

Developing a Common Agenda for Subregional Organizations for Peace, Security and Conflict Prevention in Africa: A View

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Introduction

This paper gives details of some of the experiences that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has had in the area of conflict management over the years, and subsequently proposes strategies that might assist in the quest for a commonality of approach in addressing security matters.

ECOWAS as an organization was established by treaty in 1975 in order to promote cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity among its Member States. Its purpose was to raise the living standards of the people of West Africa, fostering closer relations among them and ultimately contributing to the progress and development of the African continent.

Because of distressing events in several of its Member States, ECOWAS soon realized that the cause of economic development and progress can only be pursued in an environment of relative peace and stability. It found that it had to involve itself in conflicts in Member States to ensure that an environment conducive to the implementation of its economic programmes was maintained.

At the time of the outbreak of hostilities in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau from 1989 to 2000, ECOWAS already had certain legal instruments that enjoined Member States to respect each other's territorial integrity, exist alongside each other in peace and harmony, and unite to ward off both any external attack, armed

threat or aggression directed against a Member State and internal armed conflict engineered from outside. These instruments were the Protocol on Non-Aggression of 1978, and the Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defence of 1981.

However, these Protocols lacked in-depth provisions for effective prevention, military intervention and management or resolution strategies that might be employed to end conflict. As a result, ECOWAS had to resort to ad hoc mechanisms such as repeated mediation initiatives by high-powered committees, usually made up of foreign affairs ministers of Member States or their defence chiefs. These committees were expected to create a forum where representatives of Member States could discuss the causes of the conflict and debate ways to resolve the differences between warring factions within the states.

At the height of the hostilities in each of the conflict-torn states, ECOWAS sent a multinational West African military force made up of troops volunteered by West African states with the sole purpose of restoring peace within the given state. This was the beginning of the ECOWAS force, commonly known as ECOMOG (ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group), widely recognized and accepted as the first peace-keeping force of African origin to have successfully discharged its mandate of peace-keeping and peace enforcement. West Africa thus became the only subregion in Africa to have successfully mounted a full peace-keeping operation.

After seven years of ECOMOG operations, successful elections were held in Liberia, bringing a democratically elected government to power.

In Sierra Leone, ECOMOG managed the conflict effectively, leading to the return to power of the civilian head of state in 1998. This peace-keeping force continued to monitor events in Sierra Leone until April 2000, when ECOMOG withdrew as a result of financial constraints (troop-contributing Member States could no longer afford to maintain their forces in Sierra Leone).

Guinea-Bissau, following the outbreak of violence there in 1998, also benefited from the intervention of ECOMOG. The result was the organization and holding of general and presidential elections in Guinea-Bissau and the restoration of peace and stability in that country.

The revised ECOWAS Treaty

The revision of the ECOWAS enabling instrument in 1993 into its present form was an important event in the history of the organization. The revised Treaty not only strengthens the capacity of ECOWAS to forge a strong economic and monetary union to meet the challenges of globalization, but reinforces within its provisions a political union between Member States. This combination allows the organization to deal with issues pertaining to security, in recognition of the link between stability and economic development.

The initial experiences of ECOWAS in peace-keeping and peace enforcement, occasioned by incessant conflict, brought about the realization by heads of state and government of the need to develop an appropriate mechanism for the organization. This would not only formalize and lay out criteria for military intervention by a multinational force but, more importantly, would provide strategies that could be employed to prevent conflict or the outbreak of hostilities in Member States. If potential causes of such conflicts could be detected, it might be possible to start initiatives that could deal with these causes. The general idea was that it would certainly be cheaper in the long run to prevent conflict and resolve disputes than to manage conflicts after they had broken out, bearing in mind the dire consequences of wars and their effect on life and property.

On 10 December 1999, the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security was adopted by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government. This mechanism provides the organization with the capacity to operate effectively in the areas of conflict prevention, conflict management and resolution, peace-keeping, humanitarian support, peace-building and subregional security. It also deals with the very important issue of security in terms of cooperation in the control of all kinds of criminal activity within the Member States and across their borders.

The ECOWAS Mechanism, as it is usually called, establishes several institutions, organs and strategies, all with defined responsibilities and aims that address the peace and security situation in the subregion. These include:

- The Mediation and Security Council, which operates at the level of heads of state and government, ministers and ambassadors, taking decisions that impact on peace and security, including deployment of military missions.
- The Defence and Security Commission, which is made up of defence chiefs and security technocrats who work out the technicalities of a

military intervention.

- ECOMOG, which is now formally established as a multi-purpose standby force ready for immediate deployment. ECOMOG is described as multi-purpose in the sense that it can assume one of several functions of observation, monitoring and peace-keeping. It can be deployed for humanitarian intervention or the enforcement of sanctions. It can also undertake policing activities in order to control fraud and organized crime.
- An early-warning system, in the form of a regional observation network, has also been created. Established within the Executive Secretariat and also in specific areas within the community are observation centres or bureaux, where data on states ranging across the economic, political, security and social sectors are collected and analysed in order to detect warning signals that may signify potential conflict. This is considered an important tool in the early detection of conflict that should then inform conflict-prevention strategies.
- A Council of Elders is proposed in accordance with African traditional practice to assume the roles of mediation, conciliation and negotiation in a situation where there are indicators of potential conflict. ECOWAS has a Council of Elders made up of thirty-two eminent persons drawn from within and outside the subregion. Its mandate is essentially that of preventive diplomacy. The Council of Elders will be constituted annually by the Executive Secretary from an approved list stored in a data bank in the Secretariat.

The Executive Secretariat also has a central role to play in the implementation of the mechanism, including the power to initiate actions for conflict prevention and management, which may include fact-finding missions, mediation, facilitation, negotiation and reconciliation of parties in conflict. The Executive Secretary also has the responsibility of deploying the Council of Elders, depending on his or her assessment of a given situation. Within the Secretariat is a newly established Department of Political Affairs, Defence and Security, headed by a Deputy Executive Secretary. In addition to having the responsibility for policy formulation and implementation in all military peace-keeping and humanitarian operations, the department controls the observation and monitoring centre in the secretariat and its counterpart centres in the four designated zones within the subregion, where the collation and analysis of day-to-day

data gathered from Member States are carried out.

The ECOWAS Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security goes beyond prescriptions for preventing and managing conflicts as a means of achieving security. It approaches the issue of subregional security in a more holistic manner, making strong recommendations for promoting human security in such areas as the control of trans-border crime. It gives ECOWAS the task of promoting closer cooperation among the security services of Member States. It also advocates the establishment of specialized departments within the justice, defence and security ministries of Member States for coordination and centralization of cooperation in criminal matters and in extradition requests. The Protocol also enjoins Member States to harmonize their domestic laws in this area and to adopt a common convention regarding standardized punishment for the most commonly committed crimes within the subregion. It advocates joint measures for combating trans-border crimes such as money-laundering, corruption and arms trafficking.

The Protocol covers institutional capacity-building in the community in order to provide humanitarian assistance in conflict or disaster areas. More importantly, it also provides a framework for action by the community in the area of peace-building.

The provisions of the ECOWAS Mechanism recommend the adoption of a graduated strategy, which must be implemented as a continuum, before, during and after conflicts. These measures include:

- involvement in the preparation, organization and supervision of elections in Member States as a means of monitoring and actively supporting the development of democratic institutions as the basis of good governance;
- assistance to Member States emerging from conflict, to help to increase their capacity for national, social, economic and cultural reconstruction (in particular the role of ECOWAS financial institutions which have the responsibility for developing policies to facilitate funding for reintegration and reconstruction programmes); and
- support for all other processes that will assist the restoration of political authority, the rule of law and the judiciary, and help to develop respect for human rights.

Some of the provisions of the ECOWAS mechanism may provide the necessary framework in the task of developing a common agenda for

subregional organizations in the area of peace, security and conflict prevention.

Recommendations for achieving a common agenda

Logically, the common agenda for peace and security in subregional organizations on our continent should be centred on the attainment of a harmonious, safe and stable environment to make possible the evolution and implementation of development programmes that will provide economic prosperity for our peoples. Open debate on achieving these aims is truly indispensable, as it provides members of different subregional groups with the opportunity of exchanging ideas on how to achieve a common agenda and crystallize their vision of a prosperous Africa. To this end, all subregional organizations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), should aim to achieve a unified concept of human security. This would expedite agreement on the following issues:

- Governance: Having determined that problems of governance are a major cause of conflict in Africa, delegates must be able to work out and agree on fundamental principles that should govern intra-state and inter-state relations. For example, certain standards of behaviour and principles should be recognized and held sacred, like those governing devolution of powers or power-sharing; the status of the opposition in any government; the issue of what constitutes good governance; the role of the military in governance; civil/military relations; the need for effective separation of powers between the three arms of government; the need to have an independent judiciary for the impartial dispensation of justice; a de-emphasis on ethnic and tribal differences, and the equitable sharing of national resources.
- The Protocol cooperation with regional and continental organizations: The ECOWAS Mechanism makes specific provisions on the need for ECOWAS cooperation with the United Nations (UN), the OAU, and all other international, national, regional and non-governmental organizations and religious groups. The OAU or the UN may also request assistance on security issues from ECOWAS for national, regional and international agencies. This relationship should be maintained with all those addressing peace and security in Africa.
- Collaboration in conflict prevention: In searching for a

commonality of approach, African subregional organizations may consider collaboration on particular conflict-prevention strategies such as an early-warning system. Linkages could be established for the exchange of information, while fact-finding and mediation missions such as the ECOWAS Council of Elders need not restrict their work within a particular region, but may carry out their functions on behalf of other organizations.

- Creation of a joint inter-African Criminal Intelligence Bureau: This would make for more effective coordination of criminal investigations, with the aim of improving human security and controlling cross-border crimes.
- Formulation of treaties regarding mutual assistance: Such agreements, on civil, criminal and extradition matters, would improve due process on a regional basis and thus enhance security.
- Creation of a network of non-governmental organizations: The establishment of a network of African NGOs in the area of peace and security could ensure both global participation and the involvement of civil society. It could also help to develop a relationship between the efforts of NGOs and those of governments.
- Development of an integrated approach to peace-building: This would involve joint efforts, particularly in the service of humanitarian interests, at all stages of a conflict. It would also provide support for development programmes for reconstruction and rehabilitation purposes. This might be assisted by organizations such as the African Red Cross. A United Nations Concept Paper, developed for consideration at the 4th United Nations Regional Organization High-Level Meeting, lists other possible areas of cooperation. These include security stabilization; restoring law and order; helping to re-equip and restructure the local security forces; implementing successively the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes; restoring political order, good governance and democratization; promoting human rights requirements; providing humanitarian relief; and emphasizing sustainable development. These are all post-conflict peace-building strategies.
- Creation of an international financial recovery facility or standing trust fund for peace-building: This is a useful mechanism and one to which all organizations can contribute or even solicit contributions for. ECOWAS has found it necessary to establish trust funds, particularly in the case of Liberia, to cope with financial demands such as the elections in Liberia. The modus operandi for