

## **Regional Integration in West Africa: The Evolving Role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)**

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### **Introduction**

With the current membership that encompasses more than six million square kilometers, an area larger than that of western Europe, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a substantial economic zone (Edi, 2007). The region of West Africa is the most populous on the continent, with a population of 236 million people (Asante, 2004).

ECOWAS was formed in 1975 with the expressed purpose of promoting economic integration and cooperation in West Africa. However, in the past decade ECOWAS has assumed a more active role in the management of regional conflicts and humanitarian crises. The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was established in 1990 by the organization's Anglophone members to intervene in the civil war in Liberia and was later deployed to quell unrest in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. The creation of ECOMOG represented a radical departure from the organization's initial mandate to foster economic integration amongst its members. To reconcile the organization's new functions with the Community's original purpose, a revised Treaty was approved in 1993, which greatly expanded the functions of the organization and specifically assigned the organization with the responsibility of preventing and settling regional conflicts.

Some academics have questioned whether ECOWAS remains an organization primarily focused on economic integration and cooperation, given its recent development as a mechanism of regional stability (Bach, 2004). Despite its relatively new role as peacekeeper, it is apparent by the actions and statements of the Community that it continues to perceive itself as first and foremost an engine of economic development and regional integration (ECOWAS). In seeking to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion surrounding the development and evolution of ECOWAS, this paper will attempt to explain the organization's position in the areas of economic integration and regional stability and identify the factors that account for both the achievements and the disappointments of the organization over its nearly forty-year history.

### **Economic Integration and Cooperation in West Africa**

The primary objective in the creation of ECOWAS

was to foster greater economic cooperation amongst West African states with the eventual goal of establishing monetary union in the region. Although the stated objective of the community is the eventual creation of a monetary union, the process of greater regional integration is intended to concurrently promote enhanced regional trade and the establishment of common institutions. However, efforts to advance ECOWAS monetary cooperation have been consistently stymied by political and economic differences that exist amongst its members. Inconsistent progress in the development of a unified monetary policy has continued to hamper the community's ability to effectively advance its economic agenda.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of a West African monetary union has been largely modeled on the successful integration of the European Union (Masson, 2004). However, the two regions are incredibly diverse in terms of their economy, history, political development, and culture. In loosely designing their economic objectives on the development of the European Union, ECOWAS has created unrealistic and unattainable standards. The domestic environment of the two economic organizations are incomparable, with one representing the center of the developed world and the other only just recently having emerged from its colonial past. The introduction of the Euro followed a process of long-term planning, the consolidation of common economic policy objectives, and the empowerment of regional institutions (Bach, 74). This process has been largely non-existent in West Africa, which partially accounts for the inability of the Community to achieve its long-standing economic objectives.

In December 1999, the heads of state of several ECOWAS members met in Lome, Togo to discuss plans to accelerate the pace of regional integration (Masson, 2001).<sup>2</sup> In acknowledging that the speed of monetary integration was inadequate, the leaders pledged to renew their efforts to achieve the long-desired goal of a monetary union. Several months later, West African leaders gathered once again in Accra, Ghana. The meeting culminated in a declaration issued by six West African countries announcing their intention to proceed with monetary union. The signatories of the Declaration of Accra pledged to reduce their budget deficits by four percent of GDP by 2003, create a convergence Council to assist in coordinating macroeconomic policies, and to establish a common central bank (Ibid, 1 and Bach, 73). The joint declaration stated,

Member States recognize the need for strong political commitment and undertake to pursue all such national policies as would facilitate the regional monetary integration process (Masson, 2001).

The agreement resulted in the formation of the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ), which effectively

created yet another subset of interests within the organization, thereby threatening to create further rifts within the Community. The parties to the Declaration of Accra constitute one-third of the total membership of the Community and are disproportionately English-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup> The formation of WAMZ, which is dominated by Nigeria, its largest member, has reinforced existing apprehensions amongst many of the smaller ECOWAS members that Nigeria is intent on dominating the organization politically and economically.

The involvement of Nigeria in the potential formation of a single currency for West Africa has proved especially problematic. Nigeria is considerably larger in size than its ECOWAS counterparts and has been unable to control its large budget deficit. In addition, as a major oil exporter, Nigeria's economy differs greatly from the other member-states, which are still largely dependent on one or two major cash crops for their economic well-being (Masson, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Several economists have suggested that a West African monetary union would be undesirable to many ECOWAS member-states, whose small markets and narrow economic bases would likely be unable to weather any substantial trade shocks (Ibid).<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to create a monetary union have been hindered by the wide range of income levels and country sizes that exist amongst the Community's many members. Further exacerbating the socio-economic and political obstacles to monetary union is the continued prevalence of poverty, civil unrest, the spread of HIV/AIDS, corruption and inadequate healthcare. Life expectancy in the region varies dramatically, from 37.9 years in Sierra Leone to 69.4 in Cape Verde (Asante, 53). More than half of the members of ECOWAS have average life expectancies below 50 years (CIA World Factbook). In 2001, fourteen West African nations were ranked in the lowest category of the United Nations Development Programme's human development index scale (Asante, 53).

The economic objectives of ECOWAS remain largely unrealized. The lack of market integration through trade liberalization was presented in the Executive Secretary's 25th Anniversary Report as "the most glaring failure for ECOWAS" (Bach, 72). According to former executive secretary, Abass Bundu, the inability of the organization to realize its goal is a product of insufficient political will:

The slow pace of regional integration in West Africa has almost nothing to do with the limitations noted in the 1975 ECOWAS Treaty. The adoption of an ideal treaty is of little importance if member-states do not decide to consider regional integration as an important national enterprise (Ibid).<sup>6</sup>

Bundu's sentiments were echoed nearly a decade later by his successor, Lansana Kouate, who expressed an equal

sense of pessimism of the prospect of the fulfillment of the organization's objective of increased integration.

The lack of political will amongst the member-states is especially apparent when examining the implementation of economic liberalization policies as demonstrated by the amount of trade that exists within the Community. Economic targets established by the organization are rarely met in what has become a permanently postponed project. ECOWAS set the deadline for the creation of a single monetary zone by 1994 but, by 1993 no substantial progress had been made, and the deadline was postponed until 2009 by the Cotonou Treaty (Ibid, 73).

According to some estimates, the amount of intra-regional trade within the Community has only increased from four to eleven percent in the past two decades (Ibid, 72). Although advances in promoting the free movement of people within the region has been met with moderate success, trade within the economic zone remains far less than what West African leaders had predicted (Silverman).

Some progress, though, has been made in the area of socioeconomic integration, notably with the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on the free movement of persons. However, even these achievements have been limited by states' refusal to whole-heartedly implement Community policies (Ibid). The implementation of the Protocol continues, which formally began in 1980, continues to be thwarted by the maintenance of numerous checkpoints and administrative hurdles by many of the member states (Bach, 72).

### **The Evolving Role of ECOWAS and the Emergence of ECOMOG**

Despite its initial mandate to encourage economic cooperation amongst its members, ECOWAS has increasingly adopted the position of an arbitrator in the extremely volatile region of West Africa. The Community quickly realized that the creation of a monetary union could not be achieved without first creating a harmonious and stable environment amongst its members states.

In 1989, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF) initiated a civil war against the ruling Liberian leader, Samuel Kaynon Doe. Doe had come to power nearly a decade earlier in a military coup that effectively ended 153 years of Americo-Liberian rule. The early period of Doe's reign was characterized by strong domestic support, but a faltering political and economic infrastructure ultimately resulted in massive political unrest and the emergence of the NPLF. As disillusioned Liberians flocked to join the NPLF, the group rapidly grew in popularity and strength and, by May 1990, had succeeded in capturing more territory than was controlled by the Liberian government by May of 1990 (Levitt 1998).

At the time, the founding charter of ECOWAS did not permit the organization to intercede in the internal affairs of its members. In an attempt to circumvent these restrictions, the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was established. ECOMOG forces entered Liberia on August 27, 1990 and, although the initial intervention was a success, the civil war continued unabated until 2003 when Charles Taylor ceded power to his vice-president, Moses Blah (Jenkins, 2007).

The ECOWAS mission in Liberia in 1991 marked the first instance in which the international community as a whole supported unilateral humanitarian intervention by regional actors in a purely domestic conflict (Ibid, 344). The decision by ECOWAS to commit troops to Liberia to quell civil unrest was arguably illegal under international law and was in clear violation of the United Nations Charter. Nonetheless, the Community's decision to unilaterally intervene in the Liberian conflict was lauded by the international community and has provided significant precedent for future interventions by humanitarian-motivated regional organizations (Ibid, 341). Neither the United States nor the United Nations were prepared to become embroiled in the Liberian civil war and, despite the blatant illegality of the action of ECOWAS, were all too willing to allow a regional actor to take the lead in solving the crisis (Levitt, 340). On September 22, 1993, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 866, which called for the creation of the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to assist ECOWAS with peacekeeping activities (Ibid, 341).

The ECOWAS involvement in Sierra Leone was heavily influenced by the earlier intervention in Liberia (Ibid, 355). Once again, ECOWAS was not authorized by the United Nations to intervene in the crisis in Sierra Leone but received strong support by the international community after the organization had already committed troops on the ground.

In 1997, Johnny Koromah successfully staged a coup against the democratically-elected government of Ahmed Tijan Kabbah. Several months later at the ECOWAS summit in Abuja, Nigeria, the Community officially authorized ECOMOG to intercede in Sierra Leone to restore law and order in the country (Ibid, 357).<sup>7</sup> By early 1998, ECOMOG troops had successfully established its presence across the country and in March 1998 President Kabbah resumed his position as head of state.<sup>8</sup>

The United Nations commended the involvement of ECOWAS in restoring peace to Sierra Leone with the passage of Resolution 1162, which authorized the deployment of United Nations' personnel to the region to assist in the "performance of security tasks" (Levitt, 357). The ECOWAS intervention in Sierra Leone served as evidence

that the Community had learned to some extent from its earlier mistakes in Liberia. Anglophone members were actively involved in the military intervention in Sierra Leone, which helped to assuage fears amongst some member-states that Nigeria had the intention of utilizing ECOMOG as a tool for regional dominance (Adebajo, 138).

Unlike the previous actions of ECOWAS in Liberia several years earlier, the 1993 Revised Treaty had been amended to allow for the lawful intervention by the organization in the affairs of its members for humanitarian purposes (Levitt, 360). In addition, the generally positive response of the international community in its acceptance of the actions of ECOWAS in both Liberia and Sierra Leone indicated a shift in customary international law toward the recognition of the right to unilateral humanitarian intervention by regional actors in domestic conflicts (Ibid, 336).<sup>9</sup>

However, the ECOWAS intervention in Sierra Leone and Liberia did not entirely escape scrutiny by the international community, human rights groups and the media. The ECOMOG troops, which consisted predominantly of Nigerian soldiers, were accused of widespread human rights abuses, including summary executions and torture.<sup>10</sup> In addition, significant number of the underpaid 1,500 Nigerian troops who were involved in the ECOMOG peacekeeping mission in Liberia and Sierra Leone allegedly participated in looting, plundering and the trafficking of weapons to rebel factions.<sup>11</sup> The allegations were confirmed by a joint statement of eight relief agencies that were active in the country at the time. A joint statement of eight relief agencies that were active in the country at the time confirmed the allegations. The humanitarian groups noted that considering, as 80% of Liberians starved the peacekeepers were "hindering humanitarian action" (Morgan, 2003). According to one Western diplomat, "By the time the Nigerians really got serious about bringing the war to an end, ... they had taken just about everything that there was to take from Liberia" (Ibid).

The experiences of ECOWAS in both Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrate that although the organization has the political willingness to intervene in the internal conflicts of its members, it lacks the institutional mechanisms necessary to ensure that ECOMOG troops behave professionally and responsibly. Lack of military coordination, especially between the Anglophone and Francophone member-states, has hampered the implementation of well-coordinated and sound peacekeeping missions.

### Conclusion

Efforts to establish a common currency amongst members of ECOWAS have not been realized and many of the organization's member states have failed to adopt

needed fiscal reforms. The West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ), which was established in 2000, consists of five member states that are preparing to adopt a common currency in 2009. However, a number of the countries that belong to the WAMZ suffer from weak currencies and chronic budget deficits and the group itself has threatened to splinter the fragile political environment within the Community. ECOWAS has been equally ineffective in achieving its primary mandate of improving the living conditions of its populace. West Africa remains among the world's poorest and most conflict-prone sub-region in the world (Adebajo, 159). Four of the fifteen members of ECOWAS are amongst the ten poorest countries in the world.<sup>12</sup>

ECOWAS, however, has been considerably more successful in its role as a regional peacekeeper. Following the Community's intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the organization was commended by the United Nations. Given the relative success of ECOWAS' peace enforcement activities in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the international community has continued to urge the organization to serve as a mediator in the region. Although numerous scholars have criticized the actions of ECOMOG, the consensus of the international community, and the United Nations in particular, appear to be fully supportive of the Community's enhanced security capacities.

A number of factors may be useful in explaining the inability of ECOWAS to achieve its stated objectives. Disparities in interests, size, economic development, and historical backgrounds amongst member-states have all contributed to the political fragility and bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the organization from operating effectively. In particular, differences between the Anglophone and Francophone members of the Community have plagued the organization and poses significant challenges to the internal integrity of the organization. The tension between the two groups was highlighted with the creation of ECOMOG, which was established at the behest of the Anglophone nations and was met with considerable resistance by the Francophone states.

Despite its numerous shortcomings, ECOWAS should not be considered a failure. West Africa has gone further than any other African sub-region in its efforts to establish a security mechanism to manage its own conflicts (Adebajo, 1). ECOWAS has positively contributed to political advancement in West Africa by actively engaging in conflict management in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra

Leone. Furthermore, the longevity of the organization is a testament to the political commitment of its members in striving to achieve the community's ambitious economic objectives.

**Appendix A**  
**Map of ECOWAS Member States**



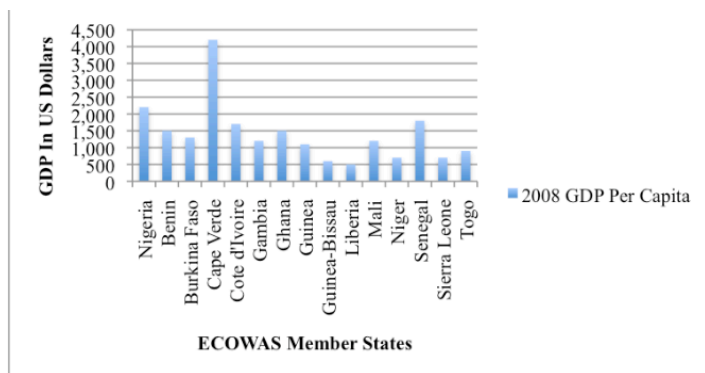
**Appendix B**  
**Basic Indicators of ECOWAS Members<sup>13</sup>**

Country	GNP Per Capita in U.S. Dollars (1998)	Populations in Millions (Mid-1998)	Life Expectancy at Birth in Years (1997)	Percent of Population Living on Less Than US\$1 a Day	Primary School Enrollment Ratio (1995-1996)
Benin	399	6.0	53	45	78
Burkina Faso	260	10.7	44	66	40
Cape Verde	1,127	.4	68	--	--

## REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

Country	GNP Per Capita in U.S. Dollars (1998)	Populations in Millions (Mid-1998)	Life Expectancy at Birth in Years (1997)	Percent of Population Living on Less Than US\$1 a Day	Primary School Enrollment Ratio (1995-1996)
Cote d'Ivoire	754	14.5	47	35	71
Gambia	347	1.2	53	--	77
Ghana	399	18.5	60	45	48
Guinea	576	7.1	46	40	--
Guinea-Bissau	161	1.2	44	--	--
Liberia	--	3.0	47	--	45
Mali	263	10.6	50	70	29
Niger	304	10.1	47	75	--
Nigeria	228	121.3	54	60	68
Senegal	570	9.0	53	40	--
Sierra Leone	146	4.9	37	--	--
Togo	327	4.5	49	66	--

**Appendix C**  
**GDP Per Capita of ECOWAS Members (2008)[14]**



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, West Africa had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$82 billion and an average per capita income of \$322, which is lower than that of both North and southern Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Masson and Pattillo (2001), 4.

<sup>3</sup> The five signatories of the Declaration of Accra are Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

<sup>4</sup> Masson and Catherine Pattillo (2004), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>8</sup> The involvement of ECOWAS in the internal conflict in Sierra Leone did not permanently quell violence, despite the reinstatement of President Kabbah. See "ECOWAS Military Intervention In Sierra Leone: Anglophone-Francophone Bipolarity or Multipolarity?" for a more complete discussion on this topic.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>10</sup> For greater detail on the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Nigerian troops serving in ECOMOG, see "Liberia's Uneasy Peace" at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/liberia/ecowas-background.html>. Numerous reports published by Human Rights Watch also confirms the use of summary execution by Nigerian peacekeepers in Sierra Leone.

<sup>11</sup> Nigerian troops reportedly plundered \$50 million worth of iron ore and stole hospital equipment, motorcycles and underground cables for sale in Nigeria.

<sup>12</sup> The four ECOWAS states that belong to this unfortunate category are Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

<sup>13</sup> Table reproduced from Masson, Paul and Catherine Pattillo, ed. 2001. *Monetary Union in West Africa (ECOWAS): Is It Desirable and How Could It Be Achieved?* Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund (IMF), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Data obtained from the CIA World Factbook

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