approaching negotiations shaped by cultural identity.

Therefore, although the study primarily focused on interaction, a comprehensive understanding of the broader context and contours of the negotiation was deemed essential. Accordingly, the interviews were structured around the following thematic axes, which contributed to a deeper qualitative understanding of the case: structure, strategic analysis, process elements, actors, and evaluation.

**Table 1: Categories of the Interviews**

| Category                 | Code | Sub-code | Objectives                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Guiding Questions / Topics                                                                                | Question ID |
|--------------------------|------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| I. Negotiation structure | St   | St-RF    | <b>I.1. Regional Structural Factors.</b><br>Describe the structural elements of power, knowledge, norms and the positioning of States in the region and how they have influenced Angola's negotiating position. | Which regional structural elements influenced Angola's negotiating position regarding SADC-FTA accession? | 1           |
|                          |      | St-GF    | <b>I.2. Global Structural Factors.</b><br>Examine the structural elements of international politics that condition Angola's position.                                                                           | Which global structural factors shaped Angola's stance?                                                   | 2           |
|                          |      | St-IF    | <b>I.3 Internal Structural Factors.</b><br>Analyze internal constraints, especially power and knowledge, which limit and enable Angola's effective economic integration into the Southern region.               | What internal political, economic and security factors influenced Angola's position?                      | 3           |

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| Category                           | Code | Sub-code | Objectives                                                                                                                                                                                           | Guiding Questions / Topics                                                              | Question ID |
|------------------------------------|------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| II. Negotiation Strategic analysis | SA   | SA-SW    | <b>II.1. Strengths and Weaknesses.</b><br>Address the first two dimensions of a strategic analysis, strengths and weaknesses, as applied to Angola's regional policy.                                | What information was available and used to form Angola's negotiating position?          | 4           |
|                                    |      | SA-OT    | <b>II.2. Opportunities and Threats.</b><br>Identify the economic and security elements that influenced and informed Angola's position regarding its accession to the SADC-FTA.                       | Which perceptions and expectations determined Angola's position?                        | 5           |
|                                    |      | SA-PC    | <b>II. 3. Preparatory Internal Consultations.</b><br>Characterize the type of internal discussion (political consultations and debates) developed around Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA.         | How would you characterize the prior internal negotiations?                             | 6           |
| III. Negotiation Process           | P    | P-IP     | <b>III.1. Angola's initial negotiating position.</b><br>Characterize in detail Angola's negotiating position as defined internally and its presentation within the context of the Southern region.   | What was Angola's initial position and objectives?                                      | 7           |
|                                    |      | P-EP     | <b>III.2. Evolution of Angola's position.</b><br>Describe the evolution of Angola's position regarding its accession to the SADC- FTA, specifically the criteria used to define postponements.       | How do you characterize the evolution of Angola's negotiating position?                 | 8           |
|                                    |      | P-RP     | <b>III.3. Relationships among Negotiating Parties.</b><br>Describe the relationships among the States from a social and historical perspective, and the interaction among their representatives.     | How do you characterize interactions among the States party to the SADC Trade Protocol? | 9           |
| IV. Negotiation actors             | A    | A-CE     | <b>IV.1. Actor Characterization and Expectations.</b><br>Reflect on the main identifiable characteristics of the negotiators and the expectations they have expressed about the negotiation process. | How would you describe the actors involved and the expectations they expressed?         | 10          |

continua...





| Category                  | Code | Sub-code | Objectives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Guiding Questions / Topics                                                                        | Question ID |
|---------------------------|------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| V. Negotiation evaluation | Ev   | Ev-DRR   | <b>V.1. Domestic vs Regional Negotiation Relationship.</b><br>Understand the relationship between internal negotiation and regional negotiation in terms of their mutual influence and the reformulation of Angola's position regarding its accession to the SADC-FTA. | What relationship exists between domestic and external (SADC) negotiations on Angola's accession? | 11          |
|                           |      | Ev-SHI   | <b>V.2. Social and Historical Interaction among States.</b><br>Reflect on the historical elements and social interactions of the States and the region's political elites that influence the negotiations in the case under study.                                     | Do historical and social interactions among States influence the negotiation?                     | 12          |
|                           |      |          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Can SADC's organizational structures be considered elements of regional socialization?            | 13          |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Participant selection adhered to the principle of representativeness for relevant actors. From the Government of Angola, entities associated with Foreign Affairs, Trade, Planning, Industry, and the national SADC Secretariat were included. From the SADC Executive Secretariat, officials with direct knowledge of the accession process were selected.

All interviews were conducted individually, except for one joint interview requested by two participants from the same ministerial department. One respondent (I5) preferred to receive the interview questions via email and provided written responses, while offering to clarify answers if necessary. The average interview duration was 45 minutes. Most interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; three were not recorded at the request of the interviewees and were instead summarized in detailed memos capturing key statements. Respondents were coded I1 – I9 in chronological order of the interviews.



**Table 2: Summary of interviewed participants**

| Interviewee | Relevant public functions                                   | Location                            | Date       | Duration |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|----------|
| I1          | National Secretary, SADC                                    | National Secretary's office, Luanda | 10.01.2017 | 50 m     |
| I2          | Director, SADC Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Angola) | Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luanda | 07.11.2017 | 1 h      |
| I3          | Minister of Foreign Affairs (Angola)                        | Residence, Luanda                   | 21.03.2018 | 40 m     |
| I4          | Minister of Foreign Affairs (Angola)                        | Hotel Alvalade, Luanda              | 15.06.2018 | 42 m     |
| I5          | Director for Industrial Development and Trade, SADC         | SADC Secretariat, Gaborone          | 04.09.2018 | —        |
| I6          | Director, International Exchange Office, Ministry of Trade  | Ministry of Trade, Luanda           | 03.08.2018 | 44 m     |
| I7          | National Director, External Trade, Ministry of Trade        | Ministry of Trade, Luanda           | 03.08.2018 | 44 m     |
| I8          | President, Business Association                             | Association headquarters, Luanda    | 13.06.2019 | 23 m     |
| I9          | Deputy Secretary, SADC Regional Integration                 | Hotel Béu-Mar, Luanda               | 30.06.2019 | 37 m     |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The interview responses were organized into thematic categories for content analysis, based on five identified dimensions: structure, strategy, actors, process, and evaluation. In line with current international standards of research transparency, the study adopted an open-data approach for qualitative materials. The anonymised interview transcripts were deposited in a secure online data repository (Zenodo), ensuring both ethical protection and academic accessibility. This practice enhances the integrity of the research, allows independent verification, and provides a valuable resource for future comparative studies on regional negotiations and social constructivism in Africa. These categories were informed by constructivist themes such as social interaction, identity formation, and norm internalization. The analysis focused on identifying the co-constitutive relationship between discourse (ideas, narratives) and institutional design. Quotations from participants were integrated directly into the analytical narrative to demonstrate how empirical evidence sustains the theoretical argument.

Thus, the data analysis process privileged content analysis of the interviews, situating participants' statements within the contexts provided both by the





interviewees themselves and by the researcher's reconstruction of historical and situational indicators specific to the case. Attention was given to the frequency of accounts and interpretations, as well as to both official and unofficial justifications offered by interviewees regarding observed or experienced realities.

#### **4. Results, Analysis, and Discussion**

Having outlined the analytical framework, we now turn to the empirical findings on Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA. This subsection examines the key factors shaping the country's negotiating behavior, drawing on interviews and documentary sources to capture both formal and informal dynamics. Moving from the general framework to the specific case provides a nuanced understanding of how material interests, political considerations, and socially constructed meanings interact in regional negotiations.

This subsection presents the main findings on Angola's accession to the SADC-FTA, based on interviews and document analysis. The results show that Angola's negotiating behavior was shaped not only by material factors, such as economic readiness and institutional capacity, but also by social and political considerations, including regional identities, perceptions of vulnerability, and the legacy of conflict. These dynamics indicate that Angola's accession cannot be explained solely by rationalist cost-benefit calculations, but reflects a complex interplay of strategic interests, social meanings, and evolving expectations regarding its role in Southern Africa.

The SADC-FTA, based on the principles of free membership, asymmetry, win-win, and globality, seeks to eliminate trade restrictions among member states by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers. Implementation has varied by product category and each country's development level. To date, 13 of the 16 SADC members (Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) are implementing the FTA. Angola formalized its accession on 5 June 2025, while the DRC and Comoros remain in the accession process.

Angola's accession negotiations to the SADC-FTA were conducted at two levels: political and technical. At the political-multilateral level, Heads of State and Government, along with Ministers of Planning, Trade, and Foreign Affairs, defined the general principles in line with the SADC Protocol on Trade. At the







technical-bilateral level, specialists from member states — mainly from trade, finance, and foreign affairs ministries — developed each country's trade offer, with the SADC Executive Secretariat facilitating and providing technical support throughout the process.

Although the accession process was largely peaceful, initial negotiations revealed some disagreements over SADC-FTA implementation. As one interviewee noted, “countries like South Africa and Botswana emerged in a brutal way, in the sense of pulling all the benefits for themselves” (Interviewee I 2). In this context, Angola clearly signaled no interest in immediate accession. Following a working visit by the SADC Executive Secretary and Deputy Secretary for Integration to assess readiness, the delegation did not travel to Luanda at the Angolan government's request (Redvers 2013). At the November 2012 SADC Ministers of Trade meeting in Maputo, Angola reported no progress, citing ongoing industrial restructuring, but remained open to technical support for preparing its tariff liberalization offer. Subsequent missions, including one scheduled for March 2012, were also canceled at Angola's request, reinforcing its position of non-immediate integration.

However, throughout the process, Angola actively participated in multilateral negotiations on the SADC Protocol on Trade and the FTA, consistently requesting a derogation period to recover infrastructure damaged during nearly three decades of civil war. Other member states acknowledged these constraints and accepted the legitimacy of Angola's delayed accession.

At the political level, Angola consistently reaffirmed its non-immediate accession in regional meetings, aligning its actions and omissions with this position while expressing continued solidarity and commitment to regional integration. Its stance reflected the lack of conditions for immediate accession, a rationale accepted by other member states under the Protocol's provisions for derogations. Consequently, the SADC-FTA was launched in 2008 with a moratorium allowing states like Angola to join when ready, paving the way for ongoing technical negotiations.

At the technical level, tariff concession discussions have continued since 2003, when SADC Executive Secretariat experts assessed Angola's readiness, leading to the creation of a technical commission coordinated by the Ministry of Industry and including Finance, Foreign Affairs, Planning, Trade, and the SADC National Secretariat. The commission was revitalized in 2014 under the Ministry of Trade and expanded to include Economy, Transport, Agriculture,





Fisheries, and Environment. Within the SADC-FTA technical accession framework, Angola evaluated the economic feasibility of accession and developed its tariff liberalization offer, with support from the SADC Executive Secretariat, considering self-sufficient products, existing zero tariffs, South Africa's relative economic development, and the protection of strategic national products.

Angola signed the SADC Protocol on Trade in 1996, ratified it in 2003, but opted for non-immediate accession to the FTA, with no fixed deadline (Lourenço 2008). An indicative accession year of 2017 was set with an approved roadmap, later revised in 2018. The Angolan commercial offer was submitted to the SADC Secretariat at the end of 2019, presented to member states in March 2020, and reviewed in technical consultations in April 2020. SACU member states requested clarifications on tariff disarmament, reflecting engagement with Angola's liberalization ambition.

At the 59th SADC Trade Negotiation Forum in May 2025, Angola's final offer was recommended for adoption by the Committee of Ministers of Trade. On 5 June 2025, at the 34th Committee meeting in Harare, Angola's tariff offer was formally adopted (SADC/CMT/34/6/2025.3.1), providing for the progressive reduction of customs tariffs from October 2025, marking Angola's technical entry into the SADC Free Trade Area.

As outlined in the methodology, the interview guide was informed by an analysis of statements by Foreign Ministers João Bernardo de Miranda (1999 — 2008) and Georges Rebello Chikoti (2010 — 2017) on Angola's SADC-FTA accession, drawn from *Jornal de Angola* and ANGOP between 2008 and 2017. Key propositions emerged:

João Bernardo de Miranda: ratification of the SADC Trade Protocol as a goodwill gesture; non-immediate FTA accession; recognition of post-war structural challenges; emphasis on development asymmetries and South Africa's economic dominance; reliance on internal studies to assess accession assumptions.

Georges Rebello Chikoti: acknowledgment of SADC-FTA benefits; reaffirmation of deferred accession due to infrastructure deficits and industrial destruction; recognition of uneven benefits among members; need for domestic preparation including reconstruction, diversification, institutional strengthening, and regional integration planning; concern over potential trade imbalances; preference for bilateral trade agreements and facilitation of cross-border mobility.

The propositions above highlight consistent themes: a concern over entering an uneven competitive environment with the risk of marginalization, alongside a





commitment to engage with regional states and uphold a cooperative platform. This duality explains both Angola's repeated expressions of goodwill, such as signing the Trade Protocol, and the successive postponements of accession, justified by the need to ensure adequate domestic conditions for integration. Structured interviews provided insights into Angola's perceived position in SADC-FTA negotiations, the key factors shaping its behaviour, the main challenges identified, and overall negotiation dynamics, summarized in the table below.

**Table 3: Synthesized Interview Responses**

| Interview | Structure                                                     | Strategies                                                                           | Actors                                 | Process                                                    | Evaluation                                                         |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I1        | Structural vulnerabilities and limited institutional capacity | Cautious, protective approach; fear of premature liberalisation; industry protection | Domestic institutions                  | Alignment of domestic actors was challenging               | Negotiations shaped by asymmetries and defensive stance            |
| I2        | Post-war recovery; fragile private sector                     | Gradual integration; prioritising economic reconstruction                            | Government, SADC partners              | Trust-building; recognition of Angola's specific context   | Process constrained by external pressure for faster liberalization |
| I3        | Historical legacies; administrative constraints               | Slow but cooperative approach                                                        | National institutions, regional bodies | Coordination issues; miscommunication                      | Flexibility required to accommodate Angola's pace                  |
| I4        | Structural disadvantage within SADC                           | Longer timelines; confidence-building                                                | SADC bodies, domestic ministries       | Lack of harmonised technical information                   | Regional solidarity important to accept Angola's conditions        |
| I5        | Weak consultation mechanisms; low private-sector engagement   | Complex negotiations perceived by business                                           | Private sector, government             | Limited firm awareness; absence of clear national strategy | Private sector inclusion insufficient, affecting coherence         |
| I6        | Fragmented communication; unclear domestic priorities         | Reactive negotiation stance                                                          | Government, business actors            | Lack of dialogue platforms                                 | Need for more participatory processes                              |

continua...





| Interview | Structure                                              | Strategies                                                | Actors                                     | Process                                                        | Evaluation                                                               |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 17        | Legacy of civil conflict; emerging industries          | Emphasis on risk mitigation over opportunity maximisation | Domestic political and economic groups     | Ambiguity around long-term vision                              | Negotiations shaped by divergent expectations within SADC                |
| 18        | Scarcity of technical expertise; desire for legitimacy | Strategic but cautious decision-making                    | Small core negotiating team                | Reliance on narrow group of negotiators                        | Highlights constructivist relevance of shared identities and perceptions |
| 19        | Domestic constraints; reputational concerns            | Balance domestic constraints with regional commitments    | Executive, Parliament, civil society, SADC | Tension between political willingness and economic feasibility | Negotiations show interplay between material limits and social meanings  |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of Angola's accession and the interpretation of interviews within the regional context indicate that the SADC-FTA's flexible schedule is underpinned by a shared social understanding. Historical experiences showed that purely economic calculations had previously fueled regional conflict, particularly under apartheid and minority rule. In response, institutional and normative frameworks fostered mutual understanding, creating a common historical experience and foundations for coordinated economic development.

The SADC Protocol on Trade embodies a social dimension of state interaction, enabling political commitments, reinforcing cooperation, and promoting regional integration. Angola's accession model accommodates structural economic weaknesses, reflecting the region's history of conflict and cooperation, and favoring an approach based on consensus, patience, and shared norms. Regional cooperation thus carries both political and social significance, grounded in common experiences and a constitutive vision of integration.

To address the limitations of purely political and technical approaches, Southern African states adopted a strategy of flexibility, consensus, and differentiation. As noted by a former SADC Secretariat official, the integration principle of variable geometry acknowledges asymmetries and differing levels of development. The absence of punitive measures for delayed accession reflects an interactional, socially informed approach rather than a strictly results-driven one.





Angola's negotiating position has been shaped by historical interactions and shared experiences, including the struggle against minority rule, regional economic liberation efforts, the construction of political cooperation through the FLS<sup>3</sup>, SADCC<sup>4</sup>, and SADC, and responses to destabilizing apartheid policies. Identities and interests are socially constructed and endogenous to the negotiation process, so Angola's self-definition and recognized position within Southern African regionalism are relational, legitimized by other states, and continuously shaped through regional interaction. Material and domestic power factors operate within this relational structure, underscoring that Angola's stance is contingent upon historical processes of regionalism.

Although several SADC member states were influenced by historical, ideational, and identity-related factors, Angola represents a particularly significant case. Like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Comoros, which also delayed or remained outside the full implementation of the SADC Free Trade Area due to specific domestic priorities and constraints, Angola postponed its accession for an extended period. However, in Angola's case, this delay was shaped by the interaction of post-conflict reconstruction priorities, state-building objectives, perceptions of economic asymmetry, and socially constructed understandings of regional integration. The value of a constructivist approach lies in explaining how these factors were interpreted and mobilized within Angola's specific domestic and regional context.

## 5. Towards a Constructivist Contribution to the Understanding of Regional Negotiations

Regional negotiations are often analyzed politically, as conflict management, or economically, as gain maximization, while the social dimension remains underexplored. A social constructivist perspective frames negotiations as relational processes in which structures emerge, evolve, and transform through interaction. Three key premises guide this approach: ideational alongside material factors

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3 The Frontline States (FLS) were a coalition of Southern African countries that supported liberation movements against colonialism, apartheid, and white minority rule, promoting decolonization and majority rule throughout the region.

4 The Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), established in 1980, was the predecessor of SADC and sought to reduce regional economic dependence on apartheid South Africa while promoting cooperation and development.







shape state behavior; identities and interests are dynamic; and these identities and interests are endogenous to the negotiation process.

In Southern Africa, understanding regional negotiations requires moving beyond material or structural analyses of power. The region's cooperative order is rooted in shared struggles for self-determination and collective management of threats posed by minority rule. Negotiation structures are both material and social: the meaning of resources (territory, economic capacity, institutional power) is co-constructed through shared historical experiences (Ben-Josef Hirsch 2021). Angola's SADC-FTA accession illustrates this constructivist insight, as hesitations, phased integration, and repeated requests for derogations show how structural factors acquire significance through social interaction.

Angola's negotiation structure reflects both material and ideational considerations. The SADC institutional framework (treaties, protocols, and the Executive Secretariat) provides formal mechanisms, such as derogations and phased accession, which enable differentiated integration based on domestic readiness (I1, I2, I4, I5). Interviews show that Angola's delayed engagement was not merely a reflection of material limitations but also of socialized norms about regional cooperation and shared historical experiences. Structural features are thus endogenous: they exist only through interaction with domestic and regional actors, and through their embedded meaning.

The Angolan strategy emphasizes gradual engagement and internal preparation, consistent with constructivist premises. Identities and interests are dynamic, shaped through interaction with other States and regional institutions (I2, I3, I6, I8). Angola's use of successive derogations, internal consultations, and targeted industrialization plans reflects a deliberate approach that balances domestic priorities, historical legacies, and regional expectations. Leadership transitions, notably the rise of President João Lourenço, illustrate how identity and interests evolve endogenously in response to internal consensus and regional signaling (I9).

The negotiation process itself constitutes a social construction. Sectoral consultations, internal validations, and facilitation by the SADC Secretariat are not procedural formalities; they are arenas in which positions, identities, and expectations are co-constructed (I5, I6, I8). Historical precedents, such as Angola's participation in the FLS alliance, provide interpretive frameworks that guide the meaning attributed to current engagements. Negotiating positions are therefore emergent, not fixed, shaped by ongoing interaction, social learning, and collective interpretation of past cooperation and conflicts.





The multiplicity of actors involved, including government ministries, the Presidency, business associations, and other SADC members, demonstrates that identities and interests are collectively constructed (I8, I9). Actors' perspectives, competing priorities, and shared experiences contribute to the evolution of Angola's negotiating posture. The interaction among these domestic and regional actors exemplifies the constructivist insight that positions, interests, and identities are mutually constituted in negotiation, rather than merely determined by pre-existing attributes.

The assessment of Angola's negotiation behavior shows that strategic hesitations, derogations, and recalibrations are expressions of socially informed reasoning, rather than mere responses to material constraints (I4, I7, I8). Angola's delayed accession, cautious tariff offers, and attention to industrial preparedness reveal that outcomes are co-shaped by shared norms, historical experiences, and socialized expectations. Constructivist theory highlights that negotiation results reflect not only choices informed by structural power but also the inter-subjective meanings that actors attribute to these structures.

**Table 4: Constructivist Mapping on Angola's SADC FTA Negotiation**

| <b>Negotiation Category</b>   | <b>Constructivist Premise</b>                           | <b>Analytical Interpretation / Evidence from Interviews</b>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Negotiation Structure</b>  | Ideational factors shape meaning of material structures | Angola's engagement is influenced by SADC norms, protocols, and mechanisms like derogations, which acquire meaning through historical and social interaction (I1, I2, I4, I5). Structural factors are endogenous to negotiation.               |
| <b>Negotiation Strategy</b>   | Dynamic identities and interests                        | Angola's gradual integration, phased accession, and industrialization strategy demonstrate that interests are constructed over time, evolving with leadership, domestic consensus, and regional signaling (I2, I3, I6, I8, I9).                |
| <b>Negotiation Process</b>    | Positions emerge through interaction                    | Sectoral consultations, internal validation, and Secretariat facilitation illustrate iterative social construction of positions (I5, I6, I8). Past experiences (FLS alliance, regional cooperation) inform interpretation and decision-making. |
| <b>Negotiation Actors</b>     | Social interactions shape identities and interests      | Multiple domestic and regional actors contribute to evolving positions, revealing collective construction of identity and strategy (I8, I9).                                                                                                   |
| <b>Negotiation Evaluation</b> | Interests and identities are reformulated               | Hesitations, derogations, and recalibrations reflect socially informed choices, shaped by norms, shared history, and collective expectations (I4, I7, I8).                                                                                     |

Source: Author's own elaboration.





From a constructivist perspective, Angola's negotiating behavior cannot be fully explained by material capabilities such as economic size, resource endowment, or industrial capacity. Instead, ideational factors, historical experiences, perceptions of regional norms, and political culture, play a central role in shaping its interactions with other SADC member states.

For example, Interviewees 3 (I3) and 4 (I4) highlight how Angola's post-conflict experience and historical engagement in regional institutions influenced its gradual adhesion to the SADC FTA, reflecting not only economic asymmetries but also concerns over sovereignty, internal stability, and regional identity. Interviewee 2 (I2) adds that Angola's strategy draws on lessons from comparative regional experiences (EU, Mercosur, ECOWAS), underscoring the importance of knowledge and norms in shaping expectations and policy choices. These insights confirm that ideational factors, norms, historical experiences, and shared understandings actively determine negotiation strategies and tactical choices.

Constructivist theory asserts that identities and interests are not fixed; they are socially constructed and evolve through interaction. The interviews provide multiple illustrations of this dynamic. Angola's identity as a founding member of SADC, combined with its self-perception as a regional economic actor, informs both its cautious engagement and its strategic use of derogations to balance regional commitments with national priorities (I4, I7, I5).

Interviewee 9 (I9) highlights how leadership change (President João Lourenço's assumption of office) produced a reconfiguration of national interests and strategic vision, signaling that identities and policy objectives are responsive to domestic political shifts and social consensus. Similarly, Interviewee 8 (I8) underscores that domestic economic actors, such as business associations and trade organizations, contribute to shaping the perceived interests of the state, suggesting that these interests emerge from a complex negotiation among internal and external stakeholders. This evidence supports the second premise: Angola's negotiating identity and interests are dynamic, shaped continuously by social, political, and historical interactions rather than predetermined or static.

The third constructivist insight, namely, that negotiating positions are endogenous to the process itself, finds strong support in the interviews. Angola's phased and cautious engagement with the SADC FTA illustrates that the state's positions are co-constructed with other actors over time, shaped by feedback, learning, and ongoing consultations. Interviewee 5 (I5) notes that the drafting of the FTA roadmap, the preparation of the tariff offer, and its validation





involved multiple internal and regional actors, highlighting a deliberative and iterative process.

Moreover, the role of the SADC Secretariat as facilitator, and the influence of other member states, reflects that Angola's positions are socially situated within a regional normative framework, rather than externally imposed or solely derived from domestic capabilities. Interviewees 6 (I6) and 7 (I7) further point to the adaptive nature of Angola's strategy, responding to crises, economic shocks, and evolving regional expectations. These observations exemplify the constructivist principle that negotiating positions emerge from the interactional process itself, demonstrating the endogeneity of both interests and strategies.

## 6. Conclusions

A social constructivist perspective highlights that negotiations are shaped by both material and ideational factors, with identities, interests, and norms evolving through social interaction. In Angola's accession to the SADC Free Trade Area, shared meanings such as post-conflict solidarity, regional trust, and awareness of economic asymmetries influenced negotiating positions and decision-making. The flexible accession approach adopted by SADC members reflects a collective understanding of regional history, where cooperation, institution-building, and shared norms have fostered gradual integration and regional stability.

Angola's accession to the SADC Free Trade Area demonstrates that state interests and negotiating positions are socially constructed through historical experiences, identities, and regional interactions. The case supports the constructivist view that regional cooperation is shaped not only by material interests but also by shared meanings and collective understandings. Consequently, the social dimensions of negotiation are essential for understanding state behavior and regional integration. The findings do not suggest that ideational factors are unique to Angola, as similar patterns exist across Southern Africa. However, Angola illustrates how historical identities, collective memories, and perceptions of regional norms interact with domestic political and economic conditions to shape distinctive negotiation outcomes. This supports the constructivist view that state interests and negotiating positions are socially constructed through interaction rather than determined solely by material power and capabilities.





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