



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Water and security at an inter-regional cross-roads¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and national level stakeholders operate as they do around managing water and security related interests. It concludes with implications for support.²

Political traction, member states interests and potential

The Lake Chad Basin is a highly variable hydrological system in a mostly arid or semi-arid ‘Sahelian zone’. A dramatic reduction in the Lake’s surface area in the past decades has made the area increasingly water-stressed. While there is still debate on the long-term trends and the challenges of climate change in the basin, the drying of Lake Chad has become a key feature of climate change discussions at a global level. The rise of Boko Haram in the 2000s has further put the Lake Chad area under stress and at the centre of global attention.

As a subregion, the Lake Chad Basin countries find themselves at a regional crossroads in a number of ways. Historically an area of heightened cross-border mobility, the main riparian countries Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic (CAR), Nigeria, and Cameroon are split between two political and economic blocks. Nigeria and Niger are part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with Chad, Cameroon and the Central African Republic part of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). LCBC was originally established in 1964 to foster the shared and sustainable management and exploitation of Lake Chad, as well as to promote cross-border security in a context where the changing shores of the Lake led to internal and cross-border migration and banditry. In recent years, faced with increasing and new forms of insecurity and the absence of a dedicated regional bloc, the LCBC’s mandate for regional security cooperation has gained prominence with a formal mandate to provide the civilian leadership to the Multinational Joint Task Force, an AU sanctioned cross-border military operation in the Lake Chad area.

In the field of shared water management, the performance of LCBC and its member states is mixed, not least since

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² Other papers dealing with regional water challenges include the International Congo-Ubangui-Sangha Commission, the Nile Basin Initiative, the Niger Basin Authority and the Southern African Development Cooperation water paper.

mechanisms and tools to monitor and control the use of water resources are not fully operational. This is partly due to insufficient clarity of roles and competences but also due to a lack of genuine political interest among, and investment by, member states. The main players, including the regional hegemon Nigeria, have invested some political capital in the organisation but tend to favour more politically visible interventions. For example, the massive proposed transnational inter-basin investment to transfer water from the Congo River Basin to Lake Chad is favoured over structural interventions to address environmental decline and agricultural transformation in the wider basin area, and particularly around the southern tributaries of the Lake. While technically feasible, the mega infrastructure project would come at an extremely high estimated cost, and is heavily criticised for the potentially adverse effects on the ecosystems of both basins as well as the possible negative effects on flow in the Congo basin.

Cross-border security is a historical concern for the basin countries, but it was not until the early 2010s, following the 2009 violent Boko Haram Uprising, that military cooperation took a more concrete shape in the form of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). This was established under Nigerian command, with support from the African Union (AU). The MNJTF was established by the LCBC summit under a Nigerian initiative, but includes only four of the six member states: Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, plus Benin, a non-member of LCBC. The MNJTF members were effectively split between ECOWAS (Nigeria, Niger, and Benin) and ECCAS (Cameroon and Chad) making it difficult for an AU recognised REC, and building block of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), to take the lead. Since the majority of the countries concerned belong to the LCBC and Boko Haram's reach had spread to the shores of the Lake Chad Basin, the organisation was seen as a suitable institutional framework for this joint effort providing a pragmatic solution for this cross-regional arrangement. The Multinational Task Force was headquartered in Baga (Nigeria) until 2015, when it was overrun by Boko Haram forces. It is currently based in N'djamena, Chad.

The MNJTF operates under the political lead of the AU, which has mandated the LCBC to be the political coordinating body of the operation. This means that the LCBC's political level acts as a forum to discuss security and military cooperation with its member states, and that the LCBC's Executive Secretary formally plays the role of interface between the AU's Peace and Security Department and the MNJTF's military command. That said, as a regional organisation the LCBC is not directly involved in the peace operations, and due to lack of capacity and the fact it is not a subsidiary institution of the APSA, the African Union Commission is the de facto civilian partner of the MNJTF. The LCBC is also not the only security cooperation framework between the participating member states. The organisation's development into a high-level platform for facilitating military cooperation and exchange however did require member states to maintain the regional organisation, even if their investment has been limited. Donor support for the functioning of LCBC and its core mandate of integrated transboundary basin management remains present yet is uncertain in the long run. There may be future opportunities for LCBC as a peace related coordination platform as well as a Basin organisation, however this depends on the political interest of its member states to position it as such.

The fight against Boko Haram has strengthened political and military cooperation between Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, with the prospect that this will be maintained and even further enhanced. As an organisation, LCBC has played only a marginal role in coordinating joint operations. On a bilateral level, however, military cooperation has broken down walls between member states and led to a situation where countries can relatively quickly deploy troop movements in neighbouring states within a range of 50 km. Whether this can further be institutionalised through the LCBC framework remains to be seen.

Implications for support

1. Continued support to LCBC could enable member countries to maintain a much-needed cross-regional political forum and to fill a critical gap for security cooperation in one of the most volatile parts of Africa

- The fight against Boko Haram has led to a rapprochement between basin countries. However, the cooperation around the Multinational Joint Task Force is not without problems. Experiences with military cooperation, though primarily bilateral, have built some momentum for coordinated action and allowed for more rapid deployment of troops across borders.
- The LCBC filled a gap as a cross-regional treaty-based organisation that has taken very initial steps to play a civilian coordinating role in military cooperation. Looking ahead, support to the LCBC could potentially help position the organisation to play a bridging role between military operations and civilian, cross-border initiatives for post-conflict reconstruction and development.
- The recent pushback against the Boko Haram group may reduce the perceived need for cross-border security cooperation through LCBC. Still, the region remains a powder keg due to, among others, religious differences, banditry, conflicts for access to resources, etc. All these security related threats require close coordination on military and civilian intelligence.

2. While the main water-related mandate of LCBC is not being fulfilled, water stress and climate vulnerability justify continued engagement on shared water management, although smarter engagement may be needed.

- Member states, including the regional hegemon Nigeria and key hydrological stakeholder Chad, prioritise quick fixes over structural investments in conservation and resource management. Member states actively promote and seek funding for regional infrastructure for an interbasin transfer, yet lag behind on the more basic levels of regional cooperation.
- Development partners can invest strategically and ensure a higher standard of donor coordination and harmonisation at regional and basin level, particularly as climate finance increasingly comes into play.
- External support needs to work with the grain of the domestic incentives, and design aid so that it promotes - when possible - long-term development and conservation focussing on the southern tributaries of the Lake.

3. Given the problematic track record and uneven political traction by the member states of LCBC, expectations around organisational reform and integrated water resource management will need to be managed, so as to avoid further agenda inflation in view of limited delivery capacity

- The ambitious mandate of LCBC as a basin organisation is unlikely to be achieved quickly. Focusing on low-hanging fruit, for example on establishing viable systems for information and data collection and exchange, may pave the way for gradual buy-in and trust building in the future.
- Reliable data and hydrological modeling is an urgent concern, especially as plans for major infrastructure works, including those for an interbasin transfer remain on the agenda. Examples from other regions suggest that technical cooperation can, in the long run, affect member state incentives to take water cooperation more seriously.

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.