Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 by developing West African states as part of their strategy to promote economic development and prosperity for their respective countries. However, following widespread conflict and instability in the sub-region in the 1990s and early 2000s, the leaders came to the realisation that economic prosperity cannot be achieved in the absence of peace and security. Beginning with a process that saw the adoption of nascent security protocols in 1978, the region has today developed and institutionalised elaborate conflict resolution, peacekeeping and security mechanisms.

This paper looks at the provisions of these mechanisms and analyse the implications for sub-regional security and conflict resolution. It argues that despite the portrayal of Africa as the ‘hopeless’ continent, the conflict management and peacebuilding intervention of ECOWAS is a manifestation that Africa is taking ownership and responsibility for its conflicts.

Evolution of ECOWAS Security Regionalism

The 1975 ECOWAS treaty provided no security role for the sub-regional grouping. This is not unique to ECOWAS, as several other regional organisations have gradually assumed security and foreign policy functions by default. The European Union is a classic case in point. Founded as an economic union, the EU has gradually developed security and foreign policy capacity with the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht and has been instrumental in devising the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Roper (1998)
considers evolution into security regionalism to occur as a result of a military threat or instability. In the West African context, conflict and political instability in several member states made ECOWAS to realise that economic development cannot be achieved in the absence of peace and stability. The need to add a defence protocol to the ECOWAS Treaty became imperative in the 1970s when two ECOWAS states became the victims of external aggression. In November 1970, Guinea experienced an attempted invasion by Portuguese mercenaries whilst Benin became the target of another failed mercenary attack in January 1977. Added to these cases of external aggression are the military coups prevalent in West Africa during the 1970s.

It is in this context of external aggression and internal instability that ECOWAS leaders moved to adopt measures that will safeguard the sub-region’s security. The organisation’s gradual movement into security started in 1978 when ECOWAS adopted the Non-aggression Treaty which called on member states to ‘…refrain from the threat and use of force or aggression’ against each other (ECOWAS, 1978). Critics regard this protocol as merely idealistic as it failed to provide an institutionalised response mechanism in the case of a breach. In recognition of this weakness, West African leaders ratified the Mutual Assistance on Defence (MAD) Protocol at the 1981 Summit in Freetown, Sierra Leone and it came into force in September, 1986. This protocol committed member states to ‘give mutual aid and assistance for defence against any armed threat or aggression’ directed at a member state and considered them to constitute ‘a threat or aggression against the entire community’ (ECOWAS, 1981). The protocol spelt out the circumstances requiring action. These include cases of armed conflict between two or more member states after the failure of peaceful means, and in the case of conflict within a state ‘engineered and supported from outside’ (art. 4). It created response mechanisms which include a Defence Council, Defence Committee and a sub-regional intervention force: the Allied Armed Forces of the Community (AAFC). However, this protocol have been criticised for its lack of effective conflict prevention, management and resolution mechanisms. Moreover it focused heavily on external threats and did not envisage a role for the regional body in the coups that destabilised the sub-region in the 1970s and 1980s, and the internal conflicts that swept through West Africa in the 1990s. Critics regard this as regime protection strategies meant to serve the interest of leaders. In addition to these limitations, the institutions provided for in this protocol were never established. A possible reason responsible for the non-implementation of this protocol lies in Francophone suspicions of Nigerian hegemonic ambitions. These suspicions were further deepened by the protocol’s call for the withdrawal of foreign troops from all member states. With strong military ties with France, most of the Francophone West African states depended on their former colonial
power for defence and security. In addition to these security concerns, the presence of a rival Francophone security mechanism adversely affected the chances of success of MAD. The **Accord de Non Aggression et d’Assistance en matière de Défense** (ANAD) was signed by Francophone West African states in 1977 following the border dispute between Mali and Burkina Faso. Unlike MAD, all the institutions of ANAD including its secretariat were made operational by 1981 (Dokken, 2002).

The Liberian crisis, which started in 1989, represents a critical stage in ECOWAS’ transition into security. Faced with unprecedented scale of human suffering and international disengagement from African conflicts, and with no institutions to respond to the conflict ECOWAS was forced to devise ad hoc security mechanisms for keeping the lid on this conflict. In May 1990, ECOWAS established a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) charged with the responsibility of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Following weeks of unproductive talks with various faction leaders in July 1990, the SMC took the bold step of establishing and deploying the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) amidst bitter opposition from then rebel leader Charles Taylor and some West African leaders. In neighbouring Sierra Leone, ECOMOG was able to reinstate the ousted President Kabbah and acted as the *de facto* army in the absence of a national army. In 1998, this ad hoc sub-regional peacekeeping force intervened to restore peace to Guinea Bissau following a revolt in the national army. In December 2002 ECOWAS sent its peacekeeping mission to Cote d’Ivoire and in August 2003, a peacekeeping mission was deployed in Liberia for the second time following the relapse of that country to violent conflict.

The dynamics and unpredictability of conflicts in the sub-region posed significant challenges to the traditional conceptualisation and practice of humanitarian intervention. State collapse, which can be both a cause and consequence of complex political emergencies, have expanded the remits of humanitarian interveners from the ‘fire brigade’ mentality to efforts aimed at rebuilding collapsed states. ECOWAS peacekeepers therefore established safe havens, shared their limited military supplies with starving civilians and secured humanitarian relief corridors. To varying degrees of success, ECOMOG missions also engaged in peacebuilding efforts, including implementing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, security sector reform and organizing elections. These interventions also provided an opportunity for the UN to co-deploy with a regional organisation in peacekeeping as was envisaged in the UN charter. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOMOG co-deployed with UN observer missions whilst ECOWAS Missions in Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire provided rapid deployment forces that were transformed into UN peacekeepers. Despite the problems of co-ordination, logistics and differences in mandate and
culture, the co-operation between the UN and ECOWAS allowed each organisation to maximise its comparative advantage whilst working together to resolve the conflicts. Lessons learned in these missions have provided a blueprint for how the UN and regional organisations can work together.

However, despite the achievements and successes outlined above, ECOWAS peacekeeping missions faced serious challenges and setbacks in their attempts to restore peace to war-torn countries. These include the force’s lack of capacity to effectively safeguard civilians under their control, poor human rights record of troops, lack of neutrality and complicity in exploiting the natural resources of the host countries (diamonds in Sierra Leone and Timber in Liberia). ECOWAS missions were also hampered by financial, military and political difficulties. The endemic funding and logistical constraints suffered by ECOMOG severely limited the capacity of the force. Another crucial factor that adversely affected ECOMOG’s operations was the rivalry and lack of political consensus between French and English speaking West Africa. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, French-speaking countries were less co-operative with some even supporting rebel groups against ECOMOG. For example, in December 1989, Charles Taylor used Cote d’Ivoire as a staging ground for the invasion of Liberia. A UN Panel of Experts also implicated Burkina Faso in providing support to the RUF and NPFL in Sierra Leone and Liberia respectively (UN, 2001). This lack of political consensus on the part of the mandating body complicated an already complex situation and further derailed efforts to resolve the conflicts. Even amongst troops on the ground, there were differences of approach and strategy. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, whilst Ghana favoured traditional peacekeeping strategies, Nigeria adopted more robust enforcement action. This difference of strategy led to problems with inter-contingent co-ordination and chain of command. These tensions were exacerbated by the lack of effective ECOWAS oversight of both forces and the sub-regional resentment of Nigeria’s hegemonic position.

**Institutionalising Conflict Resolution in West Africa: The ECOWAS Security Mechanism**

The problems encountered and lessons learned in the various ECOWAS peacekeeping operations led to the initiation of a process meant to improve future interventions. ECOWAS therefore made moves to institutionalise conflict resolution, security and peacekeeping mechanisms. The revised ECOWAS treaty of 1993 represents the first serious attempt to establish such a permanent mechanism. Besides strengthening economic and fiscal ties to face the challenges of globalisation, the treaty addressed issues pertaining to security, conflict resolution and management. In recognition of the nexus between human rights, good
governance and conflicts in the sub-region, ECOWAS in 1991 agreed on the Declaration of Political Principles which committed member states to respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This was followed in 2001 by the adoption of the Protocol on Good Governance which addresses the root causes of conflict such as corruption and bad governance. To address the link between small arms proliferation and conflict, ECOWAS member states agreed on a Moratorium on Small Arms in October 1998. The Moratorium was transformed into a legally binding convention in June 2006 and a Small Arms Unit has since been established within the ECOWAS Commission to monitor its implementation.

The most important security protocol adopted so far is the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security signed in December 1999. As its name implies, this mechanism seeks to strengthen the sub-region’s conflict prevention, management and resolution capacity, as well as build effective peacekeeping, humanitarian support and peacebuilding capabilities. It also addresses cross border crime which is becoming a major problem for the sub-region. In a bid to realise these ambitious aims, the ECOWAS Security Mechanism (as it is known for short) establishes a number of institutions, arms and strategies which include the Mediation and Security Council, an early warning system, and a stand-by force. The subsections below look at the various arms and agencies of the mechanism and assess their strengths and weaknesses.

The Mediation and Security Council (MSC)

Comprising Heads of State and Government, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ambassadors, this body makes important decisions relating to matters of peace and security and the deployment of peacekeeping/enforcement troops. Membership to the MSC is on a rotational basis and comprises nine states elected for a two-year period with no permanent seats. To facilitate the council’s work, a Committee of Ambassadors (CA) with dual accreditation to ECOWAS and Nigeria and a Defence and Security Commission (DSC) made up of defence chiefs and security technocrats work out the details and technicalities of an operation and make recommendations to the MSC.

Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN)

An early warning system has been established with regional observation network and observatories. These observatories undertake risk mapping, observation and analysis of social, economic and political situations in the sub-region which have the potential of degenerating into conflict and present appropriate threat perception analysis. To this end, four zones were established as follows: Zone 1: Cape Verde, The Gambia,
Guinea Bissau, and Senegal with Banjul as the capital; **Zone 2**: Burkina Faso, Cote D’Ivoire, Mali and Niger with headquarters in Ouagadougou; **Zone 3**: Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, HQ Monrovia; **Zone 4**: Benin, Nigeria and Togo, HQ Cotonou.

The reports coming from these zones inform the ECOWAS Commission President and the MSC in devising suitable response strategies. Four options are available to diffuse any potential threat to security identified in the various zones and they include: (a) the setting up of a fact finding commission; (b) the use of the good offices of the Commission President; (c) calling on the services of a Council of the Wise; and if all else fails (d) the employment of military force. The Council of the Wise can be seen as a traditional African conflict resolution mechanism. Made up of 15 eminent persons, one from each member state, this council is charged with the task of facilitating negotiation, mediation and conciliation in a potential conflict. The focus on conflict prevention and early response is a step in the right direction. However, the placement of one of the observatories in Burkina Faso, a country notorious for supporting insurgencies in the sub-region, is misguided. The ability of the observatory to gather and disseminate critical information on this government will be adversely affected, as the government in question might restrict the system’s work. Critics have also accused ECOWARN of lacking an early response capacity. The system also suffers from a lack of integration and co-ordination with other agencies and initiatives within ECOWAS performing prevention and peacebuilding roles such as those responsible for youth and gender equality. The development of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (discussed below) aims to address this drawback.

**ECOWAS Standby Force**

ECOMOG became formally established as a standby force for the community and, reflecting the changing nature of peacekeeping, its role was expanded to cover conflict prevention, humanitarian intervention, enforcement, peacebuilding and the control of organised crime. In June 2004, the ECOWAS Defence and Security Commission renamed ECOMOG as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). The force will be made up of 6500 highly trained soldiers to be drawn from national units. It will include a rapid reaction Task Force of 1500 troops which will have the capability to be deployed within 14 days (instead of the 30 days previously planned in line with African Union Standard), whilst the entire brigade could be deployed within 90 days. The ESF will form one of the components of the African Standby Force and will be under the operational control of the African Union. To enhance the force’s strategic, tactical and operational
readiness, ECOWAS is in the process of implementing a training programme. This involves a series of specialised modules consistent with UN standards to be delivered in three designated Centres of Excellence: Nigerian War College in Abuja, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre in Accra, Ghana, and the Ecole du Maintien de la Paix in Bamako, Mali. ECOWAS is also in the process of organising military exercises with the aim of enhancing the peacekeeping capacity of troops and harmonising strategies and equipments. Some of the exercises held so far include the Command Post exercise in Dakar and Accra in June 2006 and December 2007 respectively; the West Battalion Exercise in Thies, Senegal, December 2007, the Command Post Exercise in Bamako, Mali, June 2008 and ‘Operation Cohesion’ in Benin in April 2010. To address the perennial problem of logistics, ECOWAS has designated two logistics depots – a Coastal base just outside Freetown, Sierra Leone; and inland base in Mali. In July 2010, the Government of Sierra Leone donated 18 acres of land to ECOWAS for the building of the Logistics base and ECOWAS has already disbursed $10 million dollars for the first phase of the project.

The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework

The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) was developed in January 2008 to inform and guide the organisation’s conflict prevention efforts. It aims to provide a strong conceptual understanding of conflict prevention, strengthen ECOWAS’ conflict prevention capacity and integrate existing initiatives of ECOWAS institutions and mechanisms responsible for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These aims are to be achieved through a set of 14 components covering a broad spectrum of areas that enhance human security: Early Warning, Preventive Diplomacy, Democracy and Political Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Natural Resource Governance, Cross-Border Initiatives, Security Governance, Practical Disarmament, Women, Peace and Security, Youth Empowerment, ECOWAS Standby Force, Humanitarian Assistance and Peace Education (The Culture of Peace). To enable its implementation, the ECPF calls for increased advocacy and communication of the goals and activities of ECOWAS, resource mobilization to support peace and security efforts, cooperation with the AU, UN, member states and civil society and participative monitoring and evaluation.

The ECPF is a very comprehensive framework document that addresses a key limitation of earlier security mechanisms – the failure of coordination amongst various departments and institutions within ECOWAS and member states responsible for peace and security programming. For example, prior to the
ECPF, various agencies responsible for conflict prevention and peacebuilding such as ECOWARN and initiatives to promote good governance, gender equality and youth empowerment operated in isolation leading to duplication of efforts and inefficient use of scarce resources. It also provides a strong conceptual understanding of conflict prevention which goes beyond the prevention of imminent outbreak of violence to addressing the fundamental causes of conflict and human insecurity in the region. However, whilst the document calls for better co-ordination and integration of peace and security initiatives, it fails to specify organs or institutions responsible for this task neither does it clearly define roles and responsibilities for its implementation. Without clearly defined roles and action plans, the ECPF risks becoming one of many high sounding declarations and protocols of ECOWAS that are hardly implemented.

ECOWAS and Civil Society

Another important feature of the emerging peace and security architecture of ECOWAS is its engagement with civil society groups. This reflects the new ECOWAS vision of moving from ‘an ECOWAS of states to an ECOWAS of peoples’. In this respect, ECOWAS with the help of local and international NGOs created the West African Civil Society Forum in 2003 to act as a platform for civil society interaction with ECOWAS policy makers. This new people centred approach has already resulted in civil society playing an active role in matters of regional peace and security including helping to develop the region’s small arms control convention, the ECPF and working alongside ECOWARN to enhance ECOWAS early warning capacity. Organisations such as the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the West African Network on Small Arms (WANSA) are notable in this regard. However, critics have accused ECOWAS of only working with selected organisations that have the capacity to access the ECOWAS Commission (Ekiyor, 2008). For ECOWAS to be considered serious with its people centred approach, it must seek to work with a wider set of civil society actors and organisations and increase representation.

Opportunities and Challenges to Peace and Security in West Africa

The ECOWAS peacekeeping and peacebuilding intervention in West Africa opened up new possibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security in Africa and challenged the stereotype of Africa as the ‘hopeless’ continent. These interventions represent a significant shift in Africa’s international relations, previously characterised by the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and non-
interventionism in the internal affairs of states. ECOWAS also deserves commendation for institutionalising peacekeeping and incorporating conflict prevention and peacebuilding into its security mechanism. Humanitarian and peace support operations in today’s complex political emergencies call for a coherent and effective peacebuilding component to prevent a relapse into violence. The experiences in Liberia and Sierra Leone are indicative of the importance of incorporating peacebuilding into humanitarian intervention. The ECOWAS peace and security mechanism stands out as very progressive and has influenced the establishment of similar structures in other African regions such as SADC and ECCAS and most importantly the AU’s Peace and Security Council (PSC). The focus on conflict prevention and early response is another step in the right direction. Another encouraging feature of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture is its engagement with civil society. WACSOF is playing an important role as an interface between states and people and it is contributing to regional policy and debates. Across countries in the sub-region, civil society organisations are also becoming stronger and playing an active role in campaigning for good governance and managing conflicts. For example, the West African Network on Small Arms (WANSA) and the West African Network on Peacebuilding are both very instrumental in advocating for better peacebuilding measures.

The emerging policy shift within ECOWAS towards issues of human security and good governance is also encouraging. The Protocol on Good Governance, which is closely linked to the Security Mechanism, addresses the root causes of the sub-region’s security crisis and sought to shift attention towards the well being of the individual. Whilst there are still cases of bad governance and threats to democracy in a number of countries in the sub-region, on the whole, governance appears to be improving across West Africa. ECOWAS has also appeared to be tough on some of its members who have displayed blatant disregard for democratic principles. For example, Guinea and Niger were suspended following military coups. The regional body has also taken the bold step of recognising the universally recognised winner of the November 2010 Ivorian elections Alansan Ouatarra.

The co-operation between the UN and ECOWAS in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire provided useful lessons for peace and security interventions in West Africa and formed the basis of an emerging framework for task sharing and division of labour between the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the UN. In West Africa, this emerging complimentarity model is based on ECOWAS providing a rapid reaction force to stabilise a volatile conflict situation and handing over to a larger, well resourced UN mission whilst leading peacemaking efforts. This has given ECOWAS a leadership role in matters
relating to peace and security in the sub-region. In most cases, the AU and UN has been content with following the ECOWAS lead and endorsing its positions and resolutions.

Despite the above positive outlook for peace in West Africa, a number of challenges remain. The institutional and financial incapacity of ECOWAS poses an obstacle in realising the aims embodied in its emerging peace and security architecture. The problem of funding is not new to the organisation. The organisation’s financial crisis is characteristic of the weak economic status of its member states. The ‘Community Levy’, a 0.5 per cent tax on all imports into ECOWAS member states is meant to help fill the gap between states’ contributions and ECOWAS expenditure. However, due to competing national priorities, a number of states have so far failed to apply this levy. This means ECOWAS has to rely on external donor support to fund its peace and security mechanism. In 2003, it created the ECOWAS Peace Fund to mobilise resources to support peace and security interventions. A number of Western countries have contributed to the fund. To help with institutional capacity building, France, the US and UK are also collaborating with ECOWAS to implement a number of capacity building programmes. Whilst this external support is needed to boost the capacity of ECOWAS, this risks eroding local ownership of security structures and encourage a disproportionate dependence on outside prescriptions and funding.

Another major threat towards the realisation of the sub-region’s peace and security aspirations is the fact that ECOWAS leaders are known to be making high sounding declarations and policies which they are slow to implement. For example, since the Convention on Small Arms was signed in 2006, it took nearly 4 years for it to come into effect because countries delayed in ratifying the treaty. The reciprocal support given by some states within the sub-region to each others’ insurgents and dissident groups also undermines the collective security ideals embodied in the ECOWAS peace and security mechanism.

Whilst ECOWAS is making moves to address human security issues and become a more people-centred organisation, it still struggles to deal with endemic human security problems in the sub-region such as corruption, disease and the growing poverty and economic hardship. Corruption in the sub-region continues to undermine economic recovery efforts and robs the population of the expected peace dividend. 11 of the organisation’s 15 member states occupy the bottom 80 places of Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2009). Although macro-economic figures and growth forecasts for the sub-region are getting better, however, the pervasive poverty and poor social and economic indicators pose the biggest challenge to peace in West Africa. For example, twelve of the sub-
region’s sixteen countries fall within the Low Human Development category of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s Human Development Index Report of 2009 due to factors such as low life expectancy, high infant mortality rate, high levels of illiteracy, low per capita incomes and abject poverty.

The greatest challenge facing the emerging ECOWAS peace and security architecture is how to respond to the ongoing crisis in Cote d’Ivoire. There are echoes of the forgotten crises of Liberia and Sierra Leone as world attention is currently focused on Libya and events in the wider Middle East whilst Cote d’Ivoire plunges to violent civil war. ECOWAS has so far taken a leadership role in this crisis and continues its attempt to attract the world’s attention to it. In December 2010, ECOWAS leaders adopted a three-pronged approach to dealing with the crisis which includes peaceful negotiations, sanctions and the use of force as a last resort. However, these efforts together with the AU’s have so far failed to produce the intended outcome. In March 2011, ECOWAS leaders asked the 9000-strong UN mission based in Cote d’Ivoire to take a more robust approach and called on the UN and wider international community to give more attention to the crisis. Whilst ECOWAS has been quick in responding to the crisis, its emerging peace and security mechanism has so far failed to adequately respond to the situation and prevent the ongoing bloodbath in the country.

Conclusion

Established as an economic integration union, ECOWAS has developed the most elaborate conflict prevention, management and resolution mechanism in Africa. State collapse and conflicts in the 1990s and early 2000s and the ensuing international disengagement from African conflicts prompted an ad hoc response in the form of ECOMOG. Subsequently, the sub-regional body intervened in conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Cote d’Ivoire undertaking tasks ranging from safeguarding civilians to implementing peacebuilding programmes. The organisation has achieved mixed results in these interventions with relative successes in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire and abysmal failure in Guinea Bissau. The various interventions have been plagued by several problems including financial and logistics, lack of political consensus and the absence of a coherent peacekeeping and humanitarian strategy.

Nevertheless, despite the portrayal of West Africa and indeed the entire continent as ‘hopeless’, the conflict management and peacebuilding intervention of ECOWAS deserves commendation and is a
manifestation that Africa is taking ownership and responsibility for its conflicts. The ongoing efforts at institutionalising peace and security response mechanisms are steps in the right direction as are efforts to promote good governance and economic development in the sub-region. The greatest challenge to this emerging peace and security architecture, however, is how the sub-regional body responds to the Cote d’Ivoire crisis.

References


