

The Economic Community of Central African States and

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Introduction

Granting people the freedom to trade as a means of increasing prosperity is one way of promoting the 'human security' that so many Africans seek. Through trade, people form agreements and exchange ideas. Trade is often the impetus for travel, which exposes people to a wider world than their own village or city.

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), also known by its French name, Communauté Économique des États d'Afrique Centrale (CEEAC), was born of the desire to widen the area of trading in Central Africa. Although its efforts have been limited since 1992, a strengthened ECCAS could play a vital part in realizing the concept of increased intra-African contact and trade that is envisaged by the African Renaissance and the African Union.

In December 1981, the Central African Customs and Economic Union (UDEAC) agreed to the principle of a wider economic community of Central African states. ECCAS was established on 18 October 1983 by UDEAC and the Economic Community of the Great Lakes States (CEPGL) – consisting of Burundi, Rwanda and the then Zaire as well as São Tomé and Príncipe. ECCAS began functioning in 1985, but has been inactive since 1992 because of financial difficulties (the non-payment of membership fees) and the current conflict in the Great Lakes area (which has proved divisive for ECCAS members, since Rwanda and Angola back opposing sides).

ECCAS currently consists of eleven states covering a surface area of 6 million km², populated by about 100 million inhabitants. It aims to promote harmonious cooperation and balanced and self-maintained development in all fields of economic and social activity, to reinforce close and peaceful relations between Member States, and to contribute to the progress and development of the African continent.

In this context, the adhesion of ECCAS Member States to the Treaty establishing the African economic community and the African Union's constitutive Act ensures ECCAS's role as one of the builders of the single African market of the future. In 1985, the ECCAS General Secretariat, based in Libreville, Gabon, set out to achieve a wider trade area under rather difficult circumstances. That endeavour lasted until 1992, when the community fell into a state of lethargy because of the socio-political crises that continue to destabilize Central Africa.

Seven states (Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda) of the eleven ECCAS members are still confronted with armed conflicts that destroy human lives and damage the flora and fauna of the region, its economic infrastructure and production. Conflict also causes the movement of citizens within and out of their countries.

The other countries in the region, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe, suffer from the indirect effects of these wars. These aggravate a difficult socio-economic situation characterized by poverty, unemployment, degradation of the environment, endemic diseases, the plague of drugs, the high cost of living, and especially the poor economic performance of several of the ECCAS Member States.

Faced with such problems and in order to take into account the new challenges resulting from globalization, the assembly of ECCAS heads of state and government, gathered at Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in June 1999, defined four priority fields of focus to revitalize the community. These priorities are:

- to develop capacities to maintain peace, security and stability, which are essential prerequisites for economic and social development;
- to develop physical, economic and monetary integration;
- to develop a culture of human integration; and
- to establish an autonomous financing mechanism for ECCAS.

The heads of state and government of ECCAS signed a pact of non-

aggression in 1996. The purpose of the pact is to restore confidence between the various states of the subregion.

In 1998, they established the Central African Council for Peace and Security (COPAX), a forum for political dialogue that meets in the event of serious threat to peace and security in one or several countries in the subregion. The technical organs of the council are:

- The Central African early-warning system (MARAC), which is a mechanism for the early detection and prevention of crises. Its duty is to collect and analyse data.
- The Defence and Security Commission, which is the meeting of chiefs of staff of national armies and commanders-in-chief of police and gendarmerie forces from the different Member States. Its role is to plan, organize and provide advice to the decision-making bodies of the community in order to initiate military operations if needed.
- The Central African multinational force (FOMAC), which is a non-permanent force consisting of military contingents from Member States, whose purpose is to accomplish missions of peace, security and humanitarian relief.

Within the framework of conflict prevention, it is worth mentioning the network of central African parliamentarians and the Human Rights and Democracy Centre. The purpose of the establishment of the network of parliamentarians is to involve MPs in the pursuit of the objectives of ECCAS. The network held its first meeting in Luanda, Angola, in November 2000.

The Human Rights and Democracy Centre aims to promote human rights, democratic practices and good governance, the observance of which may help to prevent conflict. The centre held its first meeting in Libreville, Gabon, at the beginning of September 2001.

Apart from community actions to settle conflicts, there are similar fields of cooperation between Member States, in particular:

- the trilateral agreement on peace and military cooperation between Angola, the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo;
- the bilateral agreement on military cooperation between Cameroon and Chad; and
- border agreements between Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe; Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon; and Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic.

The aim of these agreements is to fix accurately the land and sea

borders between the states concerned, to prevent land or sea claims. In other cases, these agreements provide for the control of common borders and simultaneous military operations, to curb both the phenomenon of armed gangsters who terrorize, kill and plunder peaceful travellers and farmers, and to confiscate the innumerable weapons in the hands of civilians and political and military groups.

Social values

The new orientation given to the regional integration programme in Central Africa stresses the need to restore those African social values that foster peace and tolerance, because it is necessary to put an end to conflict. To foster this, all actors and beneficiaries of regional integration - parliamentarians, economic operators, youth, women, teachers, students, researchers and other members of civil society - should take part in the restoration of the communities torn apart by conflict. This may enable Central African people to know one another better and may thus lead to reconciliation. The aim of this orientation is to make the nationals of every country in the community feel at home in any other part of the subregion.

In this context, political and administrative leaders in the community will have to play a central role by creating a common and dynamic vision of regional integration. Likewise, the private sector will be encouraged to play a major role in the physical and economic integration of Central Africa. At the same time, steps will be taken to promote the free movement of people and goods and services.

Immigration ministers from Member States met in Yaounde in November 2000 to look into the modalities for launching ECCAS passports, which will be issued from 2002. National and regional investments will be protected and financial support will be given to developers in the subregion. A Department for Human Integration, Peace, Security and Stability was introduced into the ECCAS organization in 1998 to oversee the implementation of such a programme. Its management is entrusted to a deputy secretary-general.

Prospects for future funding

ECCAS is aware of the work that needs to be done to fulfil its integration and security objectives. But for the time being it does not have all the facilities needed, especially financial and technical ones,

to attain its goal. That is why the General Secretariat is in touch with a number of international organizations that are ready to help it to carry out programmes on intra-community trade liberalization processes; cooperation in the field of energy; the development of communication and telecommunication facilities; food security; and sustainable management of the environment.

The entry into force of a new method of funding the activities of ECCAS, which is expected in 2003, will strengthen the technical support of partner organizations and improve the implementation of the policies adopted in these sectors.

Non-military initiatives

If Africans are to live in some sort of peace, the prevention, management and resolution of armed conflicts must be buttressed by groups holding power in African societies. Once ECCAS funding has been strengthened, it will continue to support initiatives to promote free trade, regional integration and cooperation. These can be grouped into four broad categories: political, economic, social and institutional initiatives.

Political initiatives

African governments should promote the rule of law, democracy, respect for human rights, transparency in the management of public affairs, social justice and the peaceful, diplomatic resolution of disputes. Political parties as well as regional or ethnic groups will be encouraged to foster and observe these values. African leaders should commit themselves to being honest, competent and law-abiding in order that the continent can develop in peace. African and non-African states should refrain from interfering unnecessarily in the internal affairs of other states, either to destabilize them or to support unpopular regimes.

Economic initiatives

Economic performance has to be improved in Africa by increasing the quantity and quality of production and services. African countries should boost their agriculture industries by building skills, good economic management and competition. Regional economic integration

can be an avenue towards better economic results if it reduces the cost of reaching the market, makes companies more efficient and competitive, and enlarges the pool of skilled business people and administrators. The final goal is unemployment reduction, poverty alleviation and better living conditions.

Social initiatives

Action should be taken at national and regional levels to improve housing facilities, educational infrastructure, food security and health conditions. Accordingly, efforts have to be redoubled in order to achieve these aims, while still protecting the environment.

Institutional initiatives

Existing organizations such as the UN, UNESCO and OAU/African Union have to play a major role in promoting human security in all respects. Regional trade organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society should each make their own contributions to this process. The aim is to build institutions that reach beyond national boundaries and are trusted by the citizens of the region. These institutions can only be assured of the support of the citizenry if they are responsive, open and accountable.

Conclusion

Good regional plans need bold leaders who are willing to look beyond the day-to-day politics of their state. ECCAS is there to support those leaders, citizens and NGOs who want to play a positive regional role. The states of Central Africa have been brought together in terrible conflict. The search for conflict resolution must be the start of a regional togetherness that fosters positive linkages and opens a path toward peace and prosperity.