

Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (III): West Africa

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Executive Summary

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), now in its 41st year, has a formidable record, both in its efforts to enhance regional economic integration, its initial mandate, and to promote peace in a particularly turbulent region. Still, the organisation has demonstrated shortcomings requiring significant institutional change. Reform is essential to give the organisation new impetus, and is ever more urgent as insecurity worsens throughout the Sahel and Lake Chad regions – crisis zones extending beyond ECOWAS's geographic area and where it has limited impact and influence.

Comprising fifteen states of great political, linguistic and economic diversity and spanning a vast geographic area from the Atlantic coast to the Sahara desert, ECOWAS has been the most sought-after African regional economic body in the field of peace and security in the past 25 years. The organisation, itself composed of fragile states, has been forced to put out fires within its own member states.

The ECOWAS region has experienced over forty coups since the independence era and seen some of its leaders trying to keep their grip on power at any cost, or establish political dynasties. The body has also been confronted with more complex crises in the form of identity-based armed rebellion, as in Côte d'Ivoire, or jihadist threats, most recently in Mali. Since the 1990s, through the authority of its Heads of State and Government, ECOWAS has reacted to these crises systematically. It has yielded incontestable political and diplomatic results, but its military record is more mixed.

ECOWAS's interventions in Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Burkina Faso have highlighted the organisation's strengths, but also its limits. It has neglected several of its key objectives, including strengthening the political and security institutions of member states, reassessing all dimensions of its Standby Force and enhancing regional cooperation on transnational security threats. Such threats pose a challenge to established crisis prevention or resolution mechanisms, and cannot be overcome by traditional mediation tactics and the deployment of military missions.

The organisation has developed a number of strategy documents and action plans in recent years to correct its shortcomings, but must implement them fully to address myriad threats. These include the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans; the proliferation of groups linked to transnational terrorist organisations; and the major regional challenges of poverty, unemployment and significant population growth. In addition, ECOWAS needs to undertake significant internal reorganisation, modernise its human resources management and develop a results-based culture. The new president of the ECOWAS Commission, Marcel Alain de Souza, should make it a priority as pledged in his inaugural speech on 8 April 2016. Nigeria, which through its economic and demographic dominance wields unmatched influence in West Africa, must also play a leading role in implementing these reforms.

This report, the third and final in a series analysing the regional dimension of insecurity in Africa and collective and individual state responses, presents ECOWAS's current institutional apparatus in the field of peace and security, and analyses its responses and deficiencies through three case studies: Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Burkina Faso. It is part of a broader reflection on the changing nature of conflict and growing transnational threats, problems requiring novel solutions which regional

bodies are well placed to find. This report considers what institutional reforms need to be undertaken to improve ECOWAS's collective action in the face of formidable challenges to peace and security in West Africa.

Recommendations

To strengthen ECOWAS's institutions in the field of peace and security

To ECOWAS's Authority of Heads of State and Government:

1. Reaffirm the essential and irreversible nature of the implementation of the institutional reform proposed in 2013 that aimed to strengthen the organisation's capacity in the field of peace, security, stability and social and economic development.
2. Create a working group tasked with monitoring the implementation of this reform process, including heads of state and government, or, alternatively, high-level political figures, representative of the political, cultural and linguistic diversity of ECOWAS.

To the president of Nigeria:

3. View the restoration of Nigerian diplomacy and its influence throughout Africa as a priority for the federal government, and make the revitalisation of ECOWAS a central pillar of this renewed diplomatic role.
4. Strengthen ECOWAS's capacity by supplying additional financial resources to peacekeeping or peace-enforcing missions.

To the president of the ECOWAS Commission:

5. Take immediate action to improve the efficiency of departments, by addressing dysfunctions within human resources management, administration and finance, and blockages or delays in the implementation of decisions which result from the concentration of power within the commission presidency.

To improve ECOWAS's efficiency in attaining its objectives for peace and security

To the ECOWAS Commission:

6. Accompany member states in the reform of their political practices to strengthen their legitimacy and effectiveness, specifically in the areas of good governance and in strengthening their judiciaries in line with ECOWAS protocols, specifically by establishing ECOWAS permanent representation offices in every member state.
7. Strengthen the capacity of member states to face collectively transnational threats by:
 - a) creating an ECOWAS centre for the fight against organised crime that would integrate different action plans against transnational criminal activity, including terrorism, drug, human and arms trafficking and maritime piracy;
 - b) strengthening communication between Abuja, the permanent representation offices and member states;

- c) encouraging them to develop greater knowledge of political and security dynamics in neighbouring regions, specifically North and Central Africa, and ensuring regional collaboration occurs at political, technical and operational levels, and engages all actors, including the judicial system;
 - d) strengthening significantly ECOWAS's expertise on other regional economic communities in Africa and throughout the world, and inviting other regional economic communities in Africa and the African Union (AU) to define a framework of coordination and collaboration on issues of terrorism, trafficking, maritime security, money laundering, infiltration and destabilisation of states by criminal networks.
8. Implement the recommendations of ECOWAS's self-assessment conducted in 2013 following the Mali crisis, specifically those concerning operationalising the mediation facilitation division and re-examining all dimensions of the ECOWAS Standby Force (doctrine, operational procedures, logistical strategies and financing).

To West African civil society organisations:

9. Support publicly the recommendations contained in the institutional reform project proposed in 2013, and implement an ad hoc structure for West African civil society to independently monitor its implementation.

To AU member states and to the chairperson of the AU Commission:

10. Clarify the principles of subsidiarity, comparative advantage and responsibility sharing to quell tensions between the AU and ECOWAS during major crises in West Africa and its neighbours.
11. Continue to reflect on the doctrine, format and configuration of the African Standby Force with a view to better adapting the model to current threats and the future of peace and security on the continent, drawing lessons from challenges encountered by ECOWAS.

To ECOWAS's international partners:

12. Support ECOWAS's institutional reform without interfering in the process, and continue technical and financial assistance projects while ensuring they do not reduce incentives for reform.

Dakar/Brussels, 14 April 2016

Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (III): West Africa

I. Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the largest regional community in Africa with fifteen member states and close to 345 million inhabitants, has the most sophisticated peace and security architecture on the African continent.¹ Formed in May 1975 on the initiative of the Nigerian and Togolese presidents, Yaku-bu Gowon and Gnassingbé Eyadema respectively, ECOWAS had a difficult start.² Its efforts to promote the integration of West African economies were soon hindered by the economic crises of the 1980s, as well as rivalries between heads of state with diverse political cultures and external alliances.³

For its first fifteen years, ECOWAS mainly kept out of security issues, which were considered the sole preserve of member states. At the end of the Cold War, the East-West rivalry that had shaped the interventions of the great powers in African countries ended, giving way to a different international context. ECOWAS had to take responsibility and deal with the conflicts threatening the existence of Liberia, and then Sierra Leone.

Based on desk-based research and dozens of interviews in Dakar, Accra, Abidjan, Bamako, Ouagadougou and Abuja between May 2014 and December 2015, this report analyses the performance of ECOWAS in promoting peace and security in West Africa at a time when the risks of instability come less from intra-state conflicts than from transnational threats that call for regional solutions.⁴ This is the third in a series of reports analysing the regional dimension of insecurity in Africa and collective state responses.⁵

¹ The member states are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Mauritania withdrew from ECOWAS in 2000.

² ECOWAS was created by the Treaty of Lagos, signed on 28 May 1975. Nigeria contributed more than a third of its initial budget. Olatunde Ojo, "Nigeria and the Formation of ECOWAS", *International Organization*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1980), pp. 571-604.

³ Representing countries with a varied colonial heritage, ECOWAS was at first paralysed by recurring political disputes between member states. Julius E. Okolo, "Securing West Africa: The ECOWAS Defence Pact", *The World Today*, vol. 39, no. 5 (1983), pp. 177-184.

⁴ For more on transnational threats, see for example Crisis Group Africa Report N°227, *Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm*, 25 June 2015.

⁵ See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°181, *Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (I): Central Africa*, 7 November 2011; N°191, *Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (II): Southern Africa*, 15 October 2012; and N°228, *South Sudan: Keeping Faith with the IGAD Peace Process*, 27 July 2015.

II. Pioneering Security Mechanisms

Unlike other regional communities, which have developed their security mechanisms within the framework or under the influence of the African Union (AU) peace and security architecture, ECOWAS's efforts in this field predate AU initiatives. In the 1990s, it developed its own conflict prevention and management framework, inspired more than anything by the West African political context, its own security experiences and the particular nature of instability in the region.

A. *Toward a Collective Security Regime*

1. ECOMOG, armed wing of ECOWAS

Although the ECOWAS founding treaty, signed in Lagos in 1975, ratified the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states, the conflict in Liberia at the start of the 1990s put this principle under severe strain.⁶ At the end of May 1990, meeting in Banjul, Gambia, ECOWAS heads of state formed a permanent mediation committee to facilitate finding a solution to the crisis in Liberia. A few months later, in August 1990, this mechanism was complemented by the creation of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in effect the regional body's armed wing. However, ECOMOG's intervention in Liberia was less a jointly planned operation than a Nigerian military adventure. Nigeria initially tried to assist a regime in danger before gaining support from other West African countries.

ECOMOG intervened on two other occasions in response to violent political crises: in Sierra Leone (1997-2000) and Guinea-Bissau (1998-1999).⁷ Although the three interventions succeeded in limiting the scale of humanitarian disasters, they had only qualified success. ECOWAS paid dearly for its lack of experience in the security field and it learned about peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations the hard way. In all three cases, it was only several weeks after the deployment of ECOMOG troops that the supreme institution of ECOWAS, the Authority of Heads of State and Government, officially approved military intervention.⁸ Considering its lack of experience in these matters, ECOWAS showed remarkable perseverance. ECOMOG remained involved in Liberia for nearly a decade, until 1999, at the price of many lives and significant amounts of money.⁹

⁶ Two protocols on non-aggression and mutual assistance on defence were adopted in 1978 and 1981.

⁷ Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau* (London, 2002).

⁸ The absence of a common political vision within ECOWAS was illustrated by the hostility of some member states to ECOMOG interventions. Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire secretly supported the insurrection led by Charles Taylor in Liberia and blocked the deployment of West African troops. They went so far as to supply arms to the rebels well after the arrival of ECOMOG contingents, in violation of the embargo ordained by ECOWAS. The other Francophone countries had reservations about ECOMOG and suspected that Nigeria would use it to extend its influence. With the exception of Guinea, they all initially refused to contribute troops. Cyril Obi, "Economic Community of West African States on the Ground: Comparing Peacekeeping in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau", *African Security*, vol. 2, no. 2-3 (2009), pp. 119-135 and Herbert Howe, "Lessons of Liberia: ECOMOG and Regional Peacekeeping", *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1996-1997), p. 152.

⁹ According to estimations, ECOMOG lost between 500 and 1,000 soldiers, mainly Nigerians. Adekeye Adebajo, *Liberia's Civil War. Nigeria, ECOMOG, and Regional Security in West Africa* (2002); Obi, op. cit.

While often criticised, ECOWAS's performance in this period was not entirely negative. Its tenacity undeniably helped to stabilise the Mano River basin.¹⁰ It was attempting to impose peace while a civil war was going on, rather than conducting a classic peacekeeping operation following a peace agreement. Meanwhile, the great powers abstained from involvement and the UN deployed missions only after the most violent episodes were over, as few countries were willing to risk heavy casualties.

2. Institutionalisation of the “Mechanism”

Learning lessons from the Liberian adventure, ECOWAS adopted a new treaty in 1993 that was much more ambitious than its 1975 founding treaty. It gave the organisation the legal authority to intervene in the internal affairs of member states. The Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (the “Mechanism”), adopted in 1999, institutionalised the progress on security made in the 1990s.

The Mechanism, which contains 58 articles, is virtually ECOWAS's constitution on security matters. Its adoption explicitly recognised for the first time that economic development and regional integration can only be achieved when conditions of security, peace and political stability prevail in member states. It was the first attempt by a regional African organisation to formalise collective conflict prevention and management practices. It set out fourteen objectives, which included implementing the protocols on non-aggression and mutual assistance in defence that were signed in the 1980s.

The Mechanism went much further than dealing with “traditional” external threats. Aware that instability in West Africa was often the result of “bad governance” and violent competition for political power at the national level, ECOWAS also gave itself the means to act in the event of intra-state threats, in particular internal conflicts. It also recognised the transnational nature of many security problems in a region characterised by great human mobility and porous borders. Another of its objectives was to tackle “cross-border crime, international terrorism and [the] proliferation of small arms”.¹¹

By adopting the Mechanism, ECOWAS confirmed its abandonment of the principle of non-interference, which had been the subject of much debate at the time of its intervention in Liberia. Article 25 of the Mechanism gave the organisation a broad mandate to intervene not only “in cases of aggression or conflict”, but also “in the event of serious and massive violation of human rights and the rule of law” and “in the event of an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government”.¹² In a region often racked by coups (Senegal and Cape Verde are the only two of fifteen member states never to have suffered a change of power by force), ECOWAS took a clear and firm position in favour of democratic elections (see Section II.B.3).

¹⁰ The situation calmed down in Liberia, despite a resurgence of violence at the start of the 2000s, which provoked intervention by another ECOWAS mission (ECOMIL). That was replaced by the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in 2003. A disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program was put in place with UN support. Elections followed in 2005. In Sierra Leone, the main armed factions were also disarmed at the start of the 2000s under the supervision of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).

¹¹ Article 3 of the 1999 Mechanism.

¹² Article 25 of the Mechanism.

3. The role of the Mediation and Security Council

Having learned the lessons of the 1990s, ECOWAS created a collective security system that was unprecedented in Africa and evidenced in its institutional architecture and the workings of the Mechanism's main decision-making organs. Although the highest authority, the Authority of Heads of State and Government, is an inter-governmental body, it delegates decision-making powers to a supranational body, the Mediation and Security Council (MSC).¹³ The MSC comprises nine member states, seven of which are elected by the Authority for a two-year renewable term.¹⁴ No member state has a permanent seat, which gives small and large states equal status.

The MSC has broad powers, including the ability to authorise deployment of political and military missions. The Authority operates on the principle of consensus, but MSC decisions require a two-thirds majority, which gives ECOWAS security decisions a supranational character: six member states have the power to involve the entire organisation in peace and security issues.¹⁵ The MSC has "supporting organs" directly attached to ECOWAS, which help it make decisions and implement directives. The ECOWAS Commission, which succeeded the Executive Secretariat in January 2007, provides administrative, operational and logistical support. In particular, its president is responsible for recommending to the MSC the main appointments and dispatching research and mediation missions.

The Defence and Security Commission, which gathers the army chiefs of staff and heads of security services, meets at least once every quarter to advise the MSC on military questions. Another institution is the Council of Elders, which comprises eminent West Africans. The MSC and the chairman of the Commission can ask it to undertake mediation, conciliation or arbitration missions.¹⁶

B. *The Conflict Prevention and Management Framework*

The 1999 Mechanism gave ECOWAS a flexible framework for dealing with peace and security issues in West Africa by providing a range of procedures for it to follow in each phase of a conflict.¹⁷ An observation and early warning system aims to prevent conflicts, while mediation and reconciliation initiatives aim to facilitate their resolution. ECOWAS can also conduct peacekeeping operations by deploying the Standby Force, which replaced ECOMOG at the start of the 2000s and forms part of the AU Standby Forces. Finally, the Mechanism allows ECOWAS to implement an "end to hostilities" and peacebuilding strategy.

¹³ Article 10(1): "The Mediation and Security Council shall take decisions on issues of peace and security in the sub-region on behalf of the Authority. It shall also implement all the provisions of this protocol".

¹⁴ The other two members are the current chairman and the immediate past chairman of the Authority (Article 8).

¹⁵ The MSC meets as follows: heads of state at least twice a year, foreign affairs, defence, interior and security ministers quarterly and accredited ambassadors to ECOWAS monthly.

¹⁶ The Council of Elders has been practically dormant in recent years. Crisis Group interviews, Abuja, December 2014.

¹⁷ Article 27 provides for different courses of action: recourse to the Council of Elders, the dispatch of fact-finding, political and mediation missions and intervention by ECOMOG.

1. Conflict prevention: the early warning system

The Mechanism provides for the creation of a “sub-regional peace and security observation system”, the Early Warning and Response Network (Ecowarn). This system warns the organisation of threats to stability. It relies on an Observation and Monitoring Centre, which is located at ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja and has four local offices in Banjul, Cotonou, Monrovia and Ouagadougou, each responsible for monitoring a group of countries.¹⁸

This monitoring and early warning system is relatively accomplished. Ecowarn has formed links with West African civil society organisations, in particular the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), which groups more than 500 local peacebuilding organisations. Since it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ECOWAS in 2002, WANEP has directly participated in information gathering and analysis for implementation of Ecowarn. Ecowarn benefits from the involvement of civil society monitors, who are generally very active, in a partnership which is unique among African early warning systems.

Although the involvement of government monitors and the quality of information gathered is uneven, the early warning system has helped spread a culture of transparency on political and security issues in West Africa. Some countries, such as Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana actively cooperate with Ecowarn. Others are reluctant to share information on what they consider to be “sensitive” subjects.¹⁹

Developing rapid responses to prevent the emergence of conflicts identified by the early warning system remains a challenge. ECOWAS has responded to Ecowarn warnings on several occasions: during the crises in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau and by deciding not to participate in the monitoring and subsequent validation of the 2011 elections in Gambia.²⁰ However, due to the political considerations of member states, which are always sovereign, translating warning messages into an effective response can be difficult.²¹

In response to these limitations, reform is underway and, in 2016, will result in the creation of response mechanisms at the member state level involving government

¹⁸ The Banjul office covers zone one: Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Senegal. The Ouagadougou office covers zone two: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and Niger. The Monrovia office covers zone three: Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Cotonou office covers zone four: Benin, Nigeria and Togo (Article 24). Three monitors in each country (two state representatives and one civil society representative) gather quantitative and qualitative information on the political and economic context and security threats. They regularly produce general reports and, if needed, incident and analytical reports. This information is communicated to the Observation Centre in Abuja through the zone offices, then redistributed to the relevant actors within the ECOWAS Commission to facilitate a rapid response. Ecowarn also produces a daily review of the main political and security events in member countries, which is widely distributed throughout the region. Crisis Group interviews, experts on the ECOWAS early warning system, Accra, May 2014, Abuja, December 2014.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. On the basis of Ecowarn reports of the intimidation of the media and voters, the ECOWAS Commission decided not to send election observers to cover the 24 November 2011 presidential election, which saw the re-election of President Yahya Jammeh. “ECOWAS statement on the presidential election of 24 November 2011 in Gambia”, n°234/2011, 22 October 2011.

²¹ On several occasions in 2011 and 2012, Ecowarn signalled the arrival on Malian territory of armed Tuareg militants from Libya, but these warnings did not result in appropriate action by the Malian government. Crisis Group interviews, experts familiar with the ECOWAS early warning system, Accra, May 2014, Abuja, December 2014.

authorities, civil society representatives and other national institutions.²² Funded by the U.S. Aid Agency (USAID), the new early warning arrangements will be integrated into the operations of the permanent ECOWAS offices in member states. They will involve representatives of governments and other national institutions to try to use warning signals more systematically to muster the necessary national capacity and willingness to respond.²³ Whether this supplementary institutional arrangement is effective in promoting regional peace will depend on the care given to its implementation.

2. Mediation

The president of the ECOWAS Commission is authorised to dispatch fact-finding, mediation, facilitation, negotiation and reconciliation missions. He generally appoints special envoys to countries in crisis or those likely to suffer a crisis. Special envoys advise ECOWAS bodies on the options available to reduce tension and communicate the organisation's decisions to the actors in crisis or conflict. To play this role ECOWAS has traditionally called on former heads of state from the region, to whom current heads of state are more likely to listen. It also sends current heads of state.²⁴

To prevent and resolve conflicts ECOWAS has most frequently resorted to mediation and reconciliation initiatives. Paradoxically, the Mechanism and the organisation's other regulatory instruments do not provide much detail on these tools. The Authority of Heads of State and Government and the MSC have considerable room for manoeuvre when appointing mediators and instructing them how to conduct their missions. The Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) has a division dedicated to supporting mediation missions, like the UN and the AU, but this was only created in 2015.²⁵

3. Peacekeeping: from ECOMOG to the ECOWAS Standby Force

The drafters of the Mechanism learned from ECOWAS's improvised military deployments in Liberia and Sierra Leone and turned ECOMOG, a product of circumstances, into a permanent force. Member states made military, police and civilian units available to ECOMOG. Units were stationed in their country of origin, ready to be deployed on missions authorised by the Mechanism's executive organs.

Since the launch of the AU peace and security architecture in the 2000s, ECOMOG, renamed the ECOWAS Standby Force in June 2014, forms one of the five regional brigades that make up the African Standby Force (ASF). Since 2010, the objective has been to form a 6,500-strong multinational brigade, available for deployment accord-

²² Crisis Group interview, ECOWAS official, Abuja, December 2014.

²³ Documents on the reform of the ECOWAS early warning system, consulted by Crisis Group.

²⁴ Former Nigerian Presidents Abdulsalami Abubakar and Ibrahim Babangida served as mediators in Liberia (2003) and Niger (2009), and Guinea (2007) respectively. After leaving office, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) was ECOWAS envoy on the eve of the elections in Senegal (2012) and, briefly, during the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire (2011). As for sitting presidents, ECOWAS most often chose Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré (1987-2014) as mediator. He acted as mediator or facilitator in the crises in Togo, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali between 2005 and 2014.

²⁵ ECOWAS decided to create the division in 2008 but only finished recruiting staff in March 2015. Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, ECOWAS officials, Abuja and Dakar, December 2014, April and August 2015.

ing to six scenarios in the region or in other parts of the continent in case of a large-scale intervention.

In an attempt to resolve the problems associated with coordinating troops, from which ECOMOG particularly suffered in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the Mechanism gave the ECOWAS Commission responsibility for organising joint training programs and regular joint military exercises. The political component of each peace mission is led by a special representative and the military component by a force commander.²⁶ The MSC makes both appointments, on the recommendation of the Commission. Commanders of national contingents report to the force commander, who is accountable to the ECOWAS Commission.²⁷ The same goes for the civilian units, which are under the leadership of the special representative.

ECOWAS is the African regional organisation that has made the most progress, at least formally, toward an effective Standby Force. Although its civilian and police components are still largely underdeveloped, it has more or less achieved the military goals set in the roadmap adopted in 2005. In December 2009, the army chiefs of staff of member states approved the structure and composition of the Standby Force brigade. The brigade includes a rapid reaction force capable of intervening within 30 days and other units able to deploy within three months. The permanent army staff in Abuja has three battalions under its command and controls two logistics depots.²⁸ Several training exercises have been conducted to evaluate its capacity to lead a peace-keeping operation, including a major exercise involving all modules in Bamako in 2008.²⁹ However, there is a significant gap between the official discourse on the Standby Force's readiness and the reality of a model that has yet to be tested in the field (see Section IV).

C. *Beyond the Mechanism: Human Security and Convergence toward Democratic Values*

By actively promoting democracy and combating a wide range of security threats, in addition to dealing with problems stemming from armed conflicts, ECOWAS has gradually adopted a new security culture that is very different from the approach based on promoting the stability of states that prevailed until the 1990s. The organisation now focuses on human security and aims to ensure the welfare of individuals and protect them against all forms of violence.

1. Tackling transnational security problems

The Mechanism signalled an extension of ECOWAS's security engagement beyond armed conflicts in response to the emergence of new regional threats. It recognised the transnational nature of many security problems and took measures against cross-

²⁶ Article 32 of the 1999 Protocol.

²⁷ Article 34 of the 1999 Protocol.

²⁸ Senegal commands the west battalion, Nigeria commands the east battalion and Mali commands the logistics battalion.

²⁹ ECOWAS organised several other joint exercises in Senegal (2006, 2007), Burkina Faso (2009), Benin (2010) and Ghana (2011). The Standby Force is supposed to have two depots available to support operations: a humanitarian depot in Bamako and a logistics depot in Freetown. In fact, these depots are not yet operational. Even the army general staff in Abuja remains dependent on specific external aid packages for the basic equipment necessary to prepare a deployment on foreign territory. Crisis Group interview, ECOWAS official, Abuja, September 2015.

border crime, corruption, money laundering and the proliferation and illegal circulation of small arms.³⁰ Although the Mechanism did not go beyond declarations of intent, ECOWAS produced protocols and other documents to specify and organise its involvement in these fields.

Ever since the Mano River Basin conflicts, the organisation has innovated in the fight against small arms. In 1999, at the initiative of Mali, which has dealt with arms trafficking in the north for several decades, ECOWAS adopted a moratorium on the import, export and manufacture of small arms in West Africa. An even more restrictive convention on small arms and light weapons followed in 2006. These two documents prohibited the transfer of small arms and introduced a system of exemptions managed by the ECOWAS Commission. States wanting to import arms must submit a request with their reasons for doing so to the Commission, which then consults member states for approval. This, therefore, gives each state the right to scrutinise the arms imports of its neighbours.³¹

ECOWAS created another regional security instrument in 2000, the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA). This agency, based in Dakar, has become an essential partner for national units responsible for combatting money laundering, and since 2006, the funding of terrorism.

Faced with the rise of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other extremist movements in the Sahel and northern Nigeria, ECOWAS adopted an anti-terrorist strategy for the first time in February 2013. Largely inspired by the UN anti-terrorist strategy, it comprises three components – prevention, prosecution and reconstruction – and provides for the creation of an anti-terrorist coordination unit, an ECOWAS arrest warrant and a blacklist of terrorist and criminal networks. The will to institutionalise ECOWAS's response to terrorist threats is welcome but the real challenge is to speedily implement the measures in the strategy.

Following a conference in Praia, Cape Verde, in October 2008, ECOWAS adopted a regional action plan against drugs trafficking and transnational crime.³² In response to an increase in piracy and other crimes off the West African coast which raised fears that the situation could become similar to that of the Somali coast, ECOWAS formulated an integrated maritime security strategy. Adopted by the summit of heads of state in March 2014, it created three operational zones and a regional maritime coordination centre. Putting into practice a “pilot” zone, the one experiencing most maritime crime, which includes Benin, Niger, Nigeria and Togo, has been the first test of this new undertaking.³³

³⁰ Articles 46, 48, 49, 50 and 51.

³¹ The Moratorium also provides for the creation of national commissions in each member state to take charge of the different aspects of the small arms problem, in accordance with the national context. “Managing National Commissions for Small Arms and Light Weapons Control in West Africa”, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Policy Brief 1/2013, 2013.

³² In July 2009, the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI) was launched to help ECOWAS implement its action plan. The initiative's cornerstone is the formation in four pilot states (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone) of units to fight transnational crime. WACI was launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), the UN Department of Political Affairs, the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations and Interpol. See <http://bit.ly/1mukMXE>.

³³ This inter-regional cooperation initiative involved ECOWAS, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission and resulted in September 2014 in the creation of a centre in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

2. A firm commitment to “democratic” standards

ECOWAS has established itself as the pioneer African regional organisation in the field of political integration. Its ambition of supervising the political practices and exercise of power in member states, implicit in the Mechanism, became clear with the adoption of the Additional Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in December 2001. The additional protocol’s first article includes a long list of “constitutional principles shared by all member states”, including the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and zero tolerance for obtaining or maintaining power by unconstitutional and undemocratic means.

In a region where the military often plays a dominant role, the protocol reaffirmed the apolitical nature of the security forces and their subjection to civilian authorities. It demonstrated the will to promote free and democratic elections by authorising the president of the Commission to dispatch election observation missions. In particular, its second chapter introduced sanctions, to be activated “in the event that democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or where there is massive violation of human rights”.³⁴ On the recommendation of the MSC, the Authority of Heads of State and Government can take several measures vis-à-vis states, including their suspension from all ECOWAS bodies.

ECOWAS has made the concept of human security one of the pillars of its development strategy in the years to come. Vision 2020, adopted in June 2007 in Abuja, envisages the transformation of the organisation from an “ECOWAS of states” into an “ECOWAS of peoples”.³⁵ This was also the watchword for celebrations of the organisation’s 40th anniversary in 2015.

This commitment to human security appeared in the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), adopted in January 2008 with the goal of presenting “a comprehensive operational conflict-prevention and peacebuilding strategy”. It identified fourteen components, including classic ones such as early warning, preventive diplomacy and a peacekeeping force, and more unusual ones that illustrated the change in security culture, such as cross-border initiatives, the promotion of the interests of youth and women, of peace and security, or good governance of natural resources.³⁶

However, the ECPF resembles a list of good intentions rather than a precise action plan with national and regional objectives. Action plans were still in the course of preparation in 2014, nearly seven years after adoption of the ECPF.³⁷

³⁴ Article 45.

³⁵ “Driving a People-Centred Regional Integration”, speech by H.E. James Victor Gbeho, president of the ECOWAS Commission, on the 36th anniversary of the creation of ECOWAS, Abuja, 27 May 2011.

³⁶ The fourteen components are: 1) early warning 2) preventive diplomacy 3) democracy and political governance 4) human rights and the rule of law 5) media 6) natural resources governance 7) cross-border initiatives 8) security governance 9) practical disarmament 10) women, peace and security 11) youth empowerment 12) ECOWAS Standby Force 13) humanitarian assistance 14) peace education (the culture of peace).

³⁷ An ECPF steering committee coordinates all the departments involved in implementing the framework, but according to a Crisis Group interlocutor, “it never meets”. Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Abuja, December 2014. At the time of publication, there does not seem to have been any significant change to this situation.

III. Putting the Regional Peace and Security Architecture to the Test

Since the early 2000s, ECOWAS has had many opportunities to use its conflict prevention and management instruments: from Guinea to Mali, Togo, Guinea-Bissau and Niger, West Africa has not been spared political-institutional crises and armed conflicts. Although ECOWAS has definitively buried the principle of non-interference and has showed a great capacity to react, its interventions have not always had the expected results. They have revealed its limitations, notably its lack of military and diplomatic capacity.

On the other hand, ECOWAS has been effective in solving potentially explosive institutional crises, as in Burkina Faso in 2014, even though its action at the time of the coup in September 2015 revealed some deficiencies. The following case studies on Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Burkina Faso highlight the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS's crisis resolution model.

A. ECOWAS and Multidimensional Crises

ECOWAS has run into problems when intervening in complex crises involving regional heavyweights or bringing into play a range of structural factors and those relating to a specific time and place. These crises have highlighted the organisation's deficiencies when it comes to overcoming political deadlocks and making credible threats of military intervention. Although its intervention helped to stabilise Guinea-Bissau, the crisis in Mali exposed the limitations of its interventions in open armed conflicts.

1. Guinea-Bissau (2005-2015)

The case of Guinea-Bissau, confronted with a succession of political and security crises since the mid-2000s, shows both the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS.³⁸ It had already intervened in the country during the 1998-1999 civil war, but the improvised deployment of ECOMOG was a failure and ended with a rushed withdrawal from the country.³⁹ Returning to Guinea-Bissau in October 2004, after a mutiny by the armed forces, ECOWAS distinguished itself by its capacity to intervene in a timely manner and defuse the political tension before it escalated into a lethal conflict.

³⁸ Between 2004 and 2012, Guinea-Bissau experienced a mutiny by the armed forces (October 2004), an abortive coup (August 2008), two attempts on the life of President Vieira (2005 and 2009), the second one successful, two failed coups (April 2010 and December 2011) and a successful coup against Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Junior (April 2012). For more details, see Crisis Group Africa Reports and Briefings N°142, *Guinea-Bissau: In Need of a State*, 2 July 2008; N°61, *Guinea-Bissau: Beyond Rule of the Gun*, 25 June 2009; N°183, *Beyond Compromises: Reform Prospects in Guinea-Bissau*, 23 January 2012; and N°190, *Beyond Turf Wars: Managing the Post-Coup Transition in Guinea-Bissau*, 17 August 2012.

³⁹ Independently of ECOWAS, Senegalese and Guinean troops intervened in Guinea-Bissau in June 1998, in the name of bilateral agreements, after the army chief of staff, General Ansumane Mané, dismissed after being accused of supporting the Senegalese rebels of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MDFC), attempted a coup against President Vieira. ECOWAS negotiated an agreement between Mané and Vieira at the end of 1998 and deployed ECOMOG to ensure the ceasefire and allow the retreat of Guinean and Senegalese contingents. However, the unit was too weak militarily and it could not react when Mané went on the offensive again and took control of Bissau in May 1999. ECOMOG finally withdrew from the country less than five months after its deployment. Following this fiasco, ECOWAS largely disengaged from the country for several years, leaving the UN to take the lead.

Mediation (2004-2009)

After the appointment of a special representative of the Commission's president to Bissau in 2004, the organisation had a permanent presence in the country, where its mediation between political and military actors was generally well received. ECOWAS's quick dispatch of high-level good-will missions, usually composed of the president of the Commission and at least one minister from a member state, was also crucial to limiting crises and containing the risks of a widespread deterioration in the situation. On four occasions (2005, 2008, 2009 and 2014), emergency aid provided by ECOWAS and some of its members, with Nigeria at the forefront, was decisive in facilitating satisfactory and non-violent elections.⁴⁰

Closer to the ground than other international partners, ECOWAS was able to build on personal relationships and a better understanding of the Guinea-Bissau context, although it took years to become familiar with the former Portuguese colony's particular political and institutional heritage, including the fact that it was the only country in the region to have waged a war of independence. By promoting the creation in May 2006 of an International Contact Group for Guinea-Bissau (ICG-GB), ECOWAS helped mobilise an international community that had little interest in the country, even though the ICG-GB never benefited from the same level of attention and monitoring as the ICG-G, its equivalent in neighbouring Guinea.⁴¹

After the European Union (EU) suspended its involvement in security sector reform (SSR) following another army coup in 2010, ECOWAS tried to relaunch the process, in partnership with the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), notably Angola. However, their goodwill was unable to overcome the lack of a clear division of labour between the different international organisations, rivalries between partners who were supposed to work together on the reforms, the governmental instability and the grip on Bissau held by unsavoury military leaders. Slow and incoherent administrative and financial procedures and the non-transparent management of resources and priorities in Abuja did not help matters.⁴² ECOWAS was therefore unable to give any impetus to the necessary reforms, notably in the security sector, even though the country had become a crossroads for cocaine trafficking in West Africa during the period 2005-2009.⁴³

The political transition (2012-2016)

Finally, the fear of some key ECOWAS countries, including Senegal and Nigeria, that Guinea-Bissau could fall under the influence of Angola, pushed the organisation into taking more risks and using its own resources in the Guinea-Bissau political and mil-

⁴⁰ At the time of the 2009 presidential election, organised a few months after the assassination of President Vieira, while the international community, which had almost entirely funded legislative elections a few months earlier, was slow to mobilise, ECOWAS and the Nigerian government paid for a lot of the logistics and security operations and contained tensions within the armed forces. The election took place without violence and was welcomed by the various observation missions. Gilles Yabi, "The role of ECOWAS in managing political crisis and conflict. The cases of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, September 2010.

⁴¹ The ICG-GB was composed of representatives of international organisations (ECOWAS, Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), AU, UN, UEMOA, EU, IMF, World Bank) and interested countries (Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Spain, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Portugal and Senegal).

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, former senior ECOWAS official and diplomat, Cotonou and Abuja, 2014.

⁴³ Gilles Yabi, *op. cit.*

itary game after the military coup of 2012.⁴⁴ ECOWAS's "lone ranger" role was initially controversial, in Bissau itself and at the international level. But international actors eventually united and satisfactory elections, in which ECOWAS again played a major role, completed the transition. However, difficulties remain in Bissau, and while ECOWAS contributes to the disarmament of political life, it has not yet succeeded in bringing about the reforms necessary to build stability.

Although Angola joined with ECOWAS to try relaunching SSR in 2010, Luanda has developed since 2009 a special relationship with Guinea-Bissau's Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Junior, an important politician and prosperous businessman. It deployed a military assistance mission (Missang) in a country far from its natural zone of influence. Angola presented Missang as a mission to assist with SSR, but West Africans saw it as an external force sent to protect the interests of Gomes Junior and, presumably, those of Angola.⁴⁵

In April 2012, when a coup overthrew Prime Minister Gomes Junior, then favourite to win the presidential election, ECOWAS took advantage of the situation to strengthen its influence in the country and reduce that of Angola.⁴⁶ While the CPLP and Angola strongly disapproved of the coup and called for Gomes Junior to be reinstated, ECOWAS reaffirmed its zero tolerance policy for coups while engaging in a dialogue with the coup leaders, in the name of pragmatism and realism, and encouraged the establishment of transitional authorities dependent on the latter. Nigeria, ECOWAS and other West African regional organisations then single-handedly supported these authorities.⁴⁷

Therein, ECOWAS's handling of the April 2012 political crisis in Guinea-Bissau was clearly different from the way it dealt with the coup in Mali around the same time (see Section III.A.2). Many observers, both in Bissau and elsewhere, believe that ECOWAS effectively recognised the coup and some suspect that either it or some of its members had encouraged the military to overthrow Gomes Junior, regarded as closer to the Portuguese-language networks than to the leaders of Anglophone and Francophone West Africa.⁴⁸ Four ECOWAS countries, all very active in regional diplomacy, played a key role in determining the position of the organisation in this matter: Nigeria, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.⁴⁹

But they all had different reasons for doing so. Senegal has always been involved in resolving its neighbour's crises. Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire wanted West Africa to remain the principal actor in resolving crises in the region and were determined to block Angolan influence. Burkina Faso, at the instigation of then-President Blaise Compaoré, was trying to obtain diplomatic influence disproportionate to the country's economic influence.

In parallel to its political involvement, ECOWAS quickly deployed, at its own expense, a military mission, ECOMIB, with the stated objective of facilitating the departure of the Angolan military (effective from June 2012) and supporting the res-

⁴⁴ For more on the power struggles between ECOWAS and the CPLP, see Crisis Group Report, *Beyond Turf Wars ...*, op. cit., pp. 12-17.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, ECOWAS officials, Abuja, December 2014.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, ECOWAS officials, Abuja, December 2014.

⁴⁷ ECOWAS tried to do a "deal" with the military junta, obtaining some good-will gestures from the coup leaders, notably the release of Gomes Junior, in exchange for significant concessions, particularly the appointment of Serifo Nhamadjo as president of the transition.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group report, *Beyond Turf Wars ...*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior officials, Abidjan, November 2014.

toration of constitutional order.⁵⁰ ECOWAS then deployed a team of military experts to help the authorities relaunch SSR, long awaited by the country's international partners.

The tension between international actors finally resulted in a reasonably satisfactory compromise. Joint missions involving ECOWAS and other international organisations helped reconcile the points of view. The transition lasted two years, but the new Guinea-Bissau government was obliged to negotiate with the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), led by Gomes Junior. Satisfactory legislative and presidential elections were organised in April and May 2014. Gomes Junior prudently remained out of the country, but the PAIGC won the elections, defeating candidates associated with the coup leaders. Although ECOMIB was unable to prevent all violence against prominent opponents of the coup leaders during the transition and was unable to make much progress with SSR, it played a decisive role in keeping the Bissau-Guinean military at a distance during the election process.⁵¹

This electoral success brought international actors even closer together. ECOWAS was a key component of the international mechanisms that helped keep Bissau-Guinean actors under control, for example during the sidelining of Antonio Injai, military chief of staff at the time of the coup. ECOMIB's contribution was ultimately recognised and the EU has provided part of the mission's budget from July 2015.⁵²

While intrigues within the PAIGC now threaten the country's stability, ECOMIB probably plays a preventive role, helping to compel Bissau-Guinean politicians to use peaceful methods. ECOWAS has been involved on several occasions in attempts at mediation through its current president, Senegalese President Macky Sall, or its special envoy, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. It remains to be seen if these efforts can contain the virulent rivalries within the political class in Bissau and sufficiently stabilise the country to regain the support of international partners and finally achieve SSR.

In Abuja, the deployment of ECOMIB since May 2012 and its continued existence since then are already a cause for satisfaction in light of the difficulties experienced by ECOWAS in Mali (see Section III.A.2). Made easier by the small size of the country, ECOWAS's intervention in Guinea-Bissau since 2012 has showed it can obtain results if it has the backing of influential member countries and the necessary political, military and financial resources.

2. Mali (2012-2015)

The role of ECOWAS during the Malian political crisis underlined the organisation's importance as a diplomatic actor to be reckoned with and its lack of substance as a regional body capable of carrying out a decisive military intervention on its own in a complex environment.

⁵⁰ The deployment of ECOMIB, comprising 629 Burkinabe, Nigerian and Senegalese soldiers and police officers, was formalised in November 2012 with the signing of a mission agreement with the transitional government and a draft agreement on implementation of the roadmap for the defence and security sector reform program. "Historique de l'Opération ECOMIB", Réseau de recherche sur les opérations de paix (ROP), 7 January 2014.

⁵¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°109, *Security Sector Reform in Guinea-Bissau: an Opportunity Not to Be Missed*, 19 March 2015.

⁵² ECOMIB's mandate, renewed several times, now runs until June 2016.

The political crisis

From the first quarter of 2011, the slowness of preparations for the elections and deterioration of the security situation in the north of the country began to worry ECOWAS. However, the organisation's early warning mechanism and preventive diplomacy are not much use if the government of the country concerned does not share the same analysis and does not react to the same messages. The Malian president, although aware of his country's fragility, seemed overtaken by events and incapable of providing political or military leadership. ECOWAS was also not able to provide leadership, having little experience in Sahel-Saharan security issues.⁵³

However, ECOWAS faced a more familiar situation when successive routs of the Malian army in the north led to a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo on 21-22 March 2012.⁵⁴ On the initiative of the president of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, who was at that time chairman, ECOWAS held an emergency meeting of heads of state and government in Abidjan on 27 March. It demanded the immediate return to constitutional order, mandated the then-president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, to mediate and sent to Bamako a mission composed of six heads of state to communicate the organisation's message to Captain Sanogo and discuss the details of a return to constitutional order. However, the heads of state were unable to land in Bamako, as the airport runway had been overrun by a demonstration organised by the junta.

Back in Abidjan, the heads of state improvised a mini-summit on 29 March and decided to apply a vast arsenal of political, diplomatic, economic and financial sanctions against Mali for as long as the junta remained in power. It gave the junta 72 hours to reestablish constitutional order. These drastic sanctions included the closure of the borders of ECOWAS member states with Mali, a landlocked country dependent on the ports of its neighbours. ECOWAS also froze the state's accounts at the regional central bank. In addition, the mini-summit confirmed the decision to "put the ECOWAS Standby Force on high alert for all eventualities".⁵⁵ The threat of a regional military intervention was quickly made, but the formulation was ambiguous. In addition, two simultaneous crises were developing: the junta's takeover of political power and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)'s declaration of independence of Azawad in the north.

ECOWAS played a decisive role in organising the post-coup transition. As a prominent Malian politician involved in the initial negotiations said: "thanks to ECOWAS, we have returned to constitutional order within three weeks".⁵⁶ ECOWAS continued to supervise the transition and corrected the deficiencies of the 6 April agreement to

⁵³ As an institution, ECOWAS did not know much about the reasons behind the competition between Tuareg, Arab and other groups that had for years been active in trafficking in the Sahel-Saharan region and that, in some cases, had made links with AQIM cells. ECOWAS was not involved in the resolution of preceding conflicts in the 1990s and in 2006-2007, when most of the efforts had been led by Algiers, assisted by Libya. Algeria, Libya and, to a lesser extent, Mauritania and Morocco have more influence on security issues in the Sahel-Saharan region, including northern Mali and northern Niger, than the most influential West African capitals, including Abuja.

⁵⁴ Some ECOWAS and AU officials and foreign ministers (notably from Kenya and Zimbabwe) were trapped in Bamako on the day of the coup, as a ministerial meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on the Sahel had taken place in the Malian capital on 20 March.

⁵⁵ Press release of the ECOWAS emergency mini-summit of heads of state and government on the situation in Mali, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 29 March 2012.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2014.

end the crisis.⁵⁷ However, in 2012, many actors and observers were critical of ECOWAS's action, especially that of Burkina Faso.⁵⁸ Critics felt that the Burkinabe mediator, former President Compaoré, was given too broad a mandate, allowing him to conduct the discussions as he saw fit and compromising ECOWAS's neutrality.⁵⁹

Despite this criticism, the organisation demonstrated coherence with its principles by firmly and clearly refusing any break in constitutional order. By exercising maximum pressure on the junta, it reached its overall objective. With time, Malian actors' and regional and international diplomats' judgment on ECOWAS's political and diplomatic response to the coup has become more measured and sometimes even positive.⁶⁰ The initiatives taken on Mali by the then-Ivorian ECOWAS chairman are also seen in a positive light. This example shows that heads of state in the region can sometimes play a useful role in managing a crisis, both within the regional organisation and independently.⁶¹

The difficult question of military intervention

ECOWAS found it much more difficult to respond when rebels and jihadist groups took control of more than half of Malian territory than responding to the coup in Bamako, exposing its major weaknesses when it considers using force. The threat of military intervention was meant to put pressure on Sanogo's junta, which was committing atrocities in Bamako and the south of the country, as much as counter the armed rebel groups in the north.

In both cases, ECOWAS was confronted with the limits of its military capabilities. It was impossible to deploy its soldiers to the densely populated city of Bamako to neutralise the Malian junta's troops. An ECOWAS military intervention in the regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal to liberate them from occupation by armed Tuareg and jihadist groups, alongside or in place of a Malian army in disarray, would have involved a major operation in the Sahara, where natural conditions are extremely harsh, against well-equipped, determined, organised combatants who knew the terrain very well.

According to a Malian involved in the political and military negotiations at that time: "ECOWAS has shown a lot of goodwill but also how powerless it is. ... It was unable to mobilise troops, even in Bamako. ... Despite its problems, the Malian army

⁵⁷ ECOWAS's emissaries clarified the roles of the interim president, prime minister and head of the junta. The first transition government faced problems, notably because of the personality of its prime minister, Modibo Diarra. Following his departure, the roles within the transitional executive were clarified. The new prime minister, Django Cissoko, who unlike his predecessor harboured no presidential ambitions, had a good knowledge of the machinery of government. This allowed a smoother functioning of the institutions and facilitated interaction with ECOWAS and other international actors.

⁵⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°90, *Mali: The Need for Determined and Coordinated International Action*, 24 September 2012.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bamako, May 2012. At the ECOWAS heads of state summit on 26 April 2012, the president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, was appointed assistant mediator to supplement Compaoré's efforts. This revealed a desire to supervise more closely the individual initiatives taken by Burkina Faso.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bamako, November 2014.

⁶¹ The Ivorian president closely followed the progress of the transition in Mali and he also played a major role in launching the French Operation Serval on 10 January 2013 after a coalition of jihadist combatants started advancing toward the south and ended the negotiations that had begun in Ouagadougou. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, ECOWAS officials, Abidjan, Bamako and Abuja, November and December 2014.

was more operational on the ground than the other Francophone armies from the region”.⁶² Although this statement is not necessarily accurate, it highlights the battle of egos between Malian leaders and ECOWAS representatives, which slowed down the deployment of a military mission in Mali.⁶³ Not surprisingly, ECOWAS leaders see things differently. They blame Malian politicians and military officers: “the Malians did everything they could to prevent ECOWAS from organising a rapid deployment. In fact, [they] did not want an ECOWAS mission at home”.⁶⁴

For several months in 2012, there was open rivalry between ECOWAS and the AU over political mastery of the military intervention in Mali, recalling the tension between two a priori complementary organisations. The UN Security Council passed resolution 2085 on 20 December 2012 authorising the deployment of an “African-led force”, the International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), implicitly recognising the transfer of leadership from ECOWAS to the AU.⁶⁵ ECOWAS authorities did not conceal their frustration but the organisation remained mobilised.⁶⁶ According to one West African diplomat: “ECOWAS saved Mali by organising a special meeting of army chiefs of staff in Abidjan on 15 December 2012 when the threat of attack from armed jihadist groups became clearer. The meeting decided it was necessary to get away from the idea of an international intervention and provide Mali with a contingency plan”.⁶⁷

France’s Operation Serval and the deployment of Chadian troops, which suffered the heaviest losses in direct clashes with jihadist combatants in the Kidal region, relegated ECOWAS to the background. Perhaps too much so, given the significant role played by the deployment of contingents from the region’s countries in stabilising central Mali and the border areas. When military confrontation with the armed groups proved inevitable at the end of December 2012, ECOWAS quickly deployed troops from its various member states, despite the limited logistical capability of the organisation and contributing countries.⁶⁸ Deployment of AFISMA troops and their movement toward different regions in Mali was slow and exposed the extent of the material and logistical inadequacies of the region’s states. The fairest judgment is that there was much goodwill but serious operational limitations.

After the presidential election (since 2013)

After northern Mali was taken back from the rebels at the beginning of 2013, ECOWAS regained a certain level of influence on the political process through the efforts of its mediator, Compaoré, whose country hosted the leaders of the northern Mali

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Bamako, 18 November 2014.

⁶³ The mission was initially called the ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA) and then became the International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) which then gave way to the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, West African diplomat, Bamako, November 2014.

⁶⁵ One diplomat said that “Susan Rice saved the AU by proposing the terminology ‘African-led international mission’ during the discussion at the Security Council”. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, December 2014.

⁶⁶ The UN rejected ECOWAS’s military operations plan due to its lack of clarity on costs and objectives. It then asked it to work with the AU.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, West African diplomat, Bamako, November 2014.

⁶⁸ The Ivorian president invited four army chiefs of staff (from Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria) to a meeting on 29 December 2012. On 6 January 2013, another meeting, to which Chad was also invited, confirmed the deployment of Nigerian troops. Crisis Group interview, West African diplomat, Bamako, November 2014.

Tuareg armed groups for several months. In June 2013, the former Burkinabe president managed to ensure that the transitional government and the armed groups signed the “preliminary agreement on the presidential election and inclusive peace talks in Mali”. The Ouagadougou Agreement opened the way for the organisation of the presidential election in July-August 2013.

ECOWAS accompanied all stages of the electoral process and provided technical and financial assistance that was very much appreciated by the Malian authorities.⁶⁹ The then-ECOWAS chairman, Alassane Ouattara, got personally involved and, like other actors, including France, argued for strict adherence to the agreed electoral timetable, despite the inadequacies of the process. The presidential election was held in acceptable conditions and saw Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) win with a clear majority. From that point on, the role and influence of ECOWAS in the peace process weakened. The organisation paid the price for the overly close association between its mediation efforts and the personal good offices of the Burkinabe president, perceived as too obliging toward the Tuareg rebels. Critics felt he had his own agenda and was not worthy of the Malian government’s complete trust.

On the other hand, Algeria, a much more politically, militarily and financially powerful neighbour, and very well placed to influence the chiefs of the armed Tuareg and Arab groups in northern Mali, made itself available to take on the mediation role that it had played during previous Tuareg rebellions in Mali. President IBK preferred to turn to this neighbour that holds some of the keys to political and economic stability and security in northern Mali. The negotiations in Algiers, which resulted in the June 2015 peace agreement, did not exclude the regional and international actors that were previously involved. ECOWAS, the AU and the UN took part in the negotiations. ECOWAS did play a role, in part because it was better able to build bridges to the Malian political elites. However, although it contributed a lot in terms of expertise and know-how during the discussions, ECOWAS was no longer considered to be a decisive actor.⁷⁰

B. *ECOWAS Faces Institutional and Political Crises: Burkina Faso (2014-2015)*

ECOWAS’s response to the Burkinabe political-institutional crisis raised doubts about the organisation’s impartiality and neutrality, bringing to light the influence of prominent politicians of the region on its decisions. Private interests and personal friendships sometimes hampered the application of its democratic and good governance principles. This lack of professionalism possibly followed from the informal nature of its mediation.

⁶⁹ “The Malians felt closer to ECOWAS, given the personal links between people in the region. The AU seemed more distant. ECOWAS helped a lot with the elections, including financially by contributing a million dollars”. Crisis Group interview, Malian transitional authority, Bamako, November 2014.

⁷⁰ According to one diplomat, “ECOWAS, once very involved in Mali, has now a symbolic presence. It is not part of the hard core that leads the negotiations in Algiers. ECOWAS does not impose itself in the discussions and the Algerians hardly mention the Ouagadougou agreement”. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, December 2014.

1. Blaise Compaoré's fall (October-November 2014)

Faced with the political vacuum left by the sudden resignation of President Blaise Compaoré in October 2014 and Lieutenant-Colonel Yacouba Isaac Zida's takeover of power, ECOWAS issued a first communiqué on 31 October calling on the parties "to embrace dialogue with a view to arriving at a political consensus that will lead to free, fair and credible elections consistent with constitutional provisions". It said that "in line with its principle", ECOWAS "will not recognise any ascension to power through non constitutional means".⁷¹

Some Burkinabe civil society actors expressed reservations, deploring that ECOWAS had not expressed an opinion before the start of the insurrection, when President Compaoré was trying to change the constitution to stay in power.⁷² However, ECOWAS took charge of the Burkinabe crisis and led a joint mission with the AU and UN in Ouagadougou. The then-ECOWAS chairman, Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama, Senegalese President Macky Sall and then Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, travelled to Burkina Faso.⁷³

After consulting Burkinabe actors, the three heads of state called on stakeholders to "urgently designate by consensus a suitably eminent civilian to lead the transition, form a transitional government for a period of one year, organise presidential and legislative elections by November 2015, ... initiate an all-inclusive consultation among political party leaders, representatives of civil society organisations, religious and traditional leaders as well as the national armed forces, to work out the structure and composition of the transitional organs".⁷⁴ A contact group was created, chaired by Macky Sall, and the Senegalese diplomat Ibrahima Fall was appointed by the chairman of the Commission as special envoy for Burkina Faso.⁷⁵

ECOWAS experts stayed in the capital for several weeks to help national stakeholders reach a compromise on a transition charter, the composition of its organs and appointments to the positions of president of the transition and head of government. While Burkinabe stakeholders deserve most praise for understanding the need for an inclusive dialogue, ECOWAS played a constructive role by remaining on the ground and taking balanced positions in compliance with its protocols, notably the requirement of a civilian president for the transition.⁷⁶

The involvement of ECOWAS in managing the Burkina Faso crisis was a delicate task because President Compaoré had played a central role in the organisation for more than a decade. Between February 2012 and April 2016, the president of the ECOWAS Commission was a Burkinabe national, Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo, who was Compaoré's prime minister from 1996 to 2000 and ambassador to Brussels between 2001 and 2012. Although he was never a political activist within the regime, this

⁷¹ ECOWAS communiqué on the situation in Burkina Faso, 31 October 2014.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Burkinabe civil society actors, Dakar, December 2014, Ouagadougou, July and October 2015, and ECOWAS officials, December 2014.

⁷³ Press release of the Joint Mission of the UN, the AU and ECOWAS to Ouagadougou following the recent developments in Burkina Faso, 2 November 2014.

⁷⁴ Press release on the visit to Burkina Faso of their Excellencies, Presidents John Dramani Mahama of Ghana, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of Nigeria and Macky Sall of Senegal, 5 November 2014.

⁷⁵ Press release on the extraordinary summit of ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, Accra, 6 November 2014.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, ECOWAS diplomats and officials, Abuja, December 2014. For more on the October-November 2014 crisis in Burkina Faso, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°222, *Burkina Faso: Nine Months to Complete the Transition*, 28 January 2015.

technocrat had always been an important part of Compaoré's system. It was difficult for Kadré Ouédraogo to express an opinion on his former chief's plan to revise the constitution, especially given that the latter had vigorously defended his candidacy to the most important function at ECOWAS.⁷⁷

The appointment as director of the United Nations Office for West Africa (UN-OWA) in September 2014 of the Ghanaian Mohamed Ibn Chambas, who had been executive secretary and president of the ECOWAS Commission between 2002 and 2010, was timely for managing the Burkina crisis. He played a more visible role than the president of the ECOWAS Commission. The joint ECOWAS-AU-UN mission was therefore able to reduce the perception among Burkinabe stakeholders that ECOWAS was close to the Compaoré clan.⁷⁸

However, some civil society stakeholders criticised ECOWAS for not having opposed the presidential manoeuvres early enough to prevent the crisis. In fact, the organisation would have found it difficult to influence Compaoré and his allies, who were convinced they were going to win and stay in power. They ignored the reality of the situation and did not listen to external warnings.⁷⁹ Following an ECOWAS assessment mission to Burkina Faso in August 2014, the organisation's analysts were perfectly aware of this obstacle.⁸⁰ Moreover, the regime's initiative, taken more than one year before the presidential election scheduled for the end of 2015, was not a flagrant violation of the 2001 Additional Protocol.⁸¹

The crisis in Burkina Faso showed the extent to which the stability and security of the countries in the region could depend on personal decisions of their presidents, and to which ECOWAS was itself dependent on the dynamics of power, balance of forces, individual sympathies and calculations among heads of state, who are its supreme authority. However, ECOWAS was able to conform to its principles, thanks in particular to its protocol on democracy and good governance.

2. The September 2015 coup

Following the coup carried out by the presidential guard (RSP) on 16 September 2015, ECOWAS dithered and did not take as firm a position as the AU, which quickly condemned the coup and imposed sanctions on its authors.⁸² Instead of isolation and targeted sanctions, ECOWAS chose mediation. On 18 September, a delegation led by the ECOWAS chairman, Senegalese President Macky Sall, and his Benin counterpart, Thomas Boni Yayi, went to Ouagadougou. After two days of consultations, the delegation made a proposal that worsened the situation rather than eased tensions. It proposed an amnesty for the coup leaders, which was rejected by most Burkinabe

⁷⁷ In 2006, heads of state introduced a rotation system by alphabetical order that would have given the post to Benin. President Compaoré rejected this principle, which paved the way for a Senegalese candidacy. Several summits and negotiations over a period of more than a year were necessary in 2010 and 2011 before the appointment of Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo in February 2012. See "Zizanie au sommet", *Jeune Afrique*, 1 November 2011.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, ECOWAS diplomats and officials, Dakar and Abuja, December 2014.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former senior Burkinabe official, Burkinabe politicians, Ouagadougou, February and December 2015.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, ECOWAS officials, December 2014.

⁸¹ The protocol does not impose any restrictions on the number of presidential terms in office and does not prohibit constitutional amendments to the number and duration of terms in office.

⁸² The coup was condemned by the country's main partners: the UN, the EU, France and the U.S.

actors within the civil society and the political sphere alike.⁸³ The Burkinabe people eventually found a way out of the crisis themselves after the army defeated the RSP and reestablished the transitional institutions.

There were several reasons for the weak position taken by ECOWAS and the failure of its mediation. First, President Sall and his team were inexperienced and were conducting their first mediation mission in difficult circumstances. On 19 September, the Beninese president publicly declared that a solution had been found and that he would be announcing “good news” the following morning, while nothing of the sort was true.⁸⁴ ECOWAS tried to move too quickly and to put forward a comprehensive solution to a deep-rooted crisis that could not be resolved overnight. The mediators proposed an agreement without having sufficiently consulted the actors or given them an opportunity to amend the text of the proposed agreement.⁸⁵

On the following day, the hotel that was the venue for meetings of the protagonists was poorly secured and supporters of the coup gained access to the hall, causing great confusion and frightening some participants.⁸⁶ In addition, the meetings suffered from a patent lack of confidentiality. Participants used their mobile phones to spread rumours and “torpedo” the proposals of their adversaries.⁸⁷ Finally, it seems that President Sall and his delegation mistakenly judged the ratio of power, according to the RSP a capacity that it did not have. After all, it only managed 1,350 men in a country of 17 million people.⁸⁸ However, the mediators were not the only ones to overestimate RSP’s strike force. The myth of an all-powerful regiment as opposed to an under-equipped and untrained army was widespread in Burkina Faso and further afield.

Second, many Burkinabe actors felt that ECOWAS was partisan. It failed to convince them of its independence from Compaoré. They believed that Compaoré had strong links to ECOWAS through the ex-president of the Commission, Kadré Ouédraogo, and heads of state considered close to him, for example the Ivorian Alassane Ouattara and the Togolese Faure Gnassingbé. They saw ECOWAS as “a group of friends”⁸⁹ and “controlled by Kadré, Blaise and Alassane”.⁹⁰ This distrust existed well before the coup, for example in July 2015, when the ECOWAS Court of Justice annulled the electoral law that made pro-Compaoré candidates ineligible for the elections at the end of the transition. ECOWAS did not undertake the work necessary to convince its detractors of the contrary.

In its defence, ECOWAS said that its proposal for ending the crisis was not supposed to be a final agreement but an opening gambit to get discussions off the ground.

⁸³ Even supporters of the old regime, although considered to be on the side of the coup leaders, rejected the mediation’s proposal. “Projet d’accord de la Cedeao: l’ancienne majorité refuse le retour de Michel Kafando”, *LeFaso.net* (www.lefaso.net), 21 September 2015.

⁸⁴ “Burkina Faso: le retour vers la transition en cours selon Boni Yayi”, *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, 19 September 2015.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, ECOWAS official, September 2015; Crisis Group interview, eminent politician, Ouagadougou, October 2015.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, international official, Ouagadougou, October and December 2015.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Burkinabe official, Ouagadougou, December 2015.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Burkinabe officer, Ouagadougou, December 2015.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, Ouagadougou, October 2015.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group email correspondence, National Transitional Council (NTC) member, September 2015.

It also felt it was unfair that Burkinabe civil society assumed its bias for the Compaoré clan, when it had invested time and resources to find a solution to the crisis.⁹¹

Finally, the friendships between heads of state seem to have played an important role in the inability of ECOWAS to act more firmly against the coup leaders. Close associates of Compaoré and General Gilbert Diendéré, leader of the coup, apparently activated their networks to put pressure on the organisation to tone down its position.⁹² Individual loyalties also made it difficult for some to take a firmer position against the Compaoré clan, which had made and unmade several governments in the region and to which many owed their position and even their survival. Like the crisis that preceded Compaoré's departure, the September 2015 coup highlighted the tension between the personal dynamics and ties of friendship of leaders and former leaders of ECOWAS member states with the need to strictly apply the organisation's rules.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, ECOWAS representative, Ouagadougou, October 2015.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, former senior Burkinabe official, Ouagadougou, December 2015.

IV. Key Reforms to Achieve Peace and Security Objectives

These case studies, particularly the Malian crisis, show the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS. Aware of this, the Authority of Heads of State and Government asked the Commission to assess ECOWAS's action in Mali, with a view to learning lessons for the entire regional peace and security architecture.⁹³ In 2013, a long list of recommendations covered all aspects where changes were clearly necessary. These proposals pointed in the right direction and should be implemented. But can the organisation reform itself without a strong political impetus from member states that are themselves particularly fragile in the political, security and economic fields?

A. *The Weaknesses and Limitations of ECOWAS: A Self-assessment*

The report, finalised in 2013 following an ECOWAS Commission seminar, was very clear about the flaws and inadequacies of the organisation's peace and security Mechanism.⁹⁴ It recommended revising some provisions of the 1999 and 2001 protocols.

In the case of the 1999 protocol, it suggested clarifying the conditions for activation of the peace and security Mechanism, particularly with regard to the need or not for the country in crisis to approve the ECOWAS intervention and the moment at which the organisation should proceed without the agreement of the member country. It also raised the question of whether ECOWAS was obliged to refer cases to the AU Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council before intervening. As for the Additional Protocol of 2001, the report recommended amending the article that prohibits changes to electoral laws without a political consensus less than six months before elections. This provision has shown its limitations in many cases. It also advised reviewing the Mechanism for gradual sanctions to include provisions on the effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sanctions.⁹⁵

The report mentioned the difficult cooperation between ECOWAS and the AU and recommended the establishment of a direct line of communication, a "hotline", Commission. It also suggested that ECOWAS work with the other regional economic communities and the AU to clarify the principles of subsidiarity, comparative advantage and sharing responsibilities.⁹⁶

The tense relations between ECOWAS and the AU was a recurrent theme in the interviews conducted by Crisis Group, reflecting Abuja's frustrations. The regional organisation believes the AU disregards it and tends to take over its role at the first opportunity. In the case of Mali, the AU could justify its involvement all the more easily given that the crisis had implications and determining factors that went beyond the geographical jurisdiction of ECOWAS, notably in North Africa.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Bamako and Abuja, November and December 2014.

⁹⁴ "The Mali After-Action Review, ECOWAS Initiatives and Responses to the Multidimensional Crises in Mali", ECOWAS Commission, Report of the Internal Debriefing Exercise, Lagos, 28-30 November 2013.

⁹⁵ The six-month rule did not stop governments from planning the manipulation of electoral laws well in advance, as in the case of Burkina Faso. One option would be to make a political consensus obligatory for all amendments to laws that cover presidential elections and terms in office. The proposal to limit the number of terms in office in all member states was even made in 2015 at the Authority of Heads of State and Government. The proposal was finally rejected. Crisis Group telephone interview, ECOWAS official, September 2015.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Other recommendations addressed the internal dysfunctions of the Commission: the lack of coordination and cooperation between different departments and the slow implementation of decisions. For example, the report advised that the Early Warning Directorate should be co-located with the Political Affairs Directorate.⁹⁷ The physical distance between these two directorates emphasised the structural organisational problems within the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS). Meetings of directorate representatives only take place regularly in times of crisis. The organisation, be it at the level of the Authority of Heads of State and Government or at the level of the Commission departments, seems to operate properly only in a crisis management mode.

The report recommended that “the appointment of ECOWAS mediators and facilitators should be guided by the criteria of integrity and suitability to the specific conflict situation” and that the Commission should be responsible for facilitating and backstopping the work of mediators and facilitators; interpreting ECOWAS protocols in relation to the specific conflict situation; and recommending experts to advise on specific thematic areas of the conflict. The report called on ECOWAS to accelerate, without further delay, the operationalisation of the Mediation Facilitation Division. The Commission announced its creation within the Political Affairs Directorate in 2010. It took more than five years for this division to see the light of day, even though mediation is the organisation’s main mode of action.

Finally, the report analysed in detail, learning the lessons of the Malian crisis, the state of readiness of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), which is the West African component of the African Standby Force. Forming the ESF was a slow process and its political framework, current configuration and deployment capacities make it unable to meet its initial objective.

Among its many recommendations to improve the ESF, the report called on ECOWAS to fund and equip a two-battalion special military force capable of intervening anywhere in the region within 30 days of an emergency situation; accelerate reform of the Directorate of Peacekeeping and Regional Security, particularly by operationalising the Peace Support Operations Division, along the lines of the existing AU and UN mechanisms; and establish a fund under the management of the PAPS department to guarantee flexibility, discretion and rapid response to emergencies.

The situations described by ECOWAS officials in private show the need for a substantial reworking of the whole ESF model. One of them explained: “The concept and doctrine of the Standby Force requires contingents to be formed, equipped and ready for deployment. In fact, in member states, neither the personnel nor the equipment are in place. ... The concept and doctrine of the Standby Force need to be revamped, with the help of the AU, and adapted to the economic realities of the region”.⁹⁸ Asked to list the major weaknesses of ECOWAS, one of the organisation’s former officials said: “human resources, internal administration, including financial management, and a failure to learn all the lessons from crises”. He said that the organisation should “conduct an honest evaluation of its capacities and not claim the

⁹⁷ In Abuja, the PAPS Department offices are in an annex to the Commission building. The Early Warning Directorate is in the main Commission building.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abuja, December 2014.

force is ready when it is not”.⁹⁹ Another official deplored Abuja’s “lack of monitoring” of the operational management of deployment.¹⁰⁰

B. *An Ambitious Constitutional Reform Is Imperative*

The ECOWAS Commission’s strategic plan for 2011-2015, prepared when Mohamed Ibn Chambas was the Commission president, made a severe assessment of the organisation’s institutional weaknesses. It points at a lack of structures, job descriptions, well-defined roles and responsibilities, the absence of a functioning monitoring and evaluation system and an inefficient communication system. It also diagnoses a lack of cooperation among the staff and between different departments, insufficient and inadequately trained human resources, possibly resulting from a lack of training programs.¹⁰¹

The plan lists some obstacles to its own implementation: weak institutional capacity, dysfunctional structures as well as a strong compartmentalisation within the Commission, which is reflected by the fact that some heads of departments and directorates work with little or no contact with other departments and do not attempt to take them into account. These observations echo the analysis made by Commission officials and observers who emphasise that institutional weaknesses are a preeminent obstacle to greater effectiveness.¹⁰²

There is unanimity about the extent of the problems caused by inadequate human resources, administrative and financial management, organisation of services within the various directorates and divisions, the concentration of decision-making powers at the highest level of the Commission, the lack of systematic cooperation between different directorates except in case of crisis and the absence of codified working routines necessary for a modern administration to operate.

In this context, the performance of the directorates and services is completely dependent on the competence of the people in charge. But even the presence of highly qualified and motivated officials with a good knowledge of the political and security situation in member countries cannot compensate for the organisation’s institutional weaknesses.

Institutional reform itself suffers from the modes of operation it is supposed to correct. In July 2013, the Authority of Heads of State and Government increased the number of commission leadership positions from nine to fifteen. This decision, made for political reasons (to satisfy member states by giving each a leadership position in the Commission) and without reference to the plan for institutional reform, raised questions about the wisdom of member states and their leaders when making crucial decisions.

A report written by a private consulting company in 2014 recommended a multi-phased wholesale change to ECOWAS institutions.¹⁰³ All major reforms are difficult

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2014.

¹⁰⁰ “The biggest problems are administrative, financial and logistical. We have been trying to formulate standard procedures for years. We do not keep a record of each crisis. It always seems like we are starting from scratch”. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2014.

¹⁰¹ ECOWAS Commission, Strategic Plan 2011-2015.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Abidjan, Bamako and Abuja, November and December 2014.

¹⁰³ Consultancy on the Reform Structure, Procedures and Practices within ECOWAS Institutions, prepared for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Maxwell and Stamp PLC, Final Phase 1 Report, Volume 2, April 2014.

to implement because they disturb comfortable habits and threaten vested interests. Effective implementation of the reforms needs a hard core of member states to show firm political will, commit to a precise timetable and defend the reform against any challenges.

Reform will not be irreversible unless Nigeria, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, the region's biggest countries, actively support it and convince the other member states to follow suit. Cape Verde, a small Portuguese-speaking country that is the most successful in the region in terms of democracy, stability and governance, could take the opportunity to play a high-profile role.

C. *Peace and Security Reform Needs Pragmatism*

The 2013 report on institutional reform recommended separating the PAPS department from other ECOWAS Commission departments to provide it with the necessary degree of autonomy for conducting complex and costly activities that generally require immediate response, such as peacekeeping operations. The peace and security mandate undeniably involves a significantly different mode of operation than the initial mandate of promoting regional economic integration.

The Commission's current architecture does not distinguish between the PAPS department and divisions dealing with infrastructure, education, science and culture, or trade. Considering the major role played by ECOWAS in the political and security field during the last 25 years and the permanent threats facing the region, a clearer distinction should be made between institutions responsible for economic integration, which, moreover, contribute to regional security, and those specifically responsible for crisis prevention, management and resolution, and promoting the principles of constitutional and political convergence.

Whether this recommendation is implemented or not, ECOWAS must set new objectives and equip itself with new means of action to better fulfil its responsibilities set out in the protocols of 1999 and 2001. Reorganisation must have a strategic, pragmatic and realistic approach based on analysis of the situation and must anticipate political, security, economic and social developments in West Africa in all their complexity: the contrasting individual situations of the fifteen member countries; the transnational dynamics in the region and associated threats; the situation on the borders between West Africa and North and Central Africa; and the constraints and opportunities presented by the international context. The experience of conflict, instability and insecurity during the last 25 years and a simple forecasting exercise suggests two priorities for ECOWAS.

1. Provide advice and support to member countries for reforms aimed at strengthening the state's legitimacy and effectiveness, societal cohesion and their acceptance of the values championed by the Community

An important and most likely dominant part of the problem confronting ECOWAS flows directly from the member states: their leaders' competence, their political cultures, the legitimacy and effectiveness of their administration, the condition of their economies, defence and security forces, and the understanding and interest displayed by their leaders in regional integration and security issues. The organisation has room, although limited, to promote changes to the way member states operate.

It lies in the introduction of standards that apply to all. In this regard, the revised treaty and the 1999 and 2001 protocols are valuable achievements. The preparation and coming into force of these documents took place in a period when the region

was trying to start a new chapter after armed conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, while promoting the multiparty system, democratic elections and freedom.¹⁰⁴ Retrospectively, it is astonishing that the region ratified these protocols given the dominant political culture.

All the violent crises in the region resulted from a combination of internal factors and regional or international triggers or aggravating circumstances. The exclusively political crises stemmed from competition for power in a context of unstable political systems, a recent history of authoritarianism, weak political, economic and social institutions and diversity within societies that facilitates the exploitation of ethnic and regional identities in political struggles.

Political practices are often out of step with democratic principles and the rule of law. The executive power embodied by heads of state elected by direct universal suffrage is only slightly balanced by powers like the judiciary. In most ECOWAS countries, the judiciary is formally independent from the executive, but is in fact very dependent on it and starved of resources, rendering it incapable of fulfilling its function. Although civil society has emerged rapidly and exercises a certain amount of influence in many countries, it remains insufficiently organised and, like the judiciary, its legitimacy is weakened by its dependence on governments in power or external support.

For ECOWAS to be more effective in the prevention of conflicts, it must not exclusively rely on its early warning system, even reorganised, or on ad hoc mediation missions dispatched when crises are already brewing. More effective prevention of crises requires major changes to the political systems and practices of member states and needs ECOWAS to show a willingness to encourage and provide support for these changes in member countries. The decision to create permanent ECOWAS offices in each of the fifteen member states is welcome and should serve this objective. However, having a permanent presence will only bear fruit if ECOWAS sets strategic objectives adapted to the political and security situation of each state and equips itself with the resources necessary to act. In particular, it must provide these offices with sufficient human resources able to use strategic, diplomatic and operational tools to identify the best ways of promoting change in member states.

2. Build and strengthen the capacities of member states to deal collectively with major transnational threats

The internal threats to stability, peace and security in the region have been aggravated in recent years by the criminal economy and the spread of extremist ideologies.¹⁰⁵ Trade in illegal products and illegal trade in legal products in West Africa have increased like never before, as shown by the emergence of cocaine trafficking routes originating in South America. Arms, human beings and fake medicines trafficking feed corruption and the collapse of states that are subjected to enormous internal challenges. A region with strategic natural resources, West Africa is also part of the grey areas of the international trade in raw materials. Maritime insecurity off the

¹⁰⁴ Among heads of state that approved the pioneering additional protocol were representatives of “the new democratic era” such as John Kufuor (Ghana), Alpha Oumar Konaré (Mali) and Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria) as well as presidents who had come to power by force and who had been in office for a long time like Gnassingbé Eyadéma (Togo), Lansana Conté (Guinea) and Blaise Compaoré (Burkina Faso).

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm*, op. cit.

coast of oil-rich Nigeria but also Benin, Togo, Cameroon and in the Gulf of Guinea, has taken on a new dimension with attacks on ships by organised criminal groups. Terrorism has also become a daily concern from Nigeria to the Sahel.

ECOWAS has reacted to transnational threats under the pressure of events and its Western partners, especially the EU and France. The organisation has adopted a strategy to fight terrorism and an integrated maritime strategy. Institutionalised meetings of army chiefs of staff, chiefs of police and the security services have created frameworks for exchange and indispensable cooperation. However, ECOWAS needs to go further and create a special unit to combat organised crime that would take into account all its dimensions and ensure coherence between the different action plans on these issues, including those of ECOWAS and the many international actors present in the region. This implies working closely with member states to strengthen their capacities in the fields where they are most vulnerable and to harmonise legislations, methods and means of action. This work must be part of the mandate of the permanent ECOWAS offices in member countries.

In addition to meetings of the security services of member countries, ECOWAS should equip itself with modern and secure means of communications that would allow a continuous exchange of information among member states and all actors involved in the fight against terrorism and organised crime. Regional cooperation should take place at both political and technical levels and involve all stakeholders, including the judiciary, which is a weak link in all the region's countries. Responding to transnational threats also requires ECOWAS to open up to its neighbours, the countries of North and Central Africa. The crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad region have shown the geographical continuity of criminal activities and the need for coordinated responses from countries that belong to different regional organisations.

ECOWAS does not have much influence in the two crisis spots in the region, the Sahel and northern Nigeria and the surrounding area, because of its inability to initiate a structured political and security dialogue with countries like Algeria, Chad and Cameroon. It needs to invest in learning about its neighbours, especially North African countries.

A return to good relations with the AU is indispensable for the fight against transnational threats. On issues such as terrorism, criminal trafficking, maritime security, money laundering and the infiltration of states by members of criminal networks, ECOWAS and the other regional economic communities must clarify the principles and areas for cooperation with the AU. A permanent framework for consultation between ECOWAS and the AU must be put in place at the highest political level to avoid overlapping responsibilities and to define an effective approach for the staff of the two organisations working on transnational threats.

ECOWAS should also develop strategic thinking on its relations with Europe, the U.S., China, India, Brazil and other emerging powers. The decisive factors for peace and security are related to all international trade, financial and human exchanges. ECOWAS should develop an active and coherent diplomacy so that the organisation can speak with one voice on major peace and security issues. It must convince its member states of the need to use regional diplomacy to complement or even replace national diplomatic efforts, which have been weakened by a clear lack of financial resources.

As part of its institutional reform, ECOWAS should consider incorporating external relations into the PAPS Department. In any case, the organisation should significantly strengthen its human resources in the field of international relations and, more precisely, boost its internal multidisciplinary expertise on the main African

geographical zones and other regions of the world. To be able to anticipate peace and security issues in the medium and long term, it should put more emphasis on research and analysis.

Finally, ECOWAS needs a politically and economically strong and stable driving force, fully committed to regional integration and not worrying all other member states by projecting the image of a fragile, dangerous and threatening power. Nigeria has no rival in West Africa, given its resources and population. Its declining strength in recent years, marked in particular by the violence of Boko Haram, which has developed in a context of pre-existing security weaknesses and the inability of the government and security forces to provide an intelligible and effective response, has also weakened ECOWAS.¹⁰⁶ The political, economic and military capacities of Nigeria are a decisive factor in making the organisation operate well and progress. President Muhammadu Buhari and his government should prioritise the restoration of Nigerian diplomacy, without neglecting the necessary wide-ranging reform of the Nigerian defence and security forces.

¹⁰⁶ With Côte d'Ivoire grappling with a long crisis, Ghana has been the only demographically important country to experience political stability within a democratic framework and rapid economic growth. This progress is significant even though the economic situation has recently deteriorated in Ghana. Its recent discovery of oil risks having a negative impact on governance as it has in other African countries.

V. Conclusion

These three case studies illustrate ECOWAS's interventions in crisis situations during the last fifteen years and prompt a series of observations. First, this particularly troubled region is marked by a succession and juxtaposition of crises and conflicts of variable intensity in most member countries.

Second, the organisation has reacted systematically to crises in the region, on the political and diplomatic fronts, with the strong involvement of heads of state, under the dual impetus of chairs of the Authority of the Heads of State and Government and presidents of the ECOWAS Commission. Heads of state have learned to work with the president of the Commission, who is far from being merely a subordinate. There were no guarantees about this outcome and it owes a lot to the role played by the last ECOWAS executive secretary and first president of the Commission, Mohamed Ibn Chambas. He was wise enough to enhance the scope of the ECOWAS Commission, while remaining loyal to the Authority of Heads of State and Government, which constitutes the supreme power. His two successors have continued to operate the commission alongside the heads of state and used the protocols to defend the commission's field of action.

Third, the organisation has become a major player in the regional political landscape. In the eyes of leaders and populations, its interventions are legitimate. The organisation gets involved in case of crises and also, for example, during election campaigns. It takes part in the politics of member states, while acting as mediator or facilitator in discussions between political actors. ECOWAS has shown considerable initiative, the most striking illustration of which has undoubtedly been the rapid dispatch of heads of state to countries suffering from a dangerous level of political and security tension. However, this has often been accompanied by a concentration on short-term peace and stability objectives which did not necessarily further the political and institutional changes needed for a more durable peace.

Whatever the assessment made of its interventions, including mediation and military deployments, ECOWAS embodies a duty of solidarity in the event of a grave threat to peace and security in any of its member states. This represents major progress and the organisation can now build on these foundations to provide an example of successful regional integration on the African continent.

Dakar/Brussels, 14 April 2016

Appendix A: Map of ECOWAS Countries



Based on Map No. 4045 Rev. 7 UNITED NATIONS
 October 2011

Appendix B: List of Acronyms

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
AU	African Union
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group
ECOMIL	ECOWAS Mission in Liberia
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)
UNAMSIL	UN Mission in Sierra Leone
MSC	Mediation and Security Council of ECOWAS
Ecowarn	ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
PAPS	ECOWAS Department for Political Affairs, Peace and Security
ASF	African Standby Force
GIABA	Groupe Intergouvernemental d'Action contre le Blanchiment d'Argent en Afrique de l'Ouest – Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ECPF	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
WACI	West Africa Coast Initiative
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOWA	United Nations Office for West Africa
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ICG-GB	International Contact Group for Guinea-Bissau
ICG-G	International Contact Group for Guinea
MDFC	Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance
CPLP	Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa – Community of Portuguese Language Countries
UEMOA	Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine – Economic and Monetary Union of West Africa
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SSR	Security Sector Reform
Missang	Angolan Military Mission in Guinea-Bissau
PAIGC	Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde – African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
ECOMIB	ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
MNLA	Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad – National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MICEMA	Mission de la Cedeao au Mali – ECOWAS Mission in Mali
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
MINUSMA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali – United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita
RSP	Régiment de sécurité présidentielle – Regiment of Presidential Security in Burkina Faso
ESF	ECOWAS Standby Force

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2013

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