

## THE POSITION OF THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA

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*Abstract:* Given the current circumstances, the phenomenon of regionalism is not surprising because it is evolving at a rapid pace on a global scale. Regionalism as a process continues to expand and take on multiple roles that ultimately shape global trade cooperation, geopolitics, and diplomacy among states. Today, a large number of regional international organizations perform specific institutional functions based on specific preferences and the internal logic of functioning of the member states. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is an example of a regional organization on the African continent. Like most intergovernmental or interstate organizations, the ECOWAS is a political union among West African states, originally created by the Lagos Agreement in 1975 to promote economic cooperation and integration among the member states. With the development of international relations on African soil, there was a demand for an accelerated revision of the founding treaties of ECOWAS. In 1993, the mandate of this regional organization was expanded, so the organization generally expanded its scope of action to include the preservation of regional peace and security. However, its effectiveness and efficiency in this domain have been subject to serious criticism. On the other hand, efficiency and effectiveness in terms of regional integration were apparently somewhat more successful. This issue is given special attention in this paper, which points to specific challenges and risks associated with this process, as well as with the implementation of the ECOWAS Agreement.

In addition, the analysis is focused on general issues related to the ways and effects of the functioning of regional organizations at the global level.

*Keywords:* ECOWAS, international organizations, regional organizations, Africa, regional integration.

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## INTRODUCTION

The need for a more engaged world is increasingly becoming part of the crucial reasons for regionalism or intergovernmentalism and is essentially shaping trade collaborations, diplomacy, and geopolitics between continents, regions, and countries. There has been an increased number of regional and international organizations entrusted with various roles, which are usually underpinned by certain preferences and internal logic of member states. Similarly, there is a lot of interest in what roles interstate organizations play and how effective they are. This, in addition to environmental, economic, and social changes, has critically made such organizations a subject of public scrutiny (Igwe, Ochinanwata & Madichie, 2021, pp. 203-308; Nwedu, 2022). Likewise, debate embedded in rationalism, which is essentially concerned about the rising incidence of intergovernmentalism in modern politics, has topically emerged (Smeets & Beach, 2020). By itself, rationalism is a process capable of leading to a particular state of affairs and attainment “within a territory, of a sense of a community, and of institutions and practices strong enough and widespread enough to assure, for a long time, dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population” (Laursen, 2002, pp. 1-22). Therefore, rationalism is viewed as a symbol of international politics (Copeland, 2011, pp. 441-450). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a reference point for regional organizations on the African continent. The ECOWAS is currently a union of 15 independent West African states formed under a treaty-based multilateral agreement with an initial primary focus on economic cooperation and integration.<sup>1</sup> Former heads and governments of 16 member states signed an original treaty on May 8, 1975, in Lagos, Nigeria (ECOWAS Treaty, 2022). The formative treaty has been revised and signed in Cotonou, Benin Republic, on July 24, 1993, as a result of increased mandates and a need to meet up with new developments. Since then, the ECOWAS role has broadened and is frequently pontificated in various typologies, such as “trading hub,” “economic bloc,” and “borderless region” based on democratic principles, the rule of law, and good governance. The ECOWAS constitutes a total area of 5.12 million km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 397.21 million people, of which Nigeria has over 2 million people (World Data, 2022). The lingua franca in which it operates is English, French, and Portuguese. These official languages, somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> The ECOWAS currently consists of 15 member states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

essentially, underpin the histories of colonization of the member states. Today, uncertainties or challenges to regional governance have remarkably pushed organizations to now operate a complex-based approach and institutional structures in facilitating the performance of their roles. The ECOWAS has developed six institutions and 10 specialized agencies with varying responsibilities (ECOWAS Institutions, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Even with such a number of institutions and agencies performing certain roles, most views have portrayed the ECOWAS as non-effective and in a more general description of “failure”. This paper primarily analyses the role of the ECOWAS in regional integration in Africa and the current debate about its effectiveness. The need for an understanding of the increasing roles of interstate, regional, or international organizations has never been more crucial than now, as humanity continues to face mega problems and science is being challenged by novel diseases, such as the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The foregoing provides a key rationale for this paper and is accordingly justified, as the emerging debate over the effectiveness of the ECOWAS has to be tested. The paper has four sections. The role of the ECOWAS is examined in section two. The next section carefully analyses the current debate and interconnected challenges. The key points and lessons are finally summarized.

## **THE ROLE OF THE ECOWAS IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION**

Every nation that is joining a regional organization has a peculiar internal logic tied to socio-cultural, economic, political, and historical differences (Harvey & Cushing, 2015). More so, openness to the diversity of local needs and extraordinary geo-historical circumstances is a core reason

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<sup>2</sup>The various institutions and agencies of the ECOWAS include the ECOWAS Commission, the Community Court of Justice, the Community Parliament, the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), the West African Health Organization (WAHO), Inter-governmental Action Group against Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing in West Africa (GIABA), and the West African Monetary Agency (WAMA), the West African Monetary Institute (WAMI), the ECOWAS Youth and Sports Development Centre (EYSDC), the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC), the ECOWAS Brown Card, West African Power Pool (WAPP), the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE), the ECOWAS Regional Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERERA), the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (RAAF), and the ECOWAS Infrastructure Projects Preparation and Development Unit (PPDU).

for forming intergovernmental organizations by sovereign nations (Laursen, 2002). These core rationalities help to fairly understand what role interstate, regional, or international organizations perform, and they are presumably what heads of states and governments of the member states of the ECOWAS believe in and agree to work together as a West African regional organization. Therefore, the role of the ECOWAS is analyzed as follows.

### **Economic role**

The revised treaty of the ECOWAS underlines what could be seen as a core priority, which is aimed at fostering economic cooperation and integration towards raising living standards, maintaining and enhancing economic stability, fostering relations among member states, and contributing to the progress and development of the African continent at large (ECOWAS Treaty, 2022).<sup>3</sup> This spans a broad economic sphere, such as “industry, transport, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial, social and as well as cultural matters”. There have been major efforts made, including macroeconomic policies and the promotion of the private sector, to achieve the intended economic integration and cooperation. To boot, a roadmap for implementing a single currency program, monitoring and evaluating performance and macroeconomic union, and managing the ECOWAS Macroeconomic Database and Multilateral Surveillance System (ECO-MAC), as well as cooperation with new regional and international institutions are notable and important initiatives (ECOWAS Basic information, 2022). The integration of the West African region into a world economy with trade policies is no doubt a wider part of the role of the ECOWAS. For instance, in 2010, it adopted a “West African Common Industrial Policy”, which is an ambitious reform implementation strategy lasting well into 2030. A key target is the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade in fostering free trade and unrestricted movement of productive factors. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has reported that ECOWAS intra-trade products include petroleum products and by-products of roughly 48.3 percent, corresponding to US\$4,847 million; fabrics, cement, and lime of about 3.4 percent, equivalent to US\$342 million; tobacco 25 percent or US\$250 million; edible products and preparations of around 2.4 percent, equivalent to

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<sup>3</sup> ECOWAS Treaty 1975, Article 3 (1) (revised 24 July 1993).

US\$242; cosmetics and perfumery with the exception of soaps 2.3 percent; fixed crude and refined oils and vegetable fats about 2.2 percent; plastics and articles roughly 2.2 percent; electrical current nearly 1.8 percent; and footwear accounting for 1.5 percent (UNCTAD, 2018). Further, it reveals an increase in exports and trade activities in each member state and intra-regional blocks, which quadrupled between 1975 and 2010, with Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire accounting for 44.6 percent and 25.7 percent, respectively. There was a relative distribution of exports among some member states, comprising Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. More so, ECOWAS adopted a strategy in 2012 for regulating informal trade, leading to a Regional Informal Trade Regulation Support Program (ITRSP/PARCI) developed by the ECOWAS Commission (ECOWAS Trade Information System, 2022). For an enhanced informal trade information system, an ECOWAS Informal Cross Border Trade (ECO-ICBT) has been developed. In 2018, a collaboration between the ECOWAS Commission and Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought in the Sahel and the West African Association for Cross-Border Trade in agro-forestry, pastoral, fisheries, and foods was initiated, mainly to work harmoniously in implementing a sub-component of the STRSP/PARCI for informal cross-border trade data collection. The pursuit of a common market by the ECOWAS is intended to remove obstacles to the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital and to foster trade liberalization. Thus, it has developed a trade liberalization scheme for duty-free trade and a customs union among member states. This has proven to be significant in terms of intra-regional trade volume, accounting for nearly 12% of total ECOWAS trade in 2016 (African Development Bank, 2022). Effectively, a 40 percent increase in 2030 is targeted as support for a solid industrial structure based on global competition, environmental friendliness, and the ability to effectively improve the standards of living of the ECOWAS member states' citizens. On July 10, 2014, the ECOWAS heads of states announced a decision to support a European Union (EU-ECOWAS) as well as a Mauritania Economic Partnership Agreement, which has already been signed by both parties. Expectedly, it is a partnership capable of opening up Ghana's market to 75 percent of the tariff lines and 65 percent of the value of imports from the EU by 2035 (World Bank Group, 2015). Among the existing initiatives is the ECOWAS's Common Investment Code and Policy. It is largely a framework designed to offer fair treatment and operation of investment in the ECOWAS common investment market. There has been a tangentially political response to monetary integration. On April 20, 2000, the erstwhile political leaders of six West African non-CFA countries declared an intention

to join the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) in January 2003 (WAEMU, 2022).<sup>4</sup> Based on the early plan, it was considered an initial part of two stages to an inclusive monetary union of all ECOWAS member states in 2004. The countries politically agreed to commit to a reduction of central bank funding of budget shortfalls to 10 percent of the first year of government revenue; a reduction of budget shortfalls to 4 percent of GDP by 2003; the creation of a convergence council for coordination of macroeconomics; and the creation of a collective central bank (Masson & Pattillo, 2001). But non-WAEMU countries, including Ghana, Guinea, Gambia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, needed to build a monetary area, known as the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ), as part of a second stage (Diop, Tillmann & Winker, 2017). The success of the first and second stages, as expected in 2015 and 2020, respectively, was meant to bring the WAEMU and the WAMZ into a unitary ECOWAS monetary zone for the adoption of a common currency in 2020. Unfortunately, several rearrangements between 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2014, which are justified on grounds of unpreparedness and a lack of convergence among the member states, have stalled the realization of not even the first stage (Asongu, Folarin & Biekpe, 2019). Effective realization of a monetary union requires seamless integration of existing economic structures and financial institutions based on diligent, meticulous, and robust planning and a common framework. There is no doubt that existing state institutions and structures facilitate the effective shaping of regional governance (Söderbaum & Sbragia, 2010, pp. 563-582). Though in principle, ECOWAS's planned monetary union ideally represents a bold step towards economic integration and arguably has potential benefits. These benefits, especially in international economic relationships, include addressing issues linked to a multiplicity of currencies, exchange rates, and trade promotion; increasing trade or business income-earning prospects for citizens in improving standards of living; creation of a larger market; and easing of regional free movement and labor by removing barriers and strengthening socio-economic, cultural, and political collaboration with a common central bank, parliament, and judiciary (Saka, Onafowokan & Adebayo, 2015). They could also include creating a more promising market environment for resource pooling toward critical regional

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<sup>4</sup> The WAEMU is an economic and monetary union established in Dakar, Senegal, on January 10, 1994, by the heads of states and governments of seven West African countries using the CFA Franc in common.

infrastructure development, increasing economic attractiveness, gaining economies of scale, and lowering transaction costs.

### **Peace and security**

Article 4 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty provides for non-aggression among the member states, maintenance of regional peace, stability, security, and the peaceful settlement of disputes among member states (Aminu & Raja, 2021).<sup>5</sup> The ECOWAS was formed at a time when political power tussle characterized civilian and military supremacy in West Africa, and the majority of the member states gained independence (The Conversation, 2017, February 1). This might be one reason for engaging in peace and security, as a lack of which could strain any effort to realize sustainable economic development. One more reason is that integration is equally seen as a political process (Laursen, 2002). This means integration, whether regional or international, can benefit countries in non-economic areas such as peace and security. But in any case, weak institutions and poor policies are likely to generate bungling results (Igwe, Ochinanwata & Madichie, 2021). During the ECOWAS summit on May 30, 1990, in Banjul, the Gambia, a five-member standing mediation committee (SMC) was established to look into disputes and conflicts in Liberia (ECOWAS Decision, 1992). The SMC adopted Decision A/DEC.1/8/90 on the establishment of an ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) as a cease-fire monitoring group for Liberia. More generally, it was created as an alliance of the armed forces of the member states for the purposes of ensuring peacekeeping, restoring law and order, and effective implementation of the cease-fire. Then, a protocol on conflict prevention, management, peace, and security was adopted on December 10, 1999. At face value, it aims to provide peacekeeping and humanitarian support, address solid peace-building competencies and intolerable cross-border crimes, and was followed by a supplementary protocol on democratic governance. Furthermore, a protocol on mutual assistance defense (MAD) against armed threats and aggression against the member states was signed in May 1981. Most member states have had unstable political and multiparty systems, such as multiparty democracy, one-party systems, and military autocracies, with a growing reputation for military coups d'état more than any other region or continent globally (Kabia, 2011). Earlier in 1978, a treaty on non-aggression was adopted, which

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<sup>5</sup> ECOWAS Treaty 1975, Article 4 (d) (e) (f).

called on the member states to cease threats and use of force or aggression against everyone, and is seen as an entry point into the security mission by the ECOWAS. Bad governance, human rights violations, corruption, poverty, marginalization of ethnic groups, and small arms proliferation have contributed to some conflicts related to power tussles in West Africa (Annan, 2014, pp. 1, etc.). Therefore, it is no surprise to see Article 3 of the Treaty, *supra*, requiring the member states to recognize, promote, and protect human and people's rights as provided by the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The ECOWAS launched a Plan of Action on Conflict Prevention Framework on January 28, 2019. This framework lays out mechanisms for peacebuilding and tools for bolstering national and regional capacities in preventing violent conflicts or the reoccurrence of them in West Africa (Kabia, 2011). For effective realization, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework Focal Point Directorates are expected to work on strategies for improving conflict prevention plans and enhance cross-department collaborations and inclusive capacity building. To a very marginal degree, it has been revealed that the institutionalization of a stable democracy is one of the biggest achievements of the ECOWAS, with the exception of the coup d'état in Mali in 2012, in which case a 72-hour ultimatum was given to perpetrators to relinquish power or face sanctions (Igwe, Ochinanwata & Madichie, 2021). This is arguable, as democratic governance in the member states is fraught with abuses and has not even generated life-changing impacts.

### THE CURRENT DEBATE

The institution of the ECOWAS is beginning to attract the attention of scholars and policymakers, and as such, it could be viewed in different dimensions. First off, the emerging debate reveals that the ECOWAS lacks clarity of preferences and objectives (*Ibidem*). The revised treaty generally stipulates certain aims and objectives, but it is not clear where a focus is given or prioritized. Essentially, understanding interstate priorities and objectives helps to provide a direction and effort for organizations to realize the full benefit of regionalism. This means interactions among states require the sharing of preferences for "relative, absolute, or individual benefits" (Koehane, 1986). Even as challenges and needs might define the drivers of regionalism in today's world, economic and geopolitical interests remain two major reasons for joining regional organizations (Moravcsik, 1998). The second aspect of the emerging debate extensively deals with the effectiveness of the ECOWAS (Dwyer, 2015, pp. 206, etc.). Overall, divergent



views signify that the ECOWAS has had little or no real impact since its formation. For example, while a number of commentators show that peacebuilding and security missions are one area in which success has been achieved among the member states, some also believe it has not been successful, regardless of any life that might have been spared (Rodriguez, 2018). Trends in power tussles within the member states continue to occur more recently, for example, in Mali on August 18, 2020, which prompted a delegation of the ECOWAS peace envoy for mediation (Premium Times, 2020, July 14). By inference, it suggests mediation has not been effective in resolving such a political situation. The most argued challenges to ECOWAS peacekeeping and security include inadequate support, a lack of mission force preparation and training, and a lack of timely understanding of conflict severity, which may weaken the morale of peacekeeping forces (Dwyer, 2015). Besides, a weak engagement strategy in peacekeeping has also been identified (Igwe et al., 2020). There are alleged instances in which the member states attempted to benefit from crises rather than solve them (Marchal, 2013, pp. 486, etc.).

Experience shows increasing inter-state and intra-state vices and insecurity are today's common trends in West Africa. Typically, drug trafficking, conflict, violence, piracy, cross-border smuggling, extremism, and farmer-herder conflicts are on an incremental, proportional rise (Marc, Verjee & Mogaka, 2015). The current security crisis in Nigeria might, in part, lend credence to the current debate over the ECOWAS's failure in peacebuilding and security. Nigeria has faced one of the world's most challenging security threats, including but not limited to terrorism, banditry, and new forms of internal insecurity. Terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram and Fulani herders, have remained the most deadly, posing both national and international security threats. These groups have wider regional networks in Africa and are believed to have unimpeded entry into Nigeria from other African countries. Thus, an increasing spate of terrorism amongst the member states is one implication of the ECOWAS borderless region. The United States has recently alerted Nigeria of potential penetration by Al Qaeda into its northwest region (Homeland Security Today, 2020, August 8). Emerging radical activities of independence-seeking or separatist groups, such as Biafra or Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)'s Eastern Security Network (ESN), also pose serious national security risks. These persisting intra-state security problems demand regional intervention, yet the ECOWAS has not been moved. This is arguably a manifestation of its failure in managing internal conflicts in member states, or instead a clear indifference and disregard for its treaty mandates. There is generally an

observed poor performance in economic, monetary, trade, and regional growth. More pointedly, it is considered that the principle of free and open border trade upon which the ECOWAS economic integration mission was founded is rendered non-effective by existing informal cross-border trade activities within West African borders. Although the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) reports that the ECOWAS provides a seemingly feasible framework for actions likely to drive structural transformations with the trade benefits of regional integration as a trading bloc or single market for member countries, trade costs in the region remain astronomical (Haysom, 2014, March 5; Chambers, Foresti, & Harris, 2012, March 30). Evidence reveals again that most member states have maintained a very low record in business performance rankings, particularly with regards to getting credit and electricity (World Bank Group, 2016). There is quite a slow pace of or unsatisfactory institutional change to bring about desirable, far-reaching social transformations and economic integration of member states' economies (Igwe, Ochinanwata & Madichie, 2021). Contextually, West Africa has a long history of corruption, porous borders, regional trade, weak border enforcement, and most importantly, a lack of coordination of economic policies between neighboring countries (Golub, Mbaye & Golubski, 2019, October 29). These issues ultimately facilitate the smuggling of goods and undermine the economic policies of concerned states. In particular, a high rate of smuggling of goods is remarkable between Benin and Nigeria, with rice and petroleum being the major smuggled goods across Nigeria's border (Bouillon, 2019, October 22). Because of over-dependence on foreign rice over local products by her citizens, rice smuggling into Nigeria is rising. Though the ECOWAS single passport reflects success, major failures prevail. For example, it has no centralized, accurate migration database regardless of an early proposed harmonized system of immigration and emigration in 1992 by its Council of Ministers (Odobo, Andekin & Udegbunam, 2017, pp. 143-153).

These scenarios are rather a measure of unsuccessfulness. Effective economic cooperation and integration would mean providing a solution to such challenges. Therefore, it is no surprise to see Nigeria close its border on August 19, 2019, which is a clear manifestation of utter violation of the ECOWAS treaty principle on a borderless region and further and varying national interests of the member states. There are more member states placing a ban on all trade import-export with neighboring countries. The ECOWAS protocols remain widely unimplemented. This signals a lack of effectiveness, and so with undetectable efforts in promoting compliance with the protocols where a compliance committee exists (Igwe et al., 2020). The ECOWAS

protocol on Democracy and Good Governance remains debated as unproductive. Democratic regimes in most member states are worse than military regimes when carefully compared, as ballooning corruption, human rights violations, and disregard for the rule of law are common trends. Effective regional economic integration would be better realized with a zero-tolerance of corruption because corrupt political leaders are likely to have entirely unaligned regional economic policy objectives. There is an ECOWAS court, yet citizens of the member states arguably do not feel its impact. The ECOWAS money laundering policy also exists, but illicit flows of funds across the region are remarkable, in addition to secret financial sponsorship of terror groups by some persons in the member states. The lack of power delegation mechanisms within the ECOWAS institutions has come into debate as a challenge to effective functioning. This builds a high degree of reservation about a bureaucratic process among its institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper examines the ECOWAS ideological role in regional integration in West Africa and wider participation in geopolitics. The paper also analyses the current debate about the effectiveness of the ECOWAS. Theoretically, interstate organizations are majorly shaped by economic and political priorities. They are accordingly dictated by the internal logic of member states based on liberal conventions of international cooperation, economic, and political policies. Therefore, it is on this basis that the ECOWAS was formed. The existence of the ECOWAS and its role suggests a bold attempt in tackling Africa's problem and of the member states, in particular (Nwedu, 2020). Moreover, it represents a geopolitical alignment by which it partakes more in world roles and with new regional or international organizations. The ECOWAS has made some progress, but it is difficult to see any detectable, far-reaching impact achieved within West Africa or the member states. Both experience and research show most of the programs and policies of the ECOWAS, such as the liberalization program, have not resulted in any measurable economic gains or transformations. As a manifestation of failure, economic development remains poor in the West African region or more specifically, in the member states. There has been massive corruption, smuggling of goods, and internal crises among the member states. The progress of regionalism in West Africa is certainly in the making. However, stronger political will and action are required for the full benefits of the ECOWAS to be felt and celebrated. The world is becoming more interested in understanding not just the various roles of international

organizations but also how effective they are, which is part of why interstate organizations are now increasingly under public scrutiny. The extent of the participation of a regional organization in wider geopolitics might require an understanding of how effectively it has managed its core beliefs or regional affairs. Thus, a better African-centric regional organization would depend on a clear delineation of state preferences to drive result-oriented policies and decisions. Effective regional organizations are purpose-driven and supported with clear implementation, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that the ECOWAS has effectively implemented its treaty mandates.

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