

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA

THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS)

Jean Bossuyt



**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

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Executive Summary

This study presents a political economy analysis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), focusing in particular on what drives and hampers this regional organisation in preventing and resolving conflicts in West Africa, and in promoting a regional approach to agriculture and food security. The report is part of a broader study that includes the African Union and four other Regional Economic Communities in Africa.

Why a political economy study of ECOWAS?

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the formal aim of promoting economic co-operation between 15 countries with different historic trajectories (colonisation, language, and administrative cultures) yet sharing similar socio-economic conditions. During the 1980s the regional body was confronted with a large number of political crises, ranging from civil war to various military or constitutional *coups d'état*. This forced ECOWAS to fully embrace the security agenda as a 'core business'.

The region is widely recognised as a trailblazer, including for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Several crises have been effectively addressed through regional diplomacy and military intervention. Over the years, ECOWAS has sought to promote an ever-widening regional integration agenda through a wide variety of strategies, action plans and programmes. Initially the regional body functioned through a state-centric, top-down approach to promoting regional integration. From the 1990s onwards, there were deliberate attempts by ECOWAS to also spur regional dynamics 'from below' through close collaboration between institutional actors, civil society and business organisations.

ECOWAS recently celebrated its 40th Anniversary. In reviewing the track record of the organisation, most analyses concur that important achievements were obtained in different domains, including restoring peace, containing conflicts, dealing with rigged elections, facilitating the free movement of people or supporting infrastructure development (trans-coastal and trans-Sahelian roads).

Yet there is also a broad recognition that the initial aspirations have not been met. Overall progress in the actual implementation of ECOWAS policies in core areas such as trade, economic and monetary cooperation, energy and social development has been limited. There are still many obstacles to the free circulation of people (such as the existence of numerous check points, arbitrary and discriminatory treatment of citizens of other countries, migration laws) and goods (including the non-application of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, illegal tariff barriers, and non-tariff barriers). Other urgent crises remain unaddressed. The Sahel is being increasingly destabilised by cross-border crime, drug trafficking, the Tuareg conflict, terrorism and the spread of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The envisaged transition in the Vision 2020 from an '*ECOWAS of States*' to an '*ECOWAS of People*' has still a long way to go, particularly in terms of delivering tangible outcomes for citizens.

However, in assessing the performance of ECOWAS one cannot ignore the particularly harsh political, institutional and socio-economic conditions in which the integration project had to be pursued. The region ranks particularly low regarding all human development indicators. Thirteen ECOWAS countries are classified in the low Human Development category and 60

per cent of the population is estimated to live on less than one dollar a day. This brings along major shortcomings in policy and institutional capacity across the board.

This study of ECOWAS tries to provide insights that explain the implementation gap, as these may help inform, calibrate and target reforms as well as support efforts that are technically desirable and politically feasible. To do so, the study focuses on the key drivers and constraints that shape the ECOWAS agenda and influence implementation by analysing two policy areas: peace and security and food security (focusing on the agricultural sector and agro-food industries and trade). The study uses a political economy framework to answer two core questions: how do key actors and factors affect and shape the agenda setting of ECOWAS? And how do these different actors and factors influence what gets implemented and why?

Key findings of the ECOWAS study

ECOWAS was primarily created to promote economic cooperation within the region. To pursue this aim, it adopted at its inception an intergovernmental approach to governance, based on national sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of its member states. The regional commitment at that time was essentially that member states would integrate the lofty ambitions of ECOWAS in planning and directing their national (economic) policies. It resulted in a system whereby decision-making power lies exclusively with the Authority of Heads of State and Government and the ECOWAS Secretariat is merely charged with the task of executing the decisions taken by it.

Already in the early 1990s a *'Committee of Eminent Persons'* concluded that effective integration could not be stimulated under these conditions and pleaded for the adoption of a supra-national approach to governance in order to speed up decision-making and enforce compliance. In 2006 the ECOWAS Summit formally decided to carry out institutional reforms to give more teeth to the regional body, including turning the Executive Secretariat into a 'Commission' and further developing formal structures and institutional arrangements (such as the ECOWAS Parliament, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice and a host of dialogue mechanisms with private sector and civil society organisations in various areas). ECOWAS is the only REC that was able to formally establish a Community levy, which helps to increase its legitimacy and scope for autonomous action (though member states do not always live up to their commitments and donor dependency for programmes remains high).

However, the effective and coherent use of this formal architecture has proven to be quite challenging. Decision-making power remains firmly anchored in the Authority and Council. The Commission can propose initiatives and actions plans, yet there is no shortage of examples where policy developments have been postponed despite their apparent urgency from a regional perspective; where the ratification by member states of protocols and acts incurs major delays; where agreed policies are not translated at national level or implemented in a consistent way at regional level; where decisions of the Court are neglected by member states, and so on. This suggests the ECOWAS Commission has only limited space and power to effectively contribute to the production of regional public goods.

This limited track record in implementing regional decisions, in turn, shows that ownership levels of the whole regional construct are low across the board. This is linked to the pervasive development challenges faced at national level, the limited institutional capacities, the lack of

trust among member states and above all to the interests driving elite behaviour. Most of the incentives faced by national politicians are not related to regional integration. They are focused on satisfying short-term clientelist demands at national and sub-national level. The problem is compounded by the still prevailing culture of top-down decision-making – despite the existence of formal mechanisms to involve relevant stakeholders. As a result, it has proven difficult to create sufficient political support for the integration process among domestic constituencies.

This overall political economy reality can be illustrated by the role of ECOWAS in core policy processes such as peace and security or food security. Though primarily a regional body focusing on economic integration, ECOWAS was forced to step into the peace and security realm in order to address wars and conflicts. The proliferation of conflicts in the region is linked to foundational factors such as historical trajectories, colonisation by different European powers, geography and natural endowments or demography. As a result, most countries in the region remain fragile states with limited social cohesion, common sense of identity or shared development vision. Inequalities are growing, increasing the chance of conflicts around access to resources and land. These material conditions explain to a large extent the chronic instability of the region as well as the generally poor levels of governance across the region.

These conditions also help to understand why powerful member states (particularly regional hegemon Nigeria) had a strong incentive to use ECOWAS to prevent the regionalisation of wars and conflicts and related collateral damage (though its leadership has recently been weakened as a consequence of domestic turmoil). It allowed ECOWAS to display a selective ability for collective action to address political crises in member states (i.e. Ivory Coast, 2010-2011). In other cases the incentives were not present to generate a timely and relevant political response (i.e. Burkina Faso, 2014) with the resulting loss of credibility in the eyes of citizens. Other case material suggests that pervasive internal governance and managerial and leadership deficiencies all along the decision-making chain hamper the delivery of concrete results (as shown in the peacekeeping operation planned for Mali which could not be effected). The proliferation of actors with their own specific interests and overlapping mandates can make the task of defining coherent regional responses daunting. The difficult relation between ECOWAS and the AU is a case in point, yet similar complications arise from the many external interventions.

The implementation gap is also visible in the area of agricultural development and food security. From 2000 onwards, ECOWAS increased its profile in promoting a regional approach to agriculture and food security, supported at the continental level by the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). The 2008 food crisis provided additional momentum and incentives for accelerating reforms in the region. The ECOWAS Commission has acted as convenor of multi-actor dialogue processes, developed a wide range of policy initiatives and committed significant resources to support the effective domestication of continental and regional agricultural and food security agendas. Yet the ECOWAS Commission has little power and a limited set of incentives to offer for accelerating implementation (for instance, with regard to the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme, ETLS). This is linked to various factors such as (i) the primacy of national policy interests and considerations (e.g. for national food sovereignty); (ii) the hugely diverging interests among member states (e.g. Nigeria versus francophone/WAEMU states in the rice sector; and Sahel countries versus coastal countries in the livestock sector); (iii) the deep-rooted regionalisation

dynamics pushed forward by state and non-state actors (operating through informal channels and networks) that challenge state territorial control and regional policies alike.

Despite strengthening private sector and civil society organisations at regional level, their bargaining power and capacity to act and influence core regional policies in a coherent and effective manner remain limited. This is closely linked to diverging interests between actors artificially classified together as ‘the regional private sector’. Reference can be made to the diverging interests between importers of staple food commodities (notably rice), who constitute powerful oligopolies, have a strong influence on the political elite and extract rents from constrained local production capacities and segmented regional markets; and local producers (farmers and other operators), who are more atomised, further undermining regional-level action to support local and regional agro-food value chain development.

All this is not to say that collective action is not taking place. Yet when it occurs it does not tend to follow formalised rules and procedures. ECOWAS rather seeks to foster compliance in an indirect manner, through soft mechanisms of dialogue and persuasion. The co-existence of ECOWAS with WAEMU is a clear sign that a ‘single’ regional body may not be the appropriate way forward for West Africa. A multi-layered pattern of regional frameworks allows for more coherent forms of interest articulation (as reflected in the monetary union around the CFA in the francophone member states or the complementary roles played by ECOWAS and WAEMU in agriculture and food security).

Implications

These findings carry important implications for stakeholders interested in closing the implementation gap and building more effective forms of regional cooperation through ECOWAS. Key aspects for consideration relate to the level of ambition of future policies, appropriate sectors or policy areas for action, and selection of partners and stakeholders in programme design and implementation:

- Several structural factors continue to have a major influence on current dynamics and institutions. These need to be properly recognised and incorporated in the design of realistic support strategies. For instance, the co-existence of ECOWAS and West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) is an illustration of the various historical trajectories of the countries. Grand schemes aimed at merging the two bodies or working out a rational division of labour are likely to encounter major difficulties. The evolution and relevance of both structures will depend on the policy issue at stake and related capacity of the regional bodies involved to generate collective action.
- The cases addressed in this study indicate that the set of incentives and capacity for meaningful regional action tend to vary greatly according to sectors and even sub-sectors of intervention. In peace and security, coalitions were possible between ‘willing’ member states (generally individual Heads of State) and the Commission. This facilitated application of the existing regional arsenal of norms and tools. In the agricultural domain, the regional trigger proved less powerful to defining a shared vision, providing powerful incentives to member states to implement CAADP/ECOWAS plans or challenging the predominantly national focus on policy-makers. This huge diversity of political economy contexts calls for a much more down-to-earth and tailored approach to promoting regional integration dynamics. It also implies making use of critical junctures while diversifying the

possible 'entry points' for regional action (sometimes smaller informal alliances of member states or specialised regional structures are better conducts to get political traction and action).

- While there is space for multi-actor approaches to regional policy formulation and implementation, there are also constraints hampering the ability of non-state actors to play a positive role as 'norm entrepreneurs' or 'drivers' of regional integration agendas. Beyond major challenges of capacity, organisation and funding, regional networks may end up being 'too close for comfort' (this danger of co-optation stems from the deeper nature of state-society relations in the region, often characterised by dependency and clientelist relationships). Yet one should avoid over-simplifications. 'Regional' actors can be identified in different policy domains that are acting on principles and beliefs about regional identity. With targeted institutional support they could be further enabled to demand specific regional reforms 'from below' through coalitions sharing similar interests.
- The study shows how ECOWAS is often not performing its role according to a clear set of formal, transparent and institutionalised rules respected by all. The Commission rather follows an *ad hoc* path, looking for windows of opportunities to play the role of an informal broker or foster compliance, in close alliance with 'willing' or 'reformist' states and through '*soft mechanisms*' of dialogue and persuasion. Future institutional support programmes could try to strengthen formal and informal interfaces, dialogue mechanisms and coordination structures with member states as well as with the AU at different levels (as a key condition for more effective collective action). They could also seek to further enable ECOWAS in its role as a credible and accountable broker—equipped with the necessary political intelligence to know when and how it can usefully intervene.
- The external influence on the regional integration process is huge, firmly engrained in history and reflected in a proliferation of external actors often intervening at cross-purposes. In such a crowded arena, it is not easy for ECOWAS to carve out its own space and deliver added value (including towards the AU). Despite the existence of own resources, levels of aid dependency are high, particularly for regional programmes. The main challenge for donors is to align much closer to the real political economy dynamics prevailing in a given sector or policy area (linked to power relations, incentives and interests) rather than towards formal players and processes.

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