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The Role of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Strengthening Regional Security and Diplomatic Ties Among West African States

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Economic Community of West African States known as ECOWAS, in building regional security and diplomatic relations among its member states. The Economic Community of West African States has played a significant role in strengthening regional security and diplomatic ties among its members in many ways. This has been achieved through a number of initiatives, including the establishment of a number of institutions and mechanisms to facilitate cooperation and dialogue amongst member states including the ECOWAS Court of Justice, the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council, the ECOWAS Commission, the ECOWAS Parliament, and the ECOWAS Gender and Development Center and common market. These institutions have helped to build trust and understanding among member states, and they have also contributed to the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region. It has also been successful in promoting regional cooperation and integration, and this has had a positive impact on diplomatic relations in West Africa. The paper adopted historical approach of data analysis. Despite numerous failures and challenges of the organization, the paper argues that it has contributed tremendously towards enhancing regional security and diplomatic relations within the West Africa sub-region.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Regional, Security, Diplomatic, West Africa, Institutions, Cooperation.

Introduction

The ECOWAS which stands as an acronym of the Economic Community of West African States is a regional political and economic organization of fifteen African countries that was established in 1975 with the aim of promoting economic cooperation and integration among its member states. The headquarters of ECOWAS is located at Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. The fifteen member countries of the organization included; Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote D'voire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea- Bissau, Liberia, Mali Niger. Others are Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Over the years, the organization has played a vital role in promoting peace and stability in the region, and it has also contributed to the development of diplomatic relations among African states. In order for the organization to achieve its giant objectives, various institutions were established to serve the purpose. These were; the creation of regional security force, the facilitation of peace talks, peacekeeping operations and the promotion regional trade and development policies (Aning, 2006). The organization has also worked to address the challenges of poverty, inequality and poor infrastructure which are in so many instances, agents of insecurity and instability in many parts of Africa. These gigantic efforts have helped to strengthen peace and diplomatic relations among African states by creating economic opportunities and improving the living conditions for citizens.

However, the Economic Community of West African States has faced a number of challenges since its establishment. Some of its biggest challenges were; lack of economic integration, limited trade and investment among member states and lack of cooperation on security issues, as evidenced by the ongoing conflicts in the region. There is also the challenge of migration both within and outside and the financial constraints, making it difficult to implement some of its programs and policies (Bassole, 2011). These paper attempts to look into the role of Economic Community of West African States towards strengthening regional security and diplomatic ties among its member states. The paper adopts historical research technique of analysis. The finding of the paper sheds more lights on how the organization contribute significantly to the development of regional security in many West African states, despite many challenges bedeviling the organization.

Historical Background of the Organization

The birth of ECOWAS was a collaborative effort of two African nations, Nigeria and Togo. As mentioned in the introductory segment, it emerged as a regional organization in 1975 (Ademola, 2020). However, the origin of the organization can be traced back

to the early 1960s, when a number of West African gained independence from their colonial powers. At that time, many of these countries were facing economic and political instability, and there was a desire to find ways to promote regional cooperation and integration. In the early 1960s the Economic Commission for Africa had attempted to establish a similar organization but failed. (Ademola, 2020) In 1965, a group of West African countries signed the Treaty of Lagos, which established the ECOWAS Commission. However, the organization did not officially come into existence until 1975, when the first summit of heads of states was held in Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria then. In April 1972, Nigeria and Togo decided to bring into live the idea of a regional economic community, which will cut across linguistic and cultural barriers (Ademola, 2020).

Between July and August 1973, a delegation drawn from the two nations visited fourteen states in the sub-region to secure their support towards the establishment of the organization. To further strengthen their motive, on 14th December 1973, a ministerial meeting was summoned in Lome, Togo which was attended by fifteen West Africa countries and all agreed to the principle of establishing Economic Community of West Africa States. During the meeting, Nigeria and Togo were also mandated to come up with a detailed proposal for the development of the region, which were later considered at the conference of experts in Ghana and further by the ministerial meeting in Niger (Ademola, 2020). In a nut shell, one can argue that it was as a result of these arrays of diplomatic ties that culminated to the germination of ECOWAS in May, 1975.

Objectives of the Organization

The idea of establishing a regional organization like ECOWAS was impregnated by the goal of promoting economic development and cooperation in the region. Since its inception therefore, the ECOWAS has grown to include fifteen member states and has evolved into a key regional organization, whose leaders are critically committed to ensuring regional political and economic security. This conception of the idea of a strong regional political and economic growth, was born out of necessity considering the dominant feature of western capitalists system which was characterized by overdependence and huge economic exploitation (Wilmot,1980).

The founding members of ECOWAS identified the objectives of the organization in Article 2 of the Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States as follows:

- To promote cooperation and integration in all fields of economic activity, with a view to raising the standard of living in the region
- To maintain and enhance peace, security and stability in the region

- To establish a common market, with free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor
- To promote development of agriculture and industry in the region
- To establish close collaboration in social and cultural matters
- To promote the establishment of an effective transport and communication network in the region
- To promote cooperation in the fields of education, science and technology, as well as in health and sanitation, in order to contribute to the overall development of the region (Ademola, 2020).

Judging from the above, one could say that the main thrust of ECOWAS objectives is to promote economic development cooperation, both within the region and with the rest of the world.

ECOWAS on Regional Security and Diplomatic Ties among Member States

The Economic Community of West African States plays an important role in strengthening regional security and diplomatic relations among Wet African countries. Considering the major goal of establishing the organization, ECOWAS was established to promote economic and political cooperation, and it has evolved to become a major player in regional security and peace keeping. One of its most notable achievements has been the promotion of dialogue and cooperation between countries that have experienced conflict, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote D'voire among others.

For a successful peace and conflict resolution among its member states, ECOWAS has established number mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, ECOWAS Early Warning System and ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council. The ECOWAS Warning System(EWS), was a combination of political, economic and social indicators to predict and prevent conflicts in the region. The mechanism was established in 2001 to detect, analyze and respond to potential crises in the region. It is an innovative approach to conflict prevention that relies on decentralized network of early warning units and a central coordinating body (Melan, 2006). The EWS consists of a network of early warning units (EWUS) in which each member states, will collect and analyze information on potential threats to peace and stability. This information is then passed on to the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Center (ECOWARN), which is based in Abuja, Nigeria. The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Center then collates and evaluates the information and makes recommendations to the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council. One of the most notable examples of the ECOWAS Early Warning System (EWS) role in preventing a potential conflict in the Guinean-Liberian border region in the early

2000s. In 2002, the EWS detected growing tensions in the region, due to ethnic and political divisions. The EWS alerted ECOWAS and other regional organizations, who responded by deploying a fact-finding mission to the area. The mission was able to help defuse the tensions and prevent the situation from escalating into full-blown conflict (Melan, 2006). Despite some of the challenges by the system, it has been recognized as a successful model by the United Nations and other international organizations. In fact, the African Union has adopted a similar system based on the ECOWAS model. It is called the 'African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and it is designed to prevent, manage, and resolves conflicts in Africa. The APSA also has a focus on early warning and rapid response, and it has been credited with reducing the number of conflicts in Africa in recent years.

Similarly, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (CPF), which serves as mother to ECOWAS Early Warning System, was designed to prevent, manage, and resolve conflict in the region. The CPF has four main functions;

- Early warning and response. The CPF uses a range of tools and mechanisms to detect potential conflicts early on and respond to them effectively
- Peacekeeping and peace building. The CPF helps to maintain peace and stability in the region through peacekeeping missions and other initiatives
- Conflict resolution and management. The CPF helps to resolve conflict through mediation, negotiation, and other forms of conflict resolution

The ECOWAS CPF has achieved some notable successes, for example, the CPF was instrumental in bringing an end to the second Liberian Civil war in 2003. The CPF also helped to prevent a potential conflict in Guinea-Bissau in 2009. And it has played a role in promoting peace and stability in Mali, Niger, and Cote d'ivoire (Mezran, 2008).

The ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council (MDSC) have been successful in helping to prevent and resolves conflicts in the region. One of its most notable achievements was its role in bringing an end to the First Ivorian Civil War in 2011. The MDSC also played a role in negotiating a peace agreement between the government of Mali and rebel groups in 2015, and it has helped to promote stability in Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau (Reno, 1996). In addition, the MDSC has been involved in various peacekeeping initiatives, including supporting the disarmament and reintegration of former combatants, and promoting reconciliation and dialogue.

There are other several mechanisms adopted by Economic Community of West African states which aimed at strengthening security architecture and diplomatic ties in the region. One such tool is the ECOWAS Early Response Mechanism (ERM), which was established in 2015. The ERM is designed to provide rapid assistance in the event of crisis or emergency, including the provision of humanitarian aid and

support for peace building efforts. There are also the establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), in 2007. The ESF is a regional military force that can be deployed to address conflicts or security threats among member states (Reno, 1996).

The Challenges and Failures

As a regional body established to execute certain functions especially on matters relating to economy and regional cooperation, the ECOWAS certainly achieved a lot as earlier examined, but notwithstanding it was bedeviled by so many challenges which consequently resulted to an array of failures. Although, the challenges were not any way out of expectation taking into cognizance that the organization cut across different geographical entities, tribal groups, religion and cultural barriers. More importantly, going by their colonial experience, the organization is a conglomeration of countries being colonized by different colonial masters. Therefore, an organization with this nature, is expected to face numerous challenges in running its affairs.

There are number of challenges that ECOWAS faces in strengthening regional security and diplomatic ties among its member states. One of the main challenges is the lack of political will among member states to work together. Many of the member states have different priorities and interests, and they often do not see eye to eye on how to deal with regional issues. A prime example is the establishment of Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), Which was created in 1990 to intervene in the Liberian Civil War (Mezran, 2008). While ECOWAS member states initially agreed to the creation of ECOMOG and pledged their support, in practice many of them did not provide the resources and political will necessary for ECOMOG to be effective. The intervention was undermined by a lack of commitment from member states and a lack of coordination between them. This ultimately led to the failure of ECOMOG and the continuation of the conflict in Liberia.

Another great challenge facing the organization is lack of adequate resources, both financial and human, to carry out ECOWAS mandate. The organization has struggled with a lack of financial and human resources. It has a limited funding, and it often has to rely on outside donors to support its activities. This can make it difficult to implement its programs and policies effectively. In terms of human resources, ECOWAS faces a lack of qualified personnel, both at the headquarters level and in the member states. This has made it difficult to effectively manage and coordinate its activities. In addition many member states lack the capacity to implement ECOWAS policies and programs, further hampering the organization's effectiveness (Aning, 2004).

The organization is also battling with the challenge of non- state actors, such as rebel groups and terrorist organizations, which have destabilized the region. Non-state actors have posed a significant challenge to ECOWAS' efforts to promote peace and security in the region. Rebel groups, militias, and terrorist organizations such as the ISWAP, Boko Haram Islamic Group among other groups have been active in many of the member states, causing instability and insecurity. Example of countries within the region that experiencing this chain chaos are; Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. For over a decade, Boko Haram terrorist group have been operating in the North-Easter part of Nigeria, part of Cameroon, Chad and Niger (Falola, 2000). There is also in the recent times, massive influx of foreign militia such as the *Lakurawa* in northern part of Nigeria engaging into banditry and kidnapping. The activities of these militias did not only destroy the economy of the area, but the entire security architecture of the region. These groups often operate across borders, making it difficult for ECOWAS to address them (Nshimbi, 2009). They also tend to have access to weapons and funding that make them a formidable threat. In addition, the presence of non-state actors has contributed to a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the region, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. This has stretched ECOWA resources and made it even more shrink.

The leadership of ECOWAS has also been a source of challenges for the organization. The heads of state of the member states, who make up the Authority of Heads of States and Government, often have competing interests. This makes it difficult to reach consensus on issues and to take decisive action. In addition, there have been concerns about the personal interests of some of the heads of state, which have sometimes been prioritized over the interests of the organization as a whole. Furthermore, the Authority has at times been criticized for a lack o transparency and accountability, which has undermined its credibility and effectiveness.

Border issues have been a persistent challenge for ECOWAS, as many of its member states share long and porous borders. This has made it extremely difficult to control the movement of people, goods, and weapons across borders, and has created opportunities for criminal activity and terrorism. It has also led to disputes over the ownership of resources, such as water and land, and has exacerbated tensions between neighboring countries. More so, the presence of refugees and internally displaced persons has put additional pressure on border regions, further complicating the issue. ECOWAS has made efforts to address border issues, but it has been a difficult and ongoing challenge. The Bakassi Peninsula is a good example of the challenges of border issues in the ECOWAS region. Bakassi is a disputed territory that lies between Cameroon and Nigeria. The dispute dates back to the colonial era, and it has been a source of tension between the member countries. In 2002, the International Court of

Justice ruled that the peninsula belongs to Cameroon. However, many people living in Bakassi continue to identify as Nigerian, and there has been ongoing unrest in the region. The situation highlights the complexity of border issues in the ECOWAS region (Arhim, 2005), and the challenge of implementing international rulings.

Religious and tribal differences have also been a source of tension and conflict among ECOWAS member states. Nigeria for example, has seen violence between the largely Muslim north and the largely Christian south. In neighboring Cameroon, there have been clashes between the Anglophone minority in the south-west and the Francophone majority. In addition, countries like Senegal and Mali have experienced tension between the Muslim and the Christian majorities and animist minorities. These divisions have been exploited by politicians and have led to violence and instability. In some cases, they have even led to armed conflict, such as in the Central African Republic.

The problem of frequent military coups has been another persistent challenge for ECOWAS. Since its founding, there have been a number of military coups in member states, including Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau among others. These coups have disrupted democratic processes and have often been followed by civil wars or other forms of violence. In other words, they have led to economic instability and a lack of trust in government institutions. Economic Community of West African States has sought to address the problem of successive military coups through its protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which prohibits military takeovers in the region (Falola, 2000). However, enforcement of this protocol into practice has remained to be a difficult task. In many cases, ECOWAS member states have not complied with its provisions, and there have been few consequences for non-compliance. For example, despite the protocols ban on military coups in member states in recent years, such as Niger. This lack of enforcement has weakened the credibility of the protocol and of ECOWAS as a whole.

The recent military coup in Niger has once again highlighted the challenges of instability and lack of respect for democracy in the ECOWAS region. The coup, which ousted the democratically elected president, has been condemned in totality by both ECOWAS and the African Union. These are fears that the coup could lead to further instability in the region, as well as a potential surge in jihadists' violence (Adebajo, 2005). The coup also highlights the need for greater regional efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law. ECOWAS has currently sanctioned Niger, but it remains to be seen how this effective these sanctions will be. Although, there are still efforts on the issue, but the military leaders in Niger remained adamant. Despite several agitations against the detention of the ousted president, Muhammad Bazou, he is still under their custody.

The withdrawal of countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS is indeed a cause for concern. These countries have been key members of the organization, and their withdrawal will impact ECOWAS ability to carry out programs and initiatives. For example, ECOWAS efforts to fight jihadist violence in the Sahel region will be weakened without the participation of these countries. In addition, the loss of these member states will reduce the organization's economic strength and political influence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has made significant progress and achievements in strengthening regional security and diplomatic ties as examined by the paper, there are still an array of challenges. These challenges are; lack of political will, lack of adequate resources, leadership tussle, and border issues. Others are religious and tribal tensions, successive military takeovers, and lack of trust among some member states and recent withdrawal of some member states. The organization has equally been hampered by a lack of enforcement of its protocols, and the ongoing conflicts and crisis in the region. However, the ECOWAS has the potential to be a powerful force for goo in West Africa and it continues to work towards its goals of peace building and economic development in the region. The organization's success will ultimately depend on the commitment and cooperation of its members.

Recommendations

Considering the huge successes achieved by ECOWAS and at the same time its major challenges, the paper provides the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the enforcement of the protocol of Democracy and Good Governance, including sanctions for non-compliance
- Promote inter-state cooperation and dialogue to resolve conflicts peacefully
- Enhance cooperation with regional and international partners, such as the African Union and the United Nations
- Improve the capacity of member states to address security challenges through capacity-building programs
- Improve regional economic integration, including through the creation of a single currency
- Promote human rights, good governance and the rule of law

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