



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

ECOWAS: Political traction with Africa's oldest regional organisation¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its regional and national level stakeholders operate as they do. It looks at the political traction of ECOWAS in two specific regional agendas, namely on violent conflict and unconstitutional transfers of power as well as on food security and agriculture. It concludes with implications for support.²

Political traction, member states interests and potential

ECOWAS is the oldest of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) recognised by the African Union (AU). Over four decades it has developed multiple institutions, organs, systems and policies to foster regional integration. ECOWAS is a multi-purpose regional organisation with an ever-expanding agenda. Treaty revisions and the transformation from an ECOWAS *Secretariat* into a *Commission*, ostensibly with more authority, were introduced with the aim of closing the gap between the expanding agenda and implementation.

ECOWAS is also the only Regional Economic Community in Africa so far with a well-functioning Community levy that assures a continuous flow of own revenues to finance ECOWAS operational costs and programmes. Nevertheless, the regional organisation remains dependent on donors, and implementation of programmes and policies varies substantially.

The ECOWAS region includes fifteen very different countries. Several are characterised as fragile states and are at risk from violent conflicts or upheavals. The geographical size, nature of the economies and economic endowments differ substantially from landlocked least developed countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to Africa's biggest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria.

¹ Based on a March 2017 Background Paper by ECDPM, available at www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers. The Policy Brief and Background Paper were prepared under the BMZ-financed project on the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO)*. This paper builds on an earlier paper conducted under the *PERIA* project. Author: Jan Vanheukelom (jvh@ecdpm.org). Project team leader: Bruce Byers (bby@ecdpm.org).

² Other PEDRO related papers on ECOWAS deal with governance, trade and trade facilitation, energy, and industrialisation and youth employment.

The effectiveness and decisiveness of ECOWAS policy implementation varies by sector. Peace and security has the strongest political traction, particularly - but not only - in Nigeria, a country that was foundational in the establishment of ECOWAS. Nigeria has also strongly shaped the regional peace and security architecture. However, the regional influence of this powerful *swing state* should not be over exaggerated as Nigeria faces political, economic and security challenges of its own. It also shares concerns with some countries in the region about reducing the risks and potential costs of spillovers of persisting fragility and violent conflicts. Here, ECOWAS has managed to develop a regional peace architecture to deal with instability and contingent violent conflicts.

The ECOWAS peace and security responses have adapted to the changing violent contexts. Three cases illustrate this capacity to adapt: the secessionist war, military putsch and unconstitutional transfer of power in Mali; the contested election results and threat of resumption of major violence in Cote d'Ivoire; and the unconstitutional transfer of power, military putsch and final return to constitutional order in Burkina Faso. In all three, ECOWAS demonstrated political resolve and institutional capabilities in responding to each conflict. With differing degrees of effectiveness, the regional organisation managed to adapt its approaches to the contextual challenges. Challenges included the differing deep-rooted causes, the national and regional level interests at stake, the inevitable unpredictability of violent conflicts, but also the complex variety of stakeholders. This vast number of stakeholders includes the numerous actors involved in the conflict, but also the continental and international players such as the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union and former colonial powers. Various African organisations with overlapping mandates on peace can find themselves in competition with one another and with ECOWAS for external funding, as the bulk of the financial resources for peace operations still come from donors. Donors may - and often do - impose their priorities in terms of the crises to resolve and the strategies or means to apply.

In the ever-mutating violent conflict in Mali, ECOWAS was keen to take the lead, but faced capability and financial constraints. There were tensions between ECOWAS and the AU over who ought to do what. Similar tensions arose in the crises in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. In both cases ECOWAS responded in line with its fundamental principles on democracy and governance with respect to the constitutional transfer of power. Yet the way these were applied differed given the variations of interests of key leaders in the region, different country incentives and roles, and the mandates and capabilities of other continental and global players. While initially slow to respond to the politico-military crisis in Burkina Faso, ECOWAS managed to play a distinctive and central role in mediating and brokering a political solution. Given the broader set of interests in the political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS had to adapt its approach to the multiple players but also managed to avoid the geopolitical games that were unfolding in the UN Security Council and the African Union.

In sectors other than peace and security, there is demonstrably less political traction at member state level to engage in regional cooperation and implementation on the ground. The case of food security and regional agricultural policies in ECOWAS illustrates these differences clearly. The food price crisis in 2007-08 alarmed ruling elites in some member states about the threat to stability, triggered by food riots. But regional commitments to contribute to the Continental African Agriculture Development programme (CAADP) aimed at stimulating agricultural development and food security still did not translate into implementation by member states. Political traction in regional food security or agricultural policies varies depending on the political and cross-border characteristics of particular products. A comparison between the rice and livestock value chains in Nigeria and Burkina Faso illustrate such variations. Rice being an important staple food, related policies affecting market access and production play out mainly at national level because of protectionist and security concerns of ruling elites. Livestock, on the other hand, inherently involves cross-border dynamics and processes, with stronger regional policy implications. In both value chains and sub-sectors, there is an intricate mix of non-state and state actors involved. While there is a cross-country and regional characteristic to the livestock sub-sector, state-business relations in the countries involved are such that there is weak organised pressure behind regional cooperation.

Both cases demonstrate how diverse and weakly coordinated public and private actions can result in national, short-term dynamics rather than regional collective action. This then affects the capabilities and power of ECOWAS to alter the incentives for effective implementation of regional agriculture agreements, or to facilitate regional cooperation in value chain development.

Implications for support

1. Despite the capacity of ECOWAS to mobilise resources and to implement some of its regional policies, the continued financial and technical support from donors remain important.

- ECOWAS has proven effective in a number of sectors or policy areas, especially in peace and security. It enjoys political legitimacy among member states and beyond as a key regional actor in relations with the African Union and on the global scene in certain policy areas.³
- ECOWAS remains, however, dependent on external technical and financial support, requiring donors to engage with care to avoid distorting regional incentives and priorities.

2. Support should aim to strengthen institutional capabilities for those core functions that will contribute to improved accountability relations and a stronger sense of ownership over time.

- Donors must avoid wholesale support for regional pet-projects that enjoy insufficient national-level political buy-in from key stakeholders or coalitions of member states.
- There is a need for a more continuous approach to exploring sector or issue-specific opportunities for ECOWAS to increase its relevance. This ECOWAS can do by demonstrating functional added value for member states and other core stakeholders.
- In the design of support strategies, donors should be informed by the existing incentive environment, in particular the incentives and interests and of regional swing states (Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal).

3. Given the elaborate and functional regional peace and security architecture, there is a strong argument for continued support to help tackle the region's peace and security challenges:

- Due to differing political economy dynamics of conflicts in the region, donors must calibrate their support and collective action to enable and strengthen ECOWAS in its capacity to adapt its regional instruments to the context specific challenges.
- Through their access to other regional, continental and global players, which often engage in conflicts and conflict resolution, donors can facilitate multi-stakeholder cooperation that build on the strengths of ECOWAS.
- ECOWAS has developed a solid normative framework on democratic norms and values. It has created mechanisms for dialogue with non-state actors, and has responded to bottom-up pressures at times. There are therefore good reasons for donors to support the demand-side with non-state organisations and supply-side capabilities with ECOWAS.

4. To improve on their effectiveness, donors need to continuously analyse incentives, power and informality, including culture, customs, beliefs and ethnicity.

- The examples of rice and livestock illustrate the need for a more granular stocktake and analysis of political economy characteristics at the sub-sector level.
- Potential roles of ECOWAS should not be assumed but explored with key stakeholders.

³ For more pointed implications in a number of these sectors or policy areas, see other PEDRO reports on ECOWAS.

Behind the formal structures of regional organisations is a messy world of regional power and politics. This messiness is often difficult to capture in the language of development cooperation and institutional development. Working with regional organisations and their programmes therefore implies engaging with complex, multi-level power and interest dynamics.

PEDRO, the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations, is an ECDPM project that looks at the politics behind regional organisations, and the structural factors, institutions and incentives that ultimately define the way in which countries and different stakeholders engage at a regional level. PEDRO covers 17 African regional organisations and 11 policy areas. For each of these, ECDPM has applied a political economy approach to help understand the dynamics and their effects in different regions and policy areas.

The studies are framed around three key questions: the first relates to the political traction of the regional organisation as this helps assess whether the regional organisation has enabled regional decision making and if it has contributed to implementation. The second focuses on the member state interests in engaging with the regional organisation, especially the more resourceful and powerful ones (the so-called 'swing states'). The third looks at the areas with most traction where regional and national level interests seem to be most aligned for regional outcomes.

The reports aim to present information and insights that can help regional stakeholders navigate the obstacles and better respond to reform opportunities. Rather than providing specific operational recommendations, the political economy approach encourages more reality-based discussions among practitioners and reformers about feasible ways to address regional challenges. It is hoped that this may help tailor the ambitions and approaches of donors and reformers and help identify ways to support national or regional champions or coalitions to take regional cooperation and integration forward.