

# ECOWAS' INITIATIVES IN POLITICAL CRISES AND CONFLICTS MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** Political crises and armed conflicts are, among other issues, major challenges and a persistent obstacle that haunt political decision-makers and international actors, and which continue to represent a shortfall and an impasse for the implementation of peace projects, stability and development in the world. This observation is even more striking in the West African region, which has historically been marked by civil wars, military coups and chronic instability since its countries gained independence. However, since the wave of democratisation in the 1990s, there has been a gradual assertion of certain regional and especially sub-regional actors as key entities in the management, resolution and prevention of conflicts in West Africa. This article examines the initiatives promoted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in terms of efforts and measures to manage and resolve conflicts within its member states. Our analysis focuses on the legal framework and institutional architecture issued by the sub-regional organisation in the field of conflict prevention, management and resolution as well as the preservation of peace and security in ECOWAS member states. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has a normative and institutional framework, as well as a spirit and a vision, for its diplomatic and humanitarian action in the field of war prevention and peacekeeping. This action is conceived and carried out in accordance with the cardinal principles enshrined in its founding texts, hence the interest in highlighting the principles and rules governing the conduct of ECOWAS political action.

**Keywords:** ECOWAS; Liberia; GuineaBissau; conflictsmanagement; political crises; preventivediplomacy; regionalcooperation.

## Introduction:

Since the end of the Cold War, wars and armed conflicts have undergone a number of major changes in their forms and in the modalities through which they unfold. This collective organization of violence, which since the Peace of Westphalia had been the

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supreme expression of the sovereign and sovereignty (*jus ad bellum*) against other political entities, become over the last three decades primarily a sub-state violence expressed through civil wars, military coups, or mass uprisings.

Confronted with this new reality of wars and conflicts, UN mechanisms found themselves at an impasse regarding their initial purpose of building stable and lasting peace in conflict zones. In some cases, these situations escalate into a total or partial breakdown of the Hobbesian social contract, giving rise, in extreme cases, to failed states (Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, etc.). For years or even decades, these situations eliminate any possibility or attempt to reconstitute the state and pacify society.

By no means an attempt or a pretension to replace the UN's collective peace mechanisms, but rather an expression of the spirit of Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, which tends to favour the existence of regional agreements or organizations intended to deal with matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security.<sup>2</sup> Sub-regional management of armed conflicts proves to be a fruitful and promising option for managing asymmetric armed crises by regional actors who are most affected by the consequences of conflicts, in addition, those actors are more aware of the historical and political depth of the conflict. This can lead to the conception of resolution instruments better adapted to particular cases in order to resolve political crises, contrary to the unified models or Procrustean models, whose limitations are already manifesting in the face of current armed crises.

In this sense, the public policies issued by ECOWAS regarding conflict management and resolution rules in the West African space, notably the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, represent major assets for State actors and for peace and security at the sub-regional level. To understand their roles in resolving political crises and armed conflicts in West Africa, it is imperative to ask how the institutional and legal framework issued by the organization's member states manages to overcome the specific challenges of the West African space? (Chapter I) and what role ECOWAS played in the civil war in Liberia and in the recent political crisis in Guinea-Bissau? (Chapter II)

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<sup>2</sup> United Nation Charter (26 June 1945). United Nations Digital Library System, Article 52 paragraph 1.

## **I- The Architecture of Peace and Security in West Africa:**

Initially created in 1975 to address economic issues and promote regional integration, **the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)**, under the yoke of post-colonial political crises and armed conflicts, gradually became aware of the importance of giving substance to an institutional and legal framework that responds to security challenges in the West African region. Driven by the emergence of an arc of crisis in the Mano River, ECOWAS found itself facing a decisive decade to implement a security framework capable of resolving the first civil war in Liberia (1989-1997) and Sierra Leone (1991-2002), which also affected southern Guinea and threatened to spill over into the entire region.

It was in this political context that the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security was adopted in Lomé in March 1999, implementing the provisions of Article 58 on regional security of the 1993 revised ECOWAS treaty. According to the provisions of the 1999 protocol, the mechanism is composed of three principal organs: Conference and the Executive Secretariat.<sup>3</sup>

The Conference is the organ where the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS member states sit. As the highest decision-making body of the mechanism, the Conference deliberates validly with the presence of at least two-thirds of its members and makes decisions by a two-thirds majority. During the intervals between its meetings (the Conference is convened when deemed necessary by member countries) and to respond to the need for appropriate implementation of the Mechanism's provisions, the Conference delegates the authority to make decisions on its behalf to a permanent body, which is the Mediation and Security Council. Composed of nine members elected for a renewable two-year term, the work of the Mediation and Security Council takes place at three levels: Heads of State and Government in office, Ministers, and Ambassadors.

Finally, the 1999 protocol grants the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat (created by Article 17 of the revised 1993 Treaty) and its Executive Secretary responsibilities in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. The Executive Secretary is assisted by a Deputy

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<sup>3</sup> Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace- Keeping and Security ( 24 March 1999) ECOWAS Portal, Article 4

Executive Secretary appointed by the ECOWAS Council of Ministers<sup>4</sup> and performs his duties under his responsibility. The Deputy Executive Secretary is in charge of political affairs, defense, security, and the implementation of the 1999 protocol.

In order to fulfill their purpose, the 1999 protocol, through its 17th article, aims to create a **Defense and Security Commission**, a **Council of Elders**, and an **ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group**, which are support bodies whose mission is to help the mechanism's institutions accomplish their objectives.

First, the **Defense Commission** is a body that provides technical and administrative assistance to the mandates of the Mediation and Security Council. Within this body sit state representatives and officials with a variety of profiles, but who are mainly security actors, including Chiefs of General Staff of the Armed Forces, officials from interior ministries, experts from foreign affairs ministries, etc. This varied composition is explained by the diversity of matters on the commission's agenda, which deals with issues of immigration, customs, drug control, etc.

Next, the **Council of Elders** is a body primarily dedicated to mediation, conciliation, and arbitration between parties in a dispute or conflict. Composed of eminent personalities from various social strata including women, political leaders, traditional and religious leaders<sup>[1]</sup>, the members of this body, whose names appear on a list approved by the Heads of State and Government in the Mediation and Security Council, use their good offices to manage political crises and armed conflicts in a neutral, impartial, and objective manner.

Finally, the protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security of 1999 institutionalizes the functions and procedures for the deployment of personnel, mandates, and missions of the **ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Brigade (ECOMOG)**. Deployed for the first time in 1990 during the civil war in Liberia under the initiative of *Ibrahim Babangida*<sup>5</sup>, the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Brigade, which was mainly led by Nigeria, did not benefit from any legal framework due to its temporal vocation. Only two security protocols (the non-aggression protocol of 1978 and the mutual assistance protocol in defense matters of 1981) bound the member states of the Economic Community of West African States. It was not until the

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<sup>4</sup> The Economic Community of West African States Treaty (24 July, 1993) ECOWAS Portal, Article 18 paragraph 4 (a)

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim Babangida is a Nigerian military leader who served as head of state of Nigeria from (1985–93) and also as president of from (1985–89)

adoption of the 1999 protocol, more precisely its article 21, that ECOWAS took the step towards a true regional security integration.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of ECOMOG in armed conflict zones such as Liberia and Sierra Leone had drawn the attention of certain international observers who questioned the pacifying nature of its military interventions. Thus, the deployment of thousands of soldiers to Liberia, then to Sierra Leone, and on a smaller scale to Guinea-Bissau, under the impetus of the most powerful member of the community, had generated a number of questions about Nigeria's underlying motives and hidden intentions. Although the intervention in Liberia was part of a declared desire to restore political order and peace in society, it certainly did not aim to protect the principles of the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights, but only and precisely to defend legality against any form of unconstitutional seizure of power in one of the member countries. When Nigeria decided to intervene with ECOMOG in Liberia a few months after the attack by Charles Taylor's rebel movement against Samuel Doe's government, neither the victim of the rebel attack nor the Nigerian government at the time could be described as models of democracy and respect for human rights.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the status of this "peacekeeping force" was relativized when the United Nations implicitly recognized ECOMOG as one of the fighting factions and subjected it in 1992, like other armed groups, to an arms embargo through resolution No. 788.<sup>8</sup> However, and since 1999, the ECOWAS's military, diplomatic, and humanitarian action began to address the necessity for an institutionalization of the principles and the legal rules that ECOWAS's political and humanitarian action must comply with on conflict management process. To do so, ECOWAS established frameworks for conflict prevention and resolution, such as the Protocol on Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, adopted in 1999 and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

The ECOWAS's frameworks for conflict prevention and resolution is guided by key principles including respect for territorial integrity, ensuring the sovereignty and borders of each member state are upheld to prevent territorial disputes and conflicts. The principle of regional solidarity and cooperation fosters mutual support and collective action among member states to address common challenges and enhance regional stability. The promotion

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<sup>6</sup>Abass, Ademola, The new collective security mechanism of ECOWAS. Innovations and problems. In: Journal of Conflict and Security Law, vol.5, n°2, 2000, p. 212

<sup>7</sup> Gilles OlakounléYabi, Le Rôle de la CEDEAO dans la Gestion des Crises Politiques et des Conflits, Cas de la Guinée et de la Guinée Bissau. Edité par Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bureau Régional, Abuja 12 Marrakesh Street, Wuse II, Abuja, Nigeria, p.6

<sup>8</sup>Galy, Michel, ECOMOG, faction combattante au Liberia. Outre-Terre, vol. no 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 375.

of democracy and good governance is advocated through democratic principles such as free elections and accountable governance, creating stable political environments and reducing conflict. Adherence to human rights and the rule of law upholds international human rights standards and promotes fair legal systems to ensure justice and address grievances that could lead to unrest.

## II - The role of ECOWAS in political crises and conflicts management

In his work *International Institutions: Two Approaches*<sup>9</sup>, Robert Owen Keohane examines two main theoretical aspects on the role and impact of international institutions in global politics. It involves rationalist institutionalism<sup>10</sup> and reflectivist institutionalism.<sup>11</sup>

On the first approach, institutions are seen as mechanisms to facilitate cooperation and to mitigate issues like the "collective action problems" or "prisoner's dilemma" by fostering frameworks for negotiation, dispute resolution, and collective security arrangements where states can make credible commitments, cooperate for mutual benefit and contribute to global stability and peace. On the second approach, international institutions are not only arenas for state interactions based on mutual or multilateral interests but also create, promote, and disseminate identities, norms and values that influence states behaviour and international relations.

The two approaches examined by Robert Owen Keohane are manifested in ECOWAS' vision, objectives and fundamental principles.<sup>12</sup> While ECOWAS is dealing with issues related to "collective action problem" by making peace and prosperity a common goal for all member States, it is also trying to build common principles and norms that unite the West African countries.

In order to achieve and maintain security, peace and stability as well as economic and social ambitions, ECOWAS has taken steps to tackle security issues by developing a peacekeeping force to manage conflicts in the region. The ECOWAS' efforts to establish a

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<sup>9</sup>Keohane, R. O. (1988). *International institutions: Two approaches*. International Studies Association.

<sup>10</sup> Rationalist institutionalism, rooted in the rational choice theory, assumes that states are rational actors that seek to maximize their utility. In other words, States operate based on achieving their national interests.

<sup>11</sup>Reflectivist institutionalism, often associated with constructivist theory, based on the idea that international organizations induce states to cooperate internationally even though their power and utility-maximizing interest is not achieved.

<sup>12</sup>*About ECOWAS: Economic community of West African States (ECOWAS)*. <https://www.ecowas.int/about-ecowas/>

coherent economic organization are evident in its interventions during wars, military coups or political crises in many different member States including Liberia and Guinea Bissau.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a key role in peacekeeping operations in the region. The Community aims not only to promote economic cooperation and integration in West Africa, but also to maintain regional peace, security and stability. In considering the extent to which ECOWAS has played a role in responding to conflict in West Africa, one is often tempted to forget that the organisation was meant, at its origin, to foster economic integration and only got into the field of peace and security by default.<sup>13</sup>

### **1. The ECOWAS' role in the civil war of Liberia (1989-2003)**

The Economic Community Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a multilateral military force interfered in Liberian civil war under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had a pivotal role in conflict management and resolution in Liberia. An assessment of the effectiveness and challenges of this intervention allows for a better understanding of regional conflict resolution mechanisms.

The ECOMOG intervention succeeded in temporarily stopping the bloodshed and ethnic killing, and is therefore regarded by many as a model of regional conflict resolution.<sup>14</sup> The intervention of ECOMOG was able to contain the conflict and limit the influence of warring factions, which facilitated somehow the humanitarian aid and civilians protection amidst the chaos. Besides containing the conflict and facilitating humanitarian assistance, the intervention had also enabled peace negotiations and political stabilization. While ECOMOG's forceful intervention militarised the search for peace in Liberia, the diplomatic option was never abandoned.<sup>15</sup> The ECOMOG efforts supported by the UN, OAU, and the US to impose ceasefire and provide security during negotiations were crucial in the eventual signing of a range of peace agreements as a prelude to conducting elections. The peace-building efforts were enhanced by ECOMOG's involvement in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, which helped to reduce and mitigate hostilities.

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<sup>13</sup>Jaye, T., Garuba, D., &Amadi, S. (2011). *ECOWAS and the dynamics of conflict and peace-building*. Codesria.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch. (1993). (rep.). *LIBERIA Waging War to Keep the Peace: The ECOMOG Intervention and Human Rights*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/1/liberia/liberia936.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>Sesay, M. A. (1996, October 1). Liberia. Bringing peace to Liberia | Conciliation Resources. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/liberia/bringing-peace>

However, ECOMOG faced immediate problems of political unity, military capabilities, and uncertain funding.<sup>16</sup> On logistical, operational and coordination issues, ECOMOG confronted major challenges and difficulties such as inadequate funding, equipment and logistical support as well as differences in military doctrines, languages and operational procedures among contributing member States. Differences in strategic and political interests between English-speaking and French-speaking countries have influenced ECOWAS's approach to the intervention. While Nigeria, as the leading English-speaking country in the region, enjoyed an important position in ECOWAS, which sometimes led to perceptions of dominance and hegemony, French-speaking countries such as Ivory Coast and Senegal had their own priorities and interests that sometimes contradicted those of the English-speaking countries. The conflict of strategic interests between ECOWAS member States had strongly slowed down the decision making processes affecting the effectiveness and the timeliness of interventions.

## **2. ECOWAS' role in the political crisis of Guinea Bissau (2022)**

Although there are different contexts and factors, the main common problem in many ECOWAS countries, including Liberia and Guinea Bissau, is the struggle for power in an aggressive, undemocratic and illegitimate manner, which has led to political instability and insecurity automatically affecting economic growth and economic integration in the region. The ECOWAS intervention in Guinea Bissau after the 2022 political crisis was an important operation aimed at stabilizing the country after the attempted military coup. This intervention comes within the framework of a series of regional initiatives to maintain peace and security in Guinea Bissau.

Swift diplomatic response, diplomatic pressure and preventive measures are the three main elements that characterise ECOWAS' intervention. The first element was manifested in the immediate engagement and in the manner ECOWAS managed to send high-level delegations to engage directly with key stakeholders and conduct fact-finding missions to assess the situation on the ground, gather first-hand information and understand the perspectives of the different actors involved in the crisis. The second element took the form of condemnation and support for the constitutional order, with ECOWAS having issued strong public statements condemning the coup attempt and reaffirming its commitment to ensuring respect for constitutional governance. The third element was a security deployment

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<sup>16</sup> Howe, H. (1996). Lessons of Liberia: Ecomog and regional peacekeeping. *International Security*, 21(3), 145–176.



where, as in previous interventions, a stabilisation force was deployed as a preventive measure against further attempts to disrupt the political order.

The internal political and socio-economic dynamics in Guinea Bissau are challenging for ECOWAS interventions because the political landscape is characterized by factionalism and deep-seated political rivalries as well as some political actors are resisting to ECOWAS mediation and intervention, viewing it as external interference in domestic affairs. Political instability in Guinea-Bissau is somehow a result of underlying socio-economic issues. So, addressing these roots causes a challenge for the direct mandate of ECOWAS but is essential for long-term stabilisation.

### **Conclusion:**

In the book *ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peace building*<sup>17</sup>, the authors provide a positive overview on ECOWAS evolution from an economic cooperation organization to a sub-regional key player in conflicts management and peace-building and highlight ECOWAS' mechanisms for conflicts prevention and conflicts management such as preventive diplomacy, early warning system (ECOWARN), peacekeeping missions and mediation.

ECOWAS contains very developed principles and legal arsenal that may help achieve regional and economic integration but it faces on the ground significant challenges that have prevented its progress toward a real economic integration. The main challenges that face ECOWAS economic integration are manifesting on the impact of colonial legacy and post-colonial influence, external powers influence, lack of stable political environment in most member states, lack of adequate well-developed infrastructure and industrial base, significant economic disparities between ECOWAS countries with huge variation in GDP, and lack of strong supranational bureaucratic institutions.

In order to overcome political crises and achieve economic integration in the region, ECOWAS needs to improve the capacities of its institutions, empower them with more authorities and provide them with more autonomy and with the necessary funding and resources to allow effective implementation and enforcement of policies. Besides enhancing the authority of institutions, ECOWAS needs to promote governance and implement mechanisms to control and evaluate its work. Moreover, ECOWAS should have a common policies framework that can be implemented in all member states. ECOWAS also needs to

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<sup>17</sup>Jaye, T., Garuba, D., & Amadi, S. (2011). *ECOWAS and the dynamics of conflict and peace-building*. Codesria.

invest in Human capital via improving educational system and higher education in order to build a skilled workforce.

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