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The ECOWAS democracy agenda: Channels, lessons and digital technologies for civil society engagement

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Of Africa's eight regional economic communities, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is the most active on governance. The main reason is that democracy in the region is not only vibrant but also seriously challenged: dynamic social movements alternate with military coups, contested third terms and pressures on civic space. ECOWAS plays a role by setting, promoting and sometimes enforcing democratic norms in the region. The community also tries to be inclusive by inviting civil society to take part in its processes. Several such partnerships have been sustained over time, most notably on early warning.

This paper examines the role ECOWAS plays in democratic governance and discusses the frameworks and practices of civil society engagement with the community. It maps the fast-evolving landscape of initiatives and umbrella networks civil society uses to engage the community. ECOWAS welcomes contributions from organisations that help it deliver its agenda, starting with technical support. It is less inclined to engage with organisations focused on civic rights and political accountability, and to let civil society shape its strategic orientations.

Digital technologies help civic initiatives in West Africa to mobilise constituencies and leverage knowledge to foster accountability. Technologies also allow civil society to resist and sometimes counter the pressures on civic spaces. Therefore, a partnership on digital technologies and governance between ECOWAS and civil society would be useful, as the community is well-placed to guide its members on how to regulate technologies in ways that work for – not against – inclusive governance.

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Acronyms

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
AU	African Union
CDD	Centre for Democracy and Development
CFA	Central African Franc
CFM	Climate Fund Managers
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EAC	East African Community
ECCJ	European Coalition for Corporate Justice
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECONEC	ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissioners
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ECOWARN	ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECOWAS-CSO	Economic Community of West African States-Civil Society Organisation
ECPF	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
FARE	Forum of Associations Recognised by ECOWAS
FOSDA	Foundation for Security and Development in Africa
GPPAC	Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
OSF	Open Society Foundation
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative for West Africa
PSC	Political and Security Committee
REC	Regional Economic Community
REPSFECO	Peace and Security Network for Women in the ECOWAS Region

SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
UCG	Unconstitutional Changes of Government
UEMOA	Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine
USD	United States Dollar
WAANSA	West African Action Network on Small Arms
WACSI	West Africa Civil Society Institute
WACSOF	West Africa Civil Society Forum
WADEMOS	West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network
WAEMU	West African Economic and Monetary Union
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
WAWA	West African Women's Association

Introduction

The **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** is a regional economic community and political union of fifteen member states¹ located in West Africa. Its headquarters are in Abuja, Nigeria.

As its name reveals, at its onset in 1975, ECOWAS was first envisioned as an economic integration project (with some social and cultural impact) rather than a political project. When it came to politics, its main role was to amplify the voice of its member states on the international stage to face post-independence challenges jointly. From this mostly socio-economic start, and despite the fact that it never changed its name, ECOWAS has evolved over decades to become **the most active regional economic community (REC) in the area of democratic governance (Khadiagala 2018)**. This is visible in the level of attention dedicated to governance processes such as elections in community summits and decisions, in electoral and mediation missions deployed, programmes in place, etc (Fall and Sall N.d.). It is also visible in the efforts ECOWAS deploys to foster more inclusive governance through structural engagement with civil society.²

This case study is part of a wider assessment by the Charter Project Africa of **how civil society organisations can engage with their respective regional organisations (ECOWAS, EAC AND SADC)** when it comes to promoting democratic governance and the implementation of the African Governance Charter. It is based on desk review, interviews with current and former practitioners, and a multi-stakeholder workshop with some 30 civil society leaders and policy makers held at the Gorée Institute in May 2023.³ The methodology builds on political economy analysis to assess existing structures and frameworks and unpack the drivers and incentives that explain whether and how stakeholders make use of them – in order to map practical ways forward.

The overall objective of this work is to identify opportunities for civil society organisations (CSOs) working with RECs to strengthen their political governance agendas and advocacy, especially through the use of digital technologies. To do so, this study on the case of West Africa seeks to:

1. **Assess and compare the theory and practice** of ECOWAS-civil society engagement; and
2. **Produce guidance for CSOs** for engaging with ECOWAS, using both formal and informal channels.

This study examines the roles ECOWAS plays in democratic governance in a first section. This is followed by a discussion on approaches and practices of civil society engagement with ECOWAS. The third section discusses the role of digital technologies to foster such engagement. A fourth and final section provides conclusions.

1. ECOWAS and democratic governance

ECOWAS has a strong mandate on governance and peace and security. It relies on methods ranging from early-warning conflict prevention and election observation to crisis resolution mediations and sanctions to operationalise this mandate. West African countries committed explicitly to promoting democratic governance and human rights with the **1993 revision of the ECOWAS founding treaty**, which also emphasised peace, security and stability. This treaty was complemented by the **2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance**, which for

1 ECOWAS member states are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

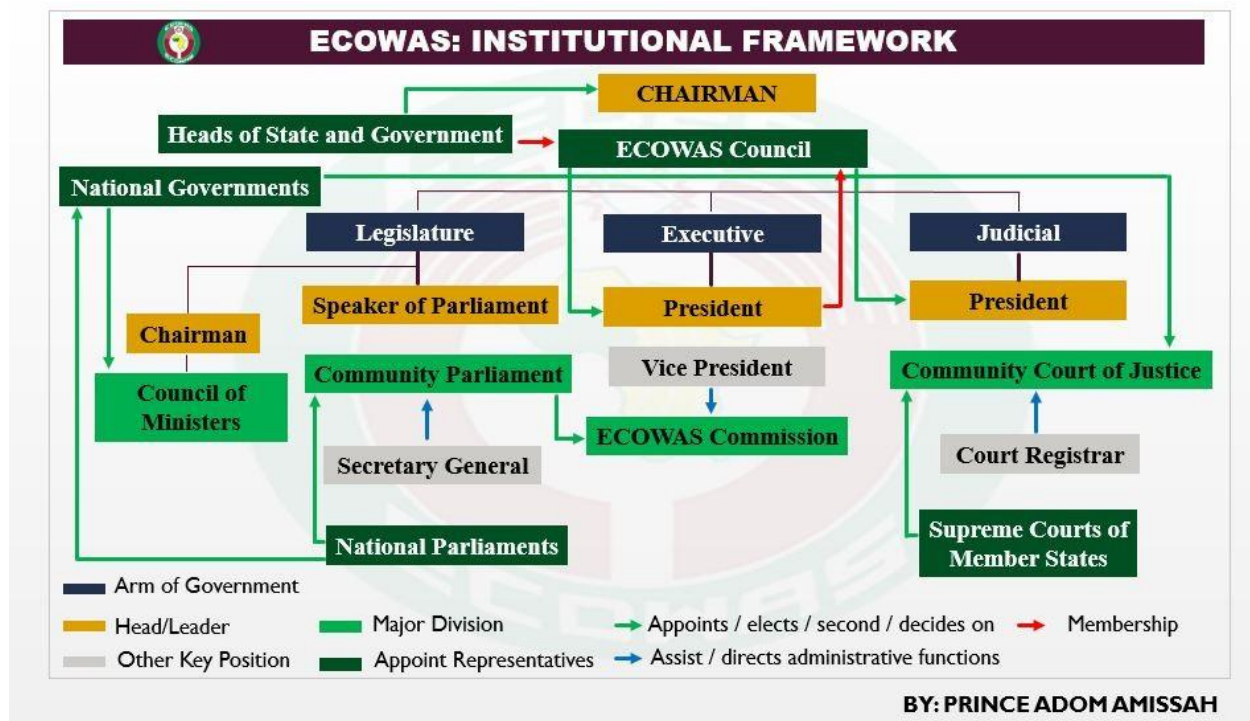
2 Civil society participation in RECs is understood by Reinold (2019) as meaning more than just being informed and invited to attend deliberations, although that tends to be a necessary condition. It entails actively shaping some elements of the policies along their whole life cycle, from design to implementation and monitoring, including advocacy and campaigning targeted at the community, or responding to its actions.

3 Wherever no documentary source is indicated, the information originates from these key informants.

instance laid down the foundation for ECOWAS to conduct election monitoring in its member states and send crisis mediation missions. The ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, established in 1991, was transformed to offer remedies in matters of human rights violations starting in 2005. ECOWAS’ plans **Vision 2020 and Vision 2050** (adopted in 2007 and 2021 respectively) stressed more and more a regional organisation ‘of the people’, fostering rule of law, freedoms and rights including political rights.

When it comes to the governance agenda, the most important ECOWAS institutions are (1) the Authority (of heads of states) and (2) the Council of Ministers, which form together the political level where member states provide the community with directions, as well as (3) the ECOWAS Commission, the community’s executive arm – and in particular its department for Political Affairs, Peace & Security. Additionally, (4) the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice not only provides dispute resolution for member states and advisory opinions, but it also grants remedies to CSOs, NGOs and individuals for breaches of human rights, including digital rights.

Figure 1: ECOWAS institutional framework



Source: Amissah 2020

Drivers of ECOWAS’s governance role

The region has its share of pressing democratic governance challenges. In the past three years, it faced no less than four (five if one counts Chad – not an ECOWAS member – as part of the extended region), unconstitutional changes of government (UCG): in Mali (twice), Burkina Faso and Guinea Conakry, plus several notable attempts. On the whole, the region has been faring comparatively well on democracy indices in recent times (IDEA 2021): much is at stake with attacks on democracy such as these (attempted) coups.⁴

⁴ International IDEA’s state of democracy indices suggested in 2021 that roughly half of the continent’s democracies were in West Africa at the time, although ECOWAS members formed just over a quarter of African countries.

To respond to such challenges, the region has adopted significant constraining norms on democratic governance, including the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance mentioned above. In fact, the Protocol provided inspiration to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the most prominent instrument defining the continental governance agenda in Africa. At present, all 15 ECOWAS member states have signed and 13 have also ratified the ACDEG.⁵ This level of adhesion is unmatched in other African regions.

It follows that governance principles stand high on the ECOWAS agenda not because they are unanimously approved, but rather because governance is fiercely contested. Norms such as the ACDEG help address the problems that arise, for instance by structuring the conversation on UCG. Indeed, they establish a baseline of democratic constitutional continuity and integrity, against which breaches can be identified, and appropriate responses can be formulated jointly in the region based on this understanding. This allows for more predictable, rules-based and timely responses.

The fear of conflict spillover within the region and the interconnection of its people help explain why ECOWAS invested in the area of governance. Civil wars that affected Sierra Leone and Liberia at the end of the last century convinced leaders in the region of the need for common norms. More recent West African conflicts with strong cross-border elements included the Boko Haram crisis around Lake Chad (directly by Nigeria) and the Sahel conflict in and around Northern Mali. Both conflicts are marked by the expansion of radical groups which prosper among marginalised groups in the governance vacuum left by states, and thanks to the economic benefits of armed mobilisation due to extortion and smuggling as well as fatigue with ineffective and/or corrupt rule. Radical groups gained ground in bordering countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Bénin as well (ACLEDE 2022). This generates a sense of urgency for the region to address not only conflicts but also their governance root causes.

In particular the region's economic powerhouse, Nigeria, leveraged the community⁶ to regionalise its defence of regional stability. This started with Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, and continued with conflicts closer to the country (ECDPM 2017). Nigeria has reportedly sought to foster close ties with its neighbours to prevent the risk of being encircled by largely francophone countries with differing views (Bach 2016). Perhaps more importantly, Nigeria but also Ghana among others have had their fair share of military coups, and after constitutional order was re-established, their leadership sought to avoid repeating such episodes.

Relatedly, financial self-sustainability helps ECOWAS lead the region's governance agenda. It runs on an annual budget of close to 600 million USD, raised in large part through a levy on internal trade, as opposed to external contributions. Up to 90% of the REC's core budget is self-funded, with a substantial part stemming from Nigeria's levies alone (ECOWAS Parliament N.d., Ojeme 2021). Both the overall amounts and this ability to tap on domestic resources are remarkable compared to other RECs.

There is also a degree of competition between ECOWAS and rival organisations. The West African Economic Union (known by its French acronym UEMOA) counts eight member states, all of which are also ECOWAS members. UEMOA was created in 1994 to promote economic cooperation, then grew to address peace and security, an area where ECOWAS held precedence.⁷ The competition presented by this smaller group of largely francophone countries

5 In the region, only Senegal and Cape Verde have not ratified the Charter yet. For more information, see this tool: <https://ecdpm.org/work/guide-african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance>.

6 Like many other regional economic communities, ECOWAS is primarily an intergovernmental organisation led by Heads of States, which means that the organisation prioritises to a large extent what they executives care about.

7 EUMOA members are Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo. ECOWAS has more members, is one of the eight AU-recognised RECs, is older (by some measures) and has a formal mandate in its treaty to become the single economic community for the region, but UEMOA is regarded by many as having more historical coherence and legitimacy among its member states and has achieved greater economic integration. UEMOA countries have also formally agreed to define positions prior to discussing with other fora – ECOWAS included (Byiers & Dièye 2022; UEMOA N.d.).

may have stimulated ECOWAS leadership to demonstrate its added value (Byiers & Dièye 2022).⁸ Similarly, ECOWAS may at times have been nudged to play a coordinating role by the multiplication of alternative regional structures that emerged in the region in reaction to conflicts or to address issues collectively. These include the G5 Sahel, the Permanent Interstate Committee for drought control in the Sahel, the Liptako Gourma Authority, several river basin authorities and energy, etc.⁹

The evolving role of ECOWAS on governance

Over the last few years, half a dozen coups and attempted coups have taken place in West Africa: in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Niger (March 2021, failed), Guinea Conakry (September 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022 and September 2022), followed by a failed attempt in February 2022 in Guinea-Bissau and another in December 2022-2023 in The Gambia. This is an indication of state fragility and a resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government in the region.

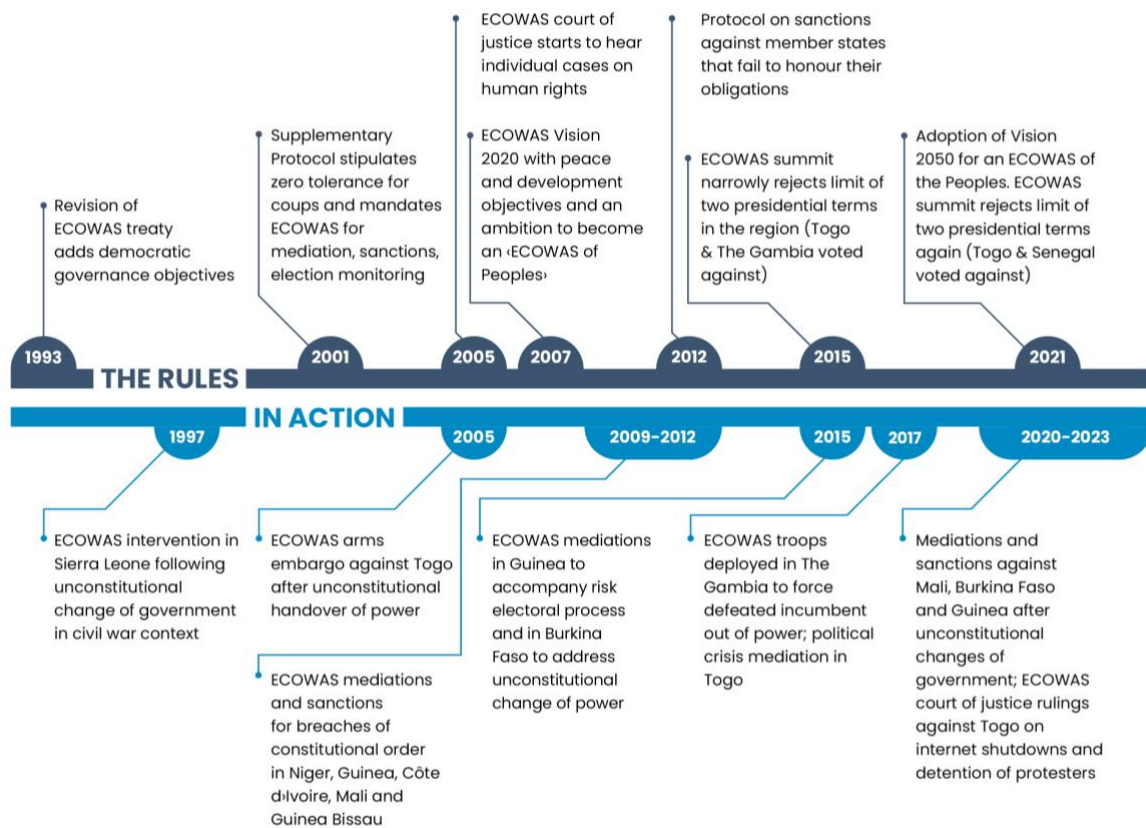
In the face of this **trend of military coups**, ECOWAS has stepped up its governance activities, including by increasingly **suspending the membership** of countries that undergo unconstitutional changes of government (see figure 2 below). From the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, it has developed a record of pursuing its ambitious policy of 'zero tolerance for UCG', a norm formulated more strongly at the regional level than it is at the pan-African level (Amani Africa 2022).

Mediation missions, sanctions and even the threat of military intervention have allowed ECOWAS to have a significant say in some of the governance developments of its member states (starting with the smaller and least powerful ones) when it comes to UCG. A case in point is ECOWAS' military intervention in The Gambia during the 2016-2017 constitutional crisis resulting from the outgoing president's refusal to leave power. This role of ECOWAS is so substantial that it can easily set the tone with its reaction to a crisis. The African Union aligns by adopting similar pronouncements, for instance in Mali recently, in the spirit of the ambiguous concept of subsidiarity, whereby decisions should be adopted as close to the ground as possible (ISS 2022).

8 Despite this rivalry, ECOWAS and UEMOA collaborate on economic and security issues. For example, they collaborate in their early warning mechanisms to assess political situations to help anticipate and defuse crises at the political level before they lead to violence.

9 For an overview of relevant regional initiatives, see ECDPM 2017. For more information on RECs as part of the African governance architecture, see this tool: <https://ecdpm.org/work/interactive-tool-mapping-african-governance-architecture>

Figure 2: Key events in the ECOWAS governance agenda



Source: authors

The record of ECOWAS has been more modest when it comes to accountability for corruption and breaches of governance norms that took place (arguably at least) within the boundaries of constitutionality (Byiers and Ronceray 2019). This includes: problematic elections, extensions of term limits and amendments to constitutions to allow incumbents to stay in power, as in the cases of Togo in 2019, Côte d'Ivoire in 2020 and Guinea in 2020 before the coup d'état in 2021. Already at an ECOWAS Commission Summit in 2015, Togo and The Gambia had blocked the attempt to limit presidential office to two terms under the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (The Cable 2015). Since then, The Gambia appears to have consented to the rule, but Senegal then changed sides to block the norm's adoption alongside Togo. Issues arising within larger member states have also been harder to handle, though there have been communiqués and mediation efforts in such crises as well (Maluleke 2022). The record is even more modest when it comes to holding leaders to account on their overall performance at delivering effective governance: restoring state authority in peripheral areas, addressing the development needs of marginalised populations, managing security challenges and improving integrity, etc.

The context of democratic disillusionment in West Africa shapes the prospects of the ECOWAS governance agenda going forward. Democracy is frequently perceived to have been reduced to the holding of elections, often marred by irregularities but validated by the international community, including ECOWAS, which then pays little attention to violations of the rule of law by the election winners. The fact is that elections have not always produced peaceful democratic transitions or consistently transferred power to leaders able to meet their citizens' demands by restoring state presence and stopping violence and corruption. By contrast, some recent coups have been accompanied with demonstrations of popular support in the streets, as many civilians saw the intervention of the military as the only

way to renew corrupt and ineffective political systems. Mali is a case in point, where the decision to lift ECOWAS sanctions, following the adoption of a timeline of return to civilian rule, may have been facilitated by the popular support that the military authorities managed to showcase (Tine 2022, BBC News 2022, Reisenberg 2022). So while states are clearly concerned with UCG and while citizens still reject military rule for the most part (Mattes 2019), there is no consensus over which governance norms are most important: handover of power through elections, or integrity and accountability in the exercise of power.

Finally, the normative focus on UCG has transferred part of the democratic challenge towards areas where less progress has been made: **election-rigging (in particular subtle autocratic innovations to do this) and third-termism (the lifting of rules that limit the number of possible terms at the head of state level)**. These areas sometimes see breakthroughs, as in the example of the ECOWAS court of justice case that pushed back against manipulation of the electoral playing field in Togo (see box 1). But on the whole, they remain sorely under-addressed, as are other issues of grievance for citizens such as integrity and security. ECOWAS will increasingly need to find ways to adequately respond to these issues beyond the focus on UCG, if it is to fulfil its governance mandate in a citizen-driven manner.

Box 1: The singularity of the ECOWAS court

Aside from the REC's central structures, the region set up the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, initially for states but since 2005 offering remedies for citizens and CSOs in governance areas such as human rights, including digital rights.

In contrast to most international courts, **there is no need to exhaust all local remedies before a litigant can petition the ECOWAS court** in cases of alleged human rights violations in a member state. By 2016 the court had already examined over a hundred cases pertaining to human rights violations, with a high rate of compliance with its rulings, in part thanks to the adoption of an ECOWAS protocol on sanction for non-compliance with community law in 2012 (OSF 2016).

The ECOWAS court of justice represents a significant opportunity for civil society active in democratic governance promotion. For instance, the Court declared that Togo's internet shutdown during protests in 2017 had violated the right of freedom of expression, in a case brought forward by seven NGOs (Access Now 2020), and it later condemned Togo for the detention of protesters in the same crisis (ECOWAS Court of Justice 2023).

The activism of the court led to some backlash over the years, especially from members of ECOWAS that saw it as acting against their interest of the time (for instance The Gambia called for a revision of the court's mandate as early as in 2009), but the court managed to retain its independence and proceed with further cases (Aggad and Miyandazi 2017).

2. Civil society engagement with ECOWAS

Foundations of ECOWAS's partnership with civil society

The revised 1993 ECOWAS treaty called on the community to **co-operate with regional CSOs and encourage the broad participation of citizens in the integration process**.¹⁰ This marked an important change in the structure and character of West African cooperation, with a purported shift to a more **"people-centred" agenda** as opposed to the "overly state-centric approach of the past" (Aryeetey 2001).

¹⁰ Treaty of ECOWAS, 1993, Article 81 (see ECOWAS Commission 1993).

Since then, civil society organisations from the region have been working with ECOWAS in implementing its agenda. In particular instruments on conflicts, such as the 1999 **protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security** and 2008 **ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework**, provide entry points for civil society involvement at the intersection of governance and security.

A central feature of this engagement is the accreditation mechanism for CSOs that ECOWAS developed (as the first REC to have one). As the REC needs to keep the number of interlocutors at a manageable level and ensure it does not favour specific member states, **CSOs are encouraged to join or form accredited transnational umbrella organisations or networks rather than apply themselves** (Open Society Foundations 2016). In this framework, there are two categories of accredited organisations:

- Organisations that present added value to the ECOWAS agenda and that are well rooted across member states – they gain rights in terms of representation and ability to share communications, including by making oral presentations to the Council of ministers and suggest items for the agenda of most ECOWAS organs;
- Organisations that are relevant to the agenda can observe, propose documents or be contacted.

Within ECOWAS, a CSO desk within the Department of Human Resources and Gender is tasked, inter alia, with issuing official invitations to associations whose views and inputs are requested by the commission, in particular when it comes to organisation with any of these two levels of observer status (Reinold 2019).

However, it is worth pointing out that **organisations that have been engaging with ECOWAS do not necessarily all have an official status (whether observer or accredited)** to ECOWAS. For instance, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) is reported to have successfully engaged with ECOWAS organs and institutions, for instance in support of the ECOWARN system (policy implementation) and playing a role in formulating the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (policy making) without enjoying observer status (Open Society Foundations 2016).

This means that **failure to acquire an official status does not prevent CSOs from engaging with ECOWAS institutions**. Engagement is also possible by joining networks that have such a status, or closer ties in the shape of a memorandum of understanding, but ultimately if the theme and activity warrants it, it is possible to engage directly.

Mapping main civil society partners of ECOWAS

ECOWAS has been working with a variety of regional civil society networks and organisations on governance issues ranging from the community's rules and norms to early warning, prevention of small arms proliferation, gender and elections observation, among others. Figure 3 below recapitulates the main entry points for civil society engagement with ECOWAS. It is hardly possible to list all the organisations that interact with ECOWAS on the governance agenda, but here are a few ones that stand out:

- The West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) – the long-standing umbrella organisation, tasked to represent civil society in general since 2003 –, located close to the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria.
- The prominent West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP – launched in 2002) and the umbrella organisation created in 2022 of which it is a member, the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), hosted by the Centre for Democracy and Development in Accra, Ghana.
- The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), established by Open Society in 2005 to reinforce the capacities of civil society in the region, also based in Accra, Ghana but with recent signs of intensifying relations with ECOWAS by opening an office in Abuja (Audu 2022).

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- Other knowledge and resource centres with regional and/or pan-African scope, e.g. Gorée Institute and the Institute for Security Studies, both with offices in Dakar, Senegal.
 - Thematic organisations: the Peace and Security Network for Women in the ECOWAS Region; the Foundation for security and Development in Africa; the West African Women’s Association ; the Mano River Women’s Peace Network; the West African Action Network on Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa...

The following subsections provide more details on the first two umbrella organisations, as they have developed long-term, close and privileged relationships with ECOWAS.

The West African Civil Society Forum

ECOWAS in partnership with key civil society organisations founded the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF) in 2003. WACSOFF is formally the **main official interface for West African civil society with the ECOWAS Commission** in promoting regional development and integration in West Africa.¹¹ It is a network of organisations from the 15 ECOWAS states working in peacebuilding, education, health, democracy, human rights, and gender. Faced with the challenge of representing civil society at large across countries, to ensure renewal and representativeness, WACSOFF decision-making relies on organisations which are elected for a term of two years, renewable only once.

WACSOFF is an independent network, but this was not always the case. For some time after its creation, official support from the ECOWAS Commission came in the form of office space within the Commission and direct financial support. With such official endorsement, WACSOFF enjoyed a strong relationship with the Commission and was able to successfully make interventions at statutory meetings as well as ECOWAS meetings with development partners, although this reportedly limited its independence.

WACSOFF has coordination teams based in each ECOWAS member state as well as thematic groups working on specific issues, including on **Political affairs, democracy and governance**; on Peace and Security; Gender and women; and Human and people’s rights, for instance. These thematic groups engage on technical matters and on policy formulation. WACSOFF involves civil society in the process of elaborating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating political, security, economic, social and cultural programmes of ECOWAS. This platform provides civil society in the sub region with an **official corridor to dialogue and engage with both national governments and ECOWAS**. For instance, WACSOFF’s Electoral Assistance Unit has collaborated with the ECOWAS Electoral Assistance Unit to form the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissioners (ECONEC), which seeks to improve the integrity of elections (Reinold 2019).

WACSOFF receives **invitations to provide inputs** into the work of ECOWAS on behalf of civil society in West Africa verbally and in writing. It also prepares position papers, press statements, advocacy letters, etc. It has also been invited to **attend all Ordinary Summits of the Community** – that is, meetings of the heads of States, to which simply accredited observers are not statutorily invited (OSF 2016). Because it has this access, WACSOFF strategically organises its annual meetings to coincide with the ECOWAS heads of State Summit, and makes **policy recommendations to the summit**. While this is significant progress in civil society’s collaboration with ECOWAS, it is difficult to measure the extent to which these recommendations are implemented by the heads of State. Building on this level of access, it has proactively promoted the uptake of the ACDEG in the few countries still pending ratification (for instance in The Gambia in the lead up to ratification in 2018).¹²

11 However, an organisation with a similar mandate has been in operation in the 2000s, the Forum of Associations Recognised by ECOWAS (FARE).

12 It might be coincidental, but it is more likely an indirect tribute to WACSOFF’s success over the years that an organisation called the Western Ankole Civil Society Forum has emerged in Uganda, sharing an acronym with WACSOFF and profiling itself in a similar way.

The West African Network for Peacebuilding

WANEP is an umbrella organisation created in 1998 and bringing together some 500 civil society organisations. It operates with district-level councils, national offices in each ECOWAS country, and through a regional office in Accra, Ghana. It also has liaison offices at the ECOWAS Secretariat and at the AU. **These multiple levels provide it with both a strong footing and regional reach.** It is ECOWAS' foremost civil society partner in peacebuilding, which makes it a key actor in democratic governance discussions as well. Its reported success factors have been sustained diplomatic channels and the ability to fill the community's gaps when it comes to reaching to the local level.

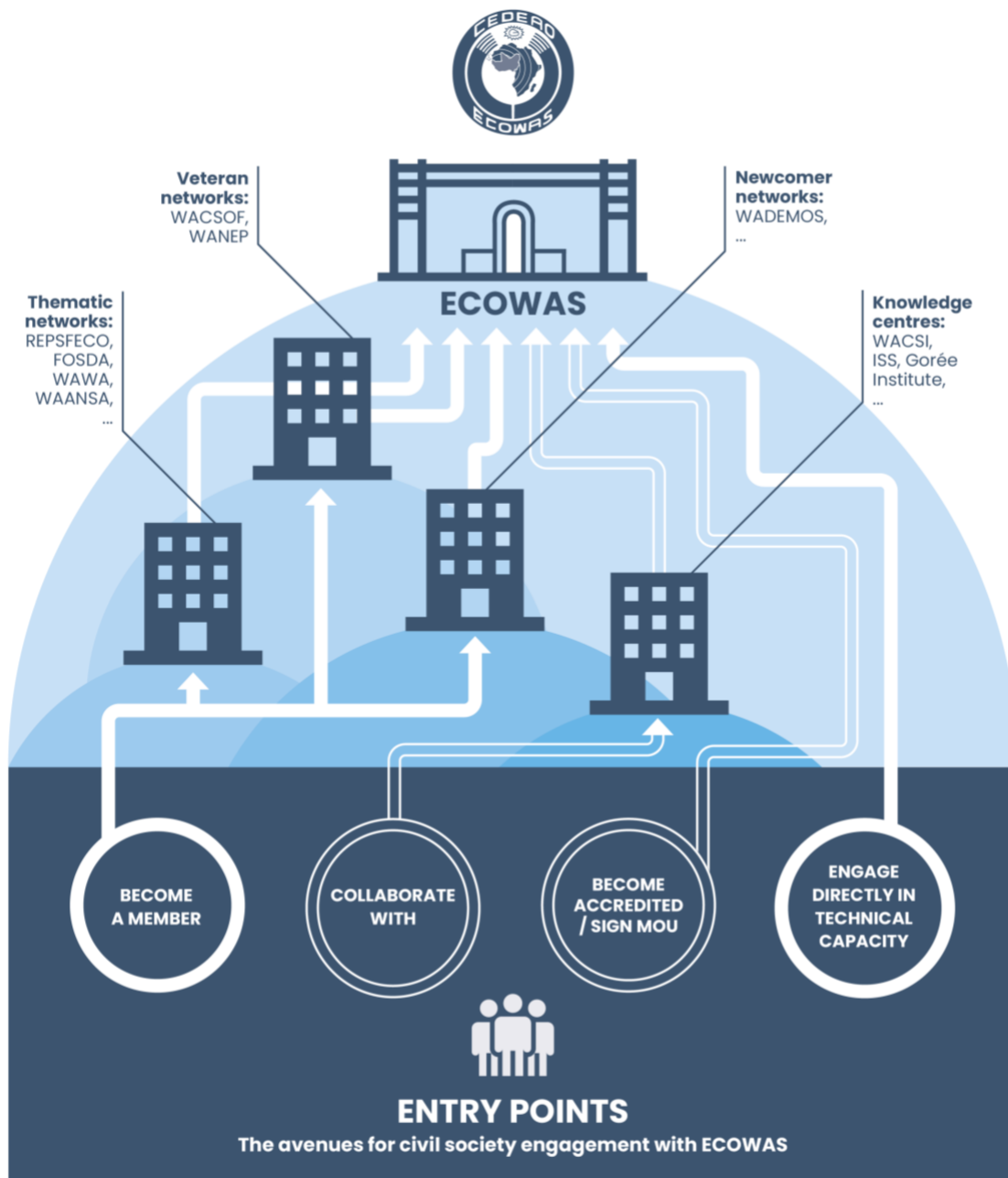
Since 2014, WANEP has become a key partner in supporting the implementation of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). It has enabled horizontal engagement on peacebuilding and conflict prevention in the region, becoming **the civil society lead agency in collecting and analysing data at the national level to feed regional early warning.** Through the partnership, ECOWAS outsourced some of its responsibilities to WANEP, relying on it to obtain Civil Society perspectives and enhance its understanding of peace and conflict trends in West Africa (Aeby 2021). The ECOWAS-WANEP partnership is reported to be "an example of best practices in the area of CSO-IO [international organisation] collaboration in the field of conflict prevention" (Reinold 2019 p.6). This partnership has allowed WANEP to profile itself at the global level as well, engaging with UN agencies and contributing to the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC).

However, interviewees stress that early warning and good data collection processes do **not necessarily lead to effective rapid responses.** As of 2016, a study found that despite this collaboration with WANEP, ECOWAS' preventive diplomacy was not overly effective, with some exceptions such as the efforts to stop the deterioration of a crisis in Guinea in 2009 (OSF 2016). Limiting factors to WANEP's work reportedly include staff turnover and dependence on ECOWAS and international donor funding for its continued peacebuilding engagement.

WANEP is a member of **WADEMOS**, an initiative launched in 2022 to play a role as a civil society regional umbrella organisation. Its constituency is different from that of WACSOF, although some CSOs have participated in both networks. While it builds on and collaborates with organisations that have a long history with ECOWAS, WADEMOS can reportedly build on privileged networks within parts of the current ECOWAS leadership to bypass existing structures.

At the time of writing, the creation of another West African civil society network was under discussion among a coalition of CSOs keen to revitalise engagement with ECOWAS without going through either the long-standing or this new network.

Figure 3: Main avenues for civil society engagement with ECOWAS



Source: authors

Main features of ECOWAS-civil society relations

The main way for CSOs to engage with ECOWAS is to converge in umbrella organisations such as WANEP and WACSO, but this picture is not static. Numbering up to hundreds of member CSOs, these umbrella organisations can hold observer status to ECOWAS and may receive invitations to participate in collaborative frameworks, for instance on training, research and capacity-building (ECOWAS 2016). This provides entry points for smaller, national or local-level CSOs to influence ECOWAS policy and engagements to a degree. New organisations emerge and the composition of existing ones renews itself. Staff changes both within ECOWAS and its civil society partners

redistribute the interpersonal links that maintain the vitality of many of these collaborations. Opinions differ strongly on whether the multiplicity of engagement initiatives is fruitful or excessive, and whether the proximity of some organisations to ECOWAS is necessary and valuable or detrimental to independent expression.

The ECOWAS-civil society relationship is mutually beneficial; it continues to evolve and become more institutionalised. For instance, WANEP structures its unique partnership with ECOWAS through joint debriefings and thematic sessions on Peace and Security for ECOWAS Ambassadors. Another example of complementarity with ECOWAS is Gorée Institute’s efforts to evaluate the capacity of countries to effectively deal with root causes of institutional instability, both external and internal, on the basis of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework. The Gorée Institute is regularly invited by ECOWAS to share the findings of this exercise at regional meetings.

Project logic and implementation tend to prevail over agenda setting and policy influencing. Even in the case of the most structured partnerships such as the one with WANEP, the extent to which ECOWAS lets itself be influenced by civil society varies significantly. Influence is dependent on staff changes and political directions, pointing to a lack of functioning accountability mechanisms to ensure ECOWAS consistently engages civil society in a meaningful manner. Reportedly however, the shift from a “watchdog” position to an implementation role does not preclude the provision of a credible bridge between policy makers and community citizens (WACSI 2009).

In addition, **civil society engagement with ECOWAS has become more focused and effective** because ECOWAS has become more open and accessible to civil society, especially when compared to national governments. According to interviewees, ECOWAS’s institutional leadership and key officials are more committed and supportive overall. This has resulted in the formalisation of partnerships between ECOWAS and CSOs, and has successfully contributed to facilitating peaceful and credible elections through mediation between the ruling and opposition parties during Elections (Bakara 2022; Yabi 2010). Organisations are exploring diverse forms of collaboration, with WADEMOS for instance proposing to embed staff within ECOWAS.

Limits of the ECOWAS – civil society partnership

The relationship between ECOWAS and the region’s civil society is, comparatively, on the healthy and productive side (Reinold 2019). However, long-standing challenges remain. A structural limiting factor is ECOWAS’s functioning itself: as an inter-governmental organisation, its decision making is based on consensus among heads of states. So states have the last word in decision-making regardless if ECOWAS staff facilitate inputs from civil society or not.

Some ECOWAS leaderships are also more open to some organisations and networks than to others, on the basis of preference or reportedly even nationality. According to an interviewee in a CSO network, WADEMOS and to some extent WANEP appear to provide examples where CSO leaders sharing a (Ghanaian, in these cases) nationality with senior ECOWAS policy makers did open doors, while other organisations not sharing the same national networks saw their clout at ECOWAS diminish by contrast. The turnover of commissioners, every four years typically, often requires building a new relationship and making the case for civil society engagement all over again (Olonisakin, 2009; interview).

This is compounded by the tendency of some decision makers to undervalue civil society expertise and contributions in general. As reported in interviews, the perception that CSO leaders are trouble-makers or political opponents biding their time in the hope to get to power later sometimes reduces civil society credibility and influence. Serious CSOs reportedly have to conduct advocacy and awareness-raising activities to sensitise politicians and technicians to the fact that CSOs are relevant, legitimate and well-structured partners.

ECOWAS is selective about the types of CSOs it is keen to engage with. Its go-to partners are CSOs and networks that play the role of supportive allies, rather than watchdogs that hold the community and its member states to account. Exceptions exist, where CSOs can remain closely engaged while demanding better accountability from ECOWAS and member states. For instance in the context of the ECOWAS Electoral Commissioners Network (ECONEC) WACSOF has at times challenged the findings of ECOWAS election monitoring teams. Reinold (2019) cites examples from Senegal and Ghana in 2011, where WACSOF contested the analysis by a Chief Observer, which it judged insufficiently critical of the situation.

CSO leadership can be reluctant to transfer power and support a renewal of their organisation (via increased youth participation, via the use of digital technologies, etc.). This can reduce their effectiveness and – in the case of umbrella networks – their representativeness of the civil society they are meant to speak for. A long-standing platform like WACSOF has faced governance issues at times, and some have argued that it made it less representative of CSOs in West Africa. Interviewees pointed to the responsibilities of CSO networks in adequately informing their member organisations of what is happening and what is being decided in ECOWAS, but also reversely, representing the diverse needs and perspectives of West African civil society.

Horizontal competition between CSOs can result in duplications as well as poor decision-making and planning. For instance, some CSOs with a specific thematic or geographic niche regularly seek to expand their work to new areas which other CSOs are already working on, reducing their respective added values. Umbrella organisations and ad hoc initiatives try (or claim to try) to coordinate these efforts, but as they compete for limited resources and attention from ECOWAS, there are strong incentives for each of them to “pull the blanket toward themselves” instead of genuinely coordinating. However, the competition also helps networks keep one another in check and increases the alternative options in case a specific CSO finds itself unresponsive, unrepresentative or compromised.

The polarisation of policy discussions undermines ECOWAS – civil society engagement. Perceptions of foreign interference affecting ECOWAS’s decisions and its ability to meet the needs of the people, and of double standards in its responses to UCGs, have contributed to a deterioration of mutual trust between ECOWAS and civil society. A case in point is the Franc CFA controversy: interviewees referred to the role played by France and Côte d’Ivoire in seeking to delay the transition from the Franc CFA to the new, regional currency Eco prepared by ECOWAS and promoted by Nigeria (Pauron 2022). Such tensions are reported to make states’ and ECOWAS’ positions more defensive and less inclined to seek views from civil society.

Finally, the **competition with INGOs and the challenge of retaining skilled staff** which are attracted by the better salaries and working conditions offered by international organisations; also play against structured ECOWAS engagement by civil society from the region (Olivier de Sardan 2023). When they do not drain competences away, foreign actors can also play against grassroots accountability of civil society initiatives as an unintended consequence of providing funding.

3. Digital technologies in the ECOWAS-CSO partnership

Civil society use of digital technology is expanding rapidly in West Africa. This builds on increased connectivity, despite a persistent digital divide (GSMA 2019 and 2022). In the COVID-19 era, CSOs in West Africa as elsewhere have stepped up technologies to hold activities, collaborate with members and peers, raise awareness among their target audiences, carry out advocacy, conduct surveys, hold training sessions, online events, and create platforms.

Digital technologies make CSOs more effective by streamlining internal processes and increasing productivity. For instance, WANEP uses technology to centralise the data it collects and make it available to its offices and its Peace

Monitoring Centre. This facilitates analysis and response, and creates flashpoints flagging areas for attention, threats and key actors. In a similar spirit, Afrobarometer’s web platform makes available extensive polling data across the region. This is overall a rather basic use of digital platforms and tools for communication. More advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, virtual reality with the ‘internet of things’ may offer further opportunities in the future. More sophisticated tools are mobilised when it comes to civic tech and responses to closing civic space.

Digital tools against closing civic space

CSOs are operating in a challenging environment where states are also making use of digital technologies and their regulations to pursue their interests. The civic space of citizens has shrunk significantly in several countries of the region. Bénin’s 2018 Digital Code – which criminalises the publication of false information and “incitation to rebellion” online – has since then been used to arrest militants, journalists and bloggers that were politically active online (CIVICUS 2020). Digital technologies have been used by states to silence public opinion (including via internet shutdowns, for instance in 2023 in Senegal) and restrict access to information for local and international media (Domingo and Shiferaw 2022).

In a context marked by a contested civic space, digital technologies help secure and amplify activism. They help conduct activities efficiently, and if needed off-the-radar, although they are sensitive to attacks on civic space in the shape of social media repression and internet shutdowns (Bossuyt and Ronceray 2020). VPNs, encrypted messaging and USSD communications all offer significant ways to bypass main restrictions on the digital civic space. Digital engagement helps counter risks of physical intimidation and is instrumental in getting the voice of marginalised groups into the public sphere, starting with women (Salzinger et al 2022). A growing number of CSOs in West Africa use digital technologies and social media networks for petitions, awareness-raising, social and political campaigns, etc. Some of these organisations set up projects to promote digital democratic governance in tandem with the use of social media such as Twitter for advocacy.¹³

Digital platforms offer opportunities for holding governments to account. Trackers of electoral promises and of their delivery by elected officials have been introduced in many West African countries. They are often named after the president in office, and have included for instance the Talonmètre in Bénin, the Buharimeter in Nigeria, the Weahmeter in Liberia, the Présimètre in Burkina Faso or Lahidi in Guinea (L’Observatoire Boutros-Ghali 2020). Other interesting initiatives include guides for election candidates (particularly relevant for elections where incumbents use practicalities to bar challengers from running).

Another important avenue is the use of digital technologies to monitor elections. Electoral observation efforts tend to be perceived as rubber-stamping electoral processes – calling them ‘not perfect but good enough’. In this context, further substantiating the findings of such missions with transparent data, putting them in a wider perspective and making them accessible to the public via digital tools helps them play a constructive yet critical role. As one of the organisations to monitor independently electoral processes, the Gorée Institute for instance has been tracking the (social) media and dangerous discourse during the 2022 legislative elections in Senegal.

13 In Mali for instance, the press umbrella organisation APPELLE MALI brings together all online media outlets and organises a forum on digital media every year. In Senegal, the organisation LEGS AFRICA has been using web platforms to collect citizen views on political issues such as the governance and use of natural resources, and the civic tech network AfricTivistes has been leveraging digital solutions to reinforce independent media in the region and conducting a pan-African consultation on citizen engagement with the continental governance agenda.

States too are harnessing digital technologies but miss the full potential of new technologies to enable transparency, fight corruption, and monitor public service delivery. ECOWAS could support these efforts, ensuring that know-how from civil society serves the capacity of its member states, for instance by allocating some of its resources on elections to civic tech efforts, or by facilitating technological collaboration between member states and CSOs in addressing the needs of electorates during elections.

Many CSOs need strengthened capacity and resources to increase their use of digital technology. CSOs and networks lack information and training on how they can use digital technologies to support their work, while being confronted with data loss, data privacy and cybersecurity challenges. Some civil society actors noted that despite several meetings between ECOWAS and CSOs, the REC isn't on track yet to using digital technology as an advocacy tool to foster democratic governance, and it could use similar capacity support as CSOs. Some CSOs themselves are making a specialty of providing this type of support.¹⁴

Towards a partnership on technologies and governance

Developing a CSO-ECOWAS partnership on digital governance would be an opportunity to jointly build digital capacity and expertise at the regional level and support the digital engagement of regional civil society. Such a partnership could seek the operationalisation at the regional level and implementation of the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa 2020-2030 (Teevan & Tadesse 2022), including by bringing in the governance dimensions in this work. This could help mitigate the pressure on civic space, but also the negative impacts of digital technologies in the region (see box 2 below), in the spirit of civil society engagement that helps ECOWAS implement its agenda and fill capacity gaps.

Box 2: digital technologies, polarisation and conflict in the Sahel

Central Sahel countries – Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali – faced with violent conflict and terrorist attacks are also among the countries with the fastest growing internet user bases in the world (between 18-20% growth rate between 2020 and 2021 alone). Digital technologies are increasingly used to fuel political and societal polarisation in West Africa and the Sahel, indirectly contributing to UCGs and violent conflict.

Disinformation, echo chambers of inflammatory narratives and recruitment into terrorist groups are reportedly increasing online in the region, with radical groups demonstrating an ability to use these tools in very sophisticated ways. For instance, there is evidence of online discourse calling for intercommunal violence on WhatsApp ahead of the March 2019 and February 2020 massacres of over 200 people in Ogossagou, Mali (Yue et al. 2022).

With its normative track record and regional scope, ECOWAS is well placed to guide member states on how to regulate digital platforms and tap their peacebuilding and governance potential. ECOWAS has had a cybersecurity framework since 2011 and adopted two Supplementary Acts in 2007 and 2010 dealing with digital technologies, but their domestication and implementation have been disparate (CIPESA AND CIPE 2021). Compared with UEMOA, which has a sectoral policy and accompanying guidelines, ECOWAS has made less progress (GSMA 2019b). As building expertise on fast-evolving digital technologies requires time and investment, ECOWAS will need to rely on the knowledge and expertise of CSOs already addressing these risks in the region.

¹⁴ Currently, WACSI is one of the main regional institutions that placed technology at the centre and are promoting it through their engagement with civil society. For instance, in 2019 and 2020, WACSI supported dozens of CSOs in Ghana with logistics and communications training including the use of digital software and social media (Interview).

Contributing to setting this policy agenda, a conference held in Accra, Ghana in October 2022, explored how ECOWAS, civil society and the media can respond together to the democratic rollback in the region; for instance via a collaboration between ECOWAS and the West Africa Coalition for Media Freedom and Good Governance, created by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA). After this dialogue focusing on traditional media and the risks faced by journalists in conflict areas, there could be a follow-up on digital technologies and social media, and how ECOWAS can collaborate with CSOs in this area (MFWA 2022).

Going forward, it will be important to address the fact that leadership in both CSOs and ECOWAS may not be fully supportive of a digital shift due to a generational gap, a reluctance to transfer power to younger staff who master the use of digital technologies better. Other disincentives include the desire to retain travel per diems as a source of revenues. ‘Young’ organisations that are often more tech-savvy will have a role to play in keeping to account the established and emerging umbrella organisations that represent civil society at ECOWAS.

Finally, much of the expertise on the use of digital technologies lies with civil society. Young people in West Africa count influential activists, movements and ‘digital CSOs’, which use digital technologies much more intensively than ECOWAS itself. Despite their useful work and ECOWAS’s signalled intention to promote empowerment – for instance in the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECOWAS 2008) – in practice young activists lack recognition from regional institutions, as do the women’s movements that use digital technologies and hold much promise for rebalancing gender relations (Salzinger et al. 2022). The advocacy of regional CSOs and platforms could **focus more on what is being done by activists, women and youth using civic technology to promote improved governance.**

4. Conclusions

ECOWAS is the most active REC in the area of governance. It dispatches election observation and mediation missions and adopts frequent high-level statements and sanctions in response to governance crises and challenges. The region shows an unmatched level of uptake of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), and further regional norms. It has comparatively high levels of democracy. Other factors enabling the regional governance agenda include ECOWAS’ sustainable funding, the support of Nigeria as a regional economic powerhouse (currently reduced) and a form of latent competition with other regional initiatives.

Governance norms are comparatively important in the region because governance is contested. The regional policy of zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) resonates with leaders, but a segment of the region’s population sees UCGs as a necessary evil to oust ineffective and corrupt leaders that hold on to power. Regional norms help structure such controversies and formulate rules-based crisis responses, although they are less successful at addressing shrinking civic space and contested third presidential terms.

ECOWAS offers entry points for civil society engagement on governance. It committed to a ‘people-centred’ regional integration agenda. Civil society engages with the community through accreditation and observer status, and a number of organisations have signed memoranda of understanding with the community. Informal interactions can often be fruitful outside of these collaboration frameworks. The ECOWAS court of justice offers remedies in matters of political rights to citizens and organisations without the requirement to exhaust all local remedies.

ECOWAS prefers to interact with networks representing plurinational civil society constituencies. Two such networks, WANEP and WACSOFF, stand out as privileged partners, and others are emerging. WANEP focuses on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, notably by providing ECOWAS’s early warning tool grassroots perspectives on governance situations before they turn into crises. WACSOFF has a broader mandate to represent civil society

organisations (CSOs) and has been promoting the uptake of the ACDEG. Many more umbrella organisations engage with ECOWAS, each with their own constituency and preferred institutional counterparts. This generates a degree of healthy competition but also duplications, rivalries and confusion.

ECOWAS prefers organisations that help it bridge delivery gaps, over those conducting advocacy and demanding political accountability and human rights. Many public servants acknowledge the positive role of independent civil society with a constructive mindset. Specific parts of ECOWAS cultivate their own favourite CSO counterparts on the basis of personal acquaintance, which can be unsustainable.

Civil society actors compete and keep themselves and others in check, which consolidates their legitimacy and roles as partners. Indeed, some CSOs have their own governance issues, starting with the challenge of representing transnational constituencies. Together with unintended consequences of international support (such as the brain drain of skilled staff and diverted accountability), this can play against the credibility and effectiveness of CSOs engaging at the regional level.

Digital technologies help civil society resist shrinking civic space. They help collect, consolidate and share data about governance situations, for instance in areas of election monitoring or tracking campaign promises. They amplify civil society views and empower more structured and inclusive advocacy. Basic digital engagement technologies help intensify the interactions with ECOWAS, though adverse factors include capacity, internet penetration and financial incentives to keep activities physical rather than digital. Digital technologies are also increasingly a factor in political unrest and violent conflict.

A partnership on technologies and governance between ECOWAS and civil society will be useful. Technical know-how resides primarily with civic initiatives, while ECOWAS would be well-placed to further guide its member states on how to regulate technologies and tap on their peacebuilding potential without compromising civic space.

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