

## A DISCOURSE ON THE HISTORY, ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROBLEMS OF ECOWAS

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### **Abstract**

*The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the primary objective of promoting economic integration and cooperation among its 15 member states. This discourse explores the historical evolution, significant achievements, and enduring challenges faced by ECOWAS in its quest to foster regional development and stability. The history of ECOWAS is traced from its inception during a period of post-colonial optimism, where regional integration was viewed as a pathway to economic independence and collective self-reliance. Over the decades, ECOWAS has made considerable strides in various sectors, including the establishment of a customs union, the introduction of the ECOWAS passport, and the creation of regional peacekeeping forces such as ECOMOG, which have played crucial roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the region. However, ECOWAS has also encountered significant challenges. These include political instability within member states, economic disparities, and the slow pace of implementing key integration protocols. Additionally, issues such as cross-border security threats, including terrorism and organized crime, have further complicated the regional body's efforts to achieve its goals. This paper will employ a qualitative research approach, relying on a review of existing literature, including academic articles, books, and reports from international organizations. The paper will also draw on data from various sources, including the treaty of Lagos, research papers, interview with policy makers, library and archival materials, national and regional government sources etc. This discourse provides a critical examination of how ECOWAS has navigated these challenges and highlights the need for stronger political will, enhanced economic cooperation, and innovative approaches to address the socio-political and economic problems that continue to impede its progress. Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper underscores the importance of regional unity and collective action in overcoming the hurdles facing ECOWAS as it aspires to be a model of regional integration in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Economic Integration, West African Sub-region, ECOWAS Governance Structure, Protocol, Terrorism.

### **Introduction**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents one of the most ambitious regional integration efforts on the African continent. Established on May 28, 1975, through the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS was born out of a collective vision to foster economic cooperation and integration among the diverse nations of West Africa. The founding members, comprising 15 states, recognized that regional unity was essential to address the economic and developmental challenges that had plagued the region since the end of colonial rule. By pooling resources, harmonizing policies, and promoting trade, ECOWAS aimed to create a prosperous, stable, and self-sustaining region capable of withstanding global economic pressures.

Over the years, ECOWAS has made notable progress in several areas. It has been instrumental in facilitating the free movement of people, goods, and services across member states, establishing common trade policies, and working towards the eventual realization of a single

currency. Additionally, ECOWAS has taken on a significant role in maintaining peace and security in the region, particularly through its peacekeeping interventions in conflict zones, which have earned it international recognition.

Despite these achievements, ECOWAS has faced numerous challenges that have hindered its full potential. Political instability, economic disparities among member states, and the slow implementation of integration protocols have been persistent issues. Moreover, the region has been increasingly threatened by transnational security challenges, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, which have further complicated the mission of ECOWAS. In terms of literature, the foundation of ECOWAS has been examined by several scholars, who emphasize the historical context of its creation in the post-colonial era. Nwokedi (1992) explores the motivations behind the formation of ECOWAS, highlighting the desire of West African leaders to counteract the economic fragmentation inherited from colonialism. Other studies, such as those by Bach (1999), examine the regional political dynamics and the role of key figures, like Nigeria and Ghana, in driving the integration agenda.

In understanding the historical evolution of ECOWAS, Asante (1986) and Lavergne (1997) provide detailed accounts of the organization's institutional development and the initial challenges it faced, including the economic disparities among member states and the difficulty in harmonizing diverse national interests. These works underscore the complexity of fostering unity in a region marked by significant cultural, linguistic, and economic differences.

The achievements of ECOWAS have been widely documented, particularly in the areas of economic integration and conflict resolution. Essien (2006) and Ojo (2011) highlight ECOWAS's efforts in establishing a free trade area, a customs union, and a common external tariff, which have been crucial in promoting intra-regional trade. The introduction of the ECOWAS passport, as discussed by Ukaoha (2008), is another significant milestone that has facilitated the free movement of people across the region.

In the realm of peace and security, studies by Adebajo (2002) and Francis (2009) focus on ECOWAS's role in conflict management through its peacekeeping missions, particularly the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). These works detail the successes and challenges of ECOWAS's interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, noting the organization's growing capacity to address regional conflicts.

Despite its achievements, ECOWAS has been plagued by a series of challenges that have been the focus of much scholarly critique. Political instability within member states is a recurring theme in the literature, with authors like Obi (2007) and Sesay (2008) examining how frequent coups, civil wars, and governance issues have undermined regional integration efforts. The slow pace of implementing ECOWAS protocols, particularly those related to economic policies, is another major concern highlighted by Ogunjobi (2005) and Lavergne (2014).

The issue of economic disparities among member states is also a significant challenge. Studies by McGregor (2013) and Anyanwu (2014) argue that the varying levels of economic development within the region have created imbalances that hinder the smooth functioning of ECOWAS's economic programs. Furthermore, the literature by Akokpari (2016) and Mazrui (2018) emphasizes the growing threat of terrorism, organized crime, and other transnational security issues, which pose serious obstacles to the realization of ECOWAS's objectives. Critics of ECOWAS, such as Taylor (2005) and Adetula (2011), argue that the organization suffers from a lack of strong political will among its member states, leading to inconsistent

policy implementation and a failure to fully capitalize on its potential. Additionally, the literature by Abass (2010) and Okolo (2015) calls for a more pragmatic approach to regional integration, suggesting that ECOWAS should prioritize more achievable goals and strengthen its institutional frameworks to better address the challenges it faces.

This discourse seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the history, achievements, and ongoing problems of ECOWAS. By examining the organization's evolution, key milestones, and the obstacles it has encountered, this study aims to offer insights into the successes and shortcomings of ECOWAS. Additionally, it will explore potential strategies for overcoming the current challenges and enhancing the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a model for regional integration in Africa. Through this examination, the discourse will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in regional cooperation and the ongoing efforts to build a more united and prosperous West Africa.

The research is organized in the following structure: abstract, introduction showing the statement of the problem, literature and the organization of the work. It is followed by the history and formation of ECOWAS, governing structure, regional economy and integration, increased level of awareness of the integration, free movement, enhancement of transactional transport system, trade liberalization, ECOWAS effort toward community citizen, peacemaking, financial integration, problems and challenges of ECOWAS: economic, political. The study ended with a conclusion, recommendations and a reference of all the citations consulted.

### **History and Formation of ECOWAS**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was formed initially from the region's former French, British, and Portuguese colonies, and independent Liberia, following post-colonial independence throughout the region (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s). It was formed to provide regional economic cooperation but has since evolved to include political and military cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

The union was established on 28 May 1975, in the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region. A revised version of the treaty was agreed and signed on 24 July 1993 in Cotonou.<sup>2</sup> Considered one of the pillar regional blocs, of the continent-wide African Economic Community (AEC), the stated goal of ECOWAS is to achieve "collective self-sufficiency" for its member states by creating a single large trade bloc by building a full economic and trading union.

ECOWAS also serves as a peacekeeping organisation in the region, with member states occasionally sending joint military forces to intervene in political instability and unrest in member states. In recent years these interventions include Ivory Coast in 2003, Liberia in 2003, Guinea-Bissau in 2012, Mali in 2013, and The Gambia in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Covering a region once known as a "coup belt," ECOWAS since the 1990s, has attempted to defend the region's shift towards democracy against authoritarian rule.<sup>4</sup> However, the group has been cited for weak and ineffective responses in the early 2020s, when some member countries were overrun by a military coup d'états -- two in Mali, one attempt in Niger, and one in Guinea. In 2011, ECOWAS adopted its development blueprint for the next decade, tagged *Vision 2020*, and to accompany it, a Policy on Science and Technology (ECOPOST).<sup>5</sup>

## **Foundation of ECOWAS**

Before the creation of ECOWAS, the collective territory known as West Africa, from a regional point of view, was made up of an aggregation of states that had emerged from different colonial experiences and administrations which largely defined the boundaries of the 15 states domiciled in the area.<sup>6</sup> Even though member states of the community, today make use of three different imported official languages (English, French, and Portuguese), there are well over a thousand existing local languages including cross-border native tongues such as Ewe, Fulfulde, Hausa, Mandingo, Wolof, Yoruba, Ibo, Ga, etc. that constitute its over 300 million people tucked in a vast land of about 5.1 million square kilometres.<sup>7</sup>

Before colonialism, the area played host to many proud empires and kingdoms that spanned centuries, some of which included Ghana, Mali Songhai, Wolof, Oyo, Benin, and Kanem Bornu.<sup>8</sup> The region's cultural, linguistic, and ecological diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for the integration process. The desire to integrate forces politically and economically has always been recognised as a step forward in the desire to engender co-prosperity in the sub-region. In this regard, the first effort at integration dates back to 1945 with the creation of the CFA franc zone that brought the francophone countries of the region into a single currency union.<sup>9</sup> Then in 1964, Liberian president William Tubman proposed an economic union for West Africa leading to an agreement that was signed in 1965 by the four states of Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.<sup>10</sup>

However, nothing concrete emanated from these until 1972 when Nigerian military head of State General Yakubu Gowon, and his Togolese counterpart Gnassingbe Eyadema toured the region in support of the integration Idea. Thanks to the drafts that emanated from their efforts that formed the basis for the emergence of the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 which birthed ECOWAS.<sup>11</sup> The treaty of Lagos was initially limited to economic policies but emerging political events led to its revision and its expansion in scope and powers by 1993.<sup>12</sup>

ECOWAS is meant to foster interstate economic and political cooperation. History is on its side in this regard. Dating back to pre-colonial times, West Africans have been among the world's most mobile populations although much of the migration had been intra-regional. About 7.5 million West African migrants (3 percent of the regional population) are living in ECOWAS countries other than their own. The 1.2 million other migrants are dispersed mainly in North America and Europe. Estimated at 149 million in 2013, women constitute over 50 percent of the region's population.<sup>13</sup> The cross-border migration of women as traders and business persons places them as potential champions for promoting integration, even though this is a reality that is yet to be fully exploited.

Over the last few years, West Africa's population witnessed strong growth, increasing from 70 million to about 300 million inhabitants between 1950 and 2010. By the end of 2014, it represents nearly 40% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>14</sup> According to the projections of the United Nations; the population of West Africa should reach between 550 and 600 million by 2050. It is the youngest region in the world. Also, with about 5 percent of the world's population, with an area covering over 40 percent of sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa is the most densely populated on the continent.<sup>15</sup>

## **Governance Structure**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) comprises three arms of governance, namely, the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. At the helm of the organization structure is the Chairman of the Authority of Heads of State and

Government.<sup>15</sup>The Chairman oversees the affairs organization for one year. The Minister in charge of ECOWAS affairs in the country of the Chairman automatically becomes the Chairman of the Council of Ministers; similarly, that country presides over all other ECOWAS statutory meetings for the year. At the helm of the Executive arm of the Community is the President of the ECOWAS Commission appointed by the Authority for a non-renewable period of four years. He is assisted by a Vice President and 13 Commissioners.<sup>16</sup>

The legislative arm of the Community is the Parliament headed by the Speaker of the Parliament. The administrative functions of the Parliament are directed by the Secretary General of the Parliament. Pending elections by direct universal suffrage in the future, parliamentarians are seconded by national Parliaments to the Community Parliament for four years. The judicial arm of the Community is the Community Court of Justice, headed by the President.<sup>16</sup> They are all seconded by the Supreme Courts of their respective Member States to fill the country positions. The Court ensures the interpretation and application of Community laws, protocols, and conventions. The administrative functions of the Court are handled by the Court Registrar who is assisted by other professionals.<sup>17</sup>

### **Regional Economy and Integration**

The distribution of commercially exploitable mineral resources has been a secondary, but increasingly strong determinant of variation in the wealth in West Africa. Gold has long been quarried and panned in the region and was a principal export in the trans-Saharan trade.<sup>18</sup> As late as the 1930s, many thousands of independent producers were engaged in its extraction. The mining and working of iron are also ancient in West Africa. However, in recent times, and contrast to agricultural production, mining has been undertaken mainly by large scale foreign firms; the exception has been in diamonds, where small-scale alluvial digging has persisted.<sup>19</sup> The British colonial governments, with an eye as always to increase their revenues, found it expedient to confer rights of exploitation on foreign companies in the important goldfields and large-scale mining of manganese and diamonds in Cote d'Ivoire, and of diamonds and iron ore in Sierra Leone. These foreign companies produced for export, had high ratios of overseas costs to total costs and remitted abroad most of their profits.<sup>20</sup>

Minerals resources became important in the export trade of Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, but were not of much significance for West Africa as a whole until nearly the end of the colonial period, because the region, at that time, did not appear to have great potential for mining. These ideas, however, began to change after the Second World War. Later developments included large-scale discovery and mining of iron ore in Liberia and bauxite in Guinea since the 1950s; iron in Mauritania, phosphates in Senegal and Togo since the 1960s; and uranium in Niger since the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> By far the most important development was the discovery and extraction of oil in Nigeria since 1957, which soon overshadowed the old agricultural and pastoral economy, accounting by the mid-1970s for about nine-tenths of the country's exports, three-quarter of its public revenues, and one-quarter or more of its GDP. Additionally, Ghana became an oil producer in 1979 and Cote d'Ivoire in 1980.<sup>22</sup>

Many West African countries today are still mono-cultural, which renders their economies fragile and susceptible to external fluctuation in the prices of their agricultural products. In many parts of West Africa, mass unemployment is followed closely by rural poverty. Many of the countries have a per capita income of less than US\$ 500 and this has implications in terms of low purchasing power and savings rates. About one-third of the ECOWAS members are listed among the poorest in the world.<sup>23</sup> Five of them –Mali, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone ranked among the last 10 of the 162 countries listed in the world.<sup>24</sup>

West Africa is not homogeneous. The region not only shows marked differences between its northern and southern parts in terms of climate and vegetation, race and religion, but also inter-country contrasts in demographic structure, level of development, the content of economic policy, and the prospects and potentials of the economies. Two countries, Mali and Niger, have more than 1.2 million square kilometers.<sup>25</sup> Ghana and Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Cote d'Ivoire, produce most of the region's electricity. The establishment in 1982 of an Energy Resources Development Fund was an effort to consolidate the energy resources of the region, increase efficiency, and find alternative sources of energy.<sup>26</sup> The region speaks more than two dozen different languages.<sup>27</sup>

The economy of West Africa is not structurally complementary. The main directions of trade are still north to south, largely within each country, and not east to west or vice versa as was the case in the days of the trans-Sahara trade. Therefore, trade takes place to relieve marginal shortages, rather than to supply the bulk of local consumption. This is explained basically by the similarity of the countries' patterns of consumption and tastes. It has also been argued that the reason for the low volume of intra-West African trade is influenced by certain extraneous factors, mainly economic, political, institutional, socio-cultural, and infrastructural (Salvatore, 2002, p. 28).<sup>28</sup>

As many West African countries were still territories of France when the European Economic Community (EEC) was founded in 1958, they were offered the "benefit" of associate membership of the EEC, which many of them accepted in the Yaoundé Convention.<sup>29</sup> This could be one explanation why several West Africans have taken such an interest in the EEC due to the neglect of regional cooperation. The abolition of tariffs in Western Europe, especially within the EEC countries, placed a great handicap on the expansion of manufacturing in the West African region.<sup>30</sup>

The so-called "rule of reciprocity" also has acted as a barrier to regional integration. This rule means that agreed products can enter an associated country duty-free, but that the products of an unassociated country have to face a tariff barrier. By this means, West Africa has been divided into "associated" and "no associated" countries, both competing inefficiently for a single customer for their export products. This situation has reduced most of West Africa, especially the francophone ones, to the role of primary producers.<sup>31</sup> However, the region's trade with the EEC is extremely important and accounted for 74% of West Africa's imports and 66% of its exports in 2002.<sup>32</sup>

Two-thirds of all the exports from ECOWAS come from Nigeria. Of this amount, 60% is exported to the members of the European Economic Community and 25% to the United States.<sup>33</sup> Although some efforts have been made to increase the volume of trade within the member states, so far very little has been accomplished. According to the latest statistics supplied by the International Monetary Fund, the level of trade is still below 15%.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the external debt for all ECOWAS countries rose to \$71.3 billion in 2002, which consumes an average of 40% of the members' annual budgets.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, trade with other third-world economic groups is insignificant. Trade with other African groups such as with the East African Community is less than one percent. The same is true in relation with trade with the South Asian (SADEC) and Latin American (COPAL) countries.<sup>36</sup>

Significant efforts to create a West African transport region date back to the 1961 Monrovia Conference at which it was agreed that certain road links of regional importance be established.<sup>37</sup> Since then however, there has been regional highways linking most of the urban

and capital cities of the various countries that make up the community. The Lagos-Cotonou-Lome highway is a case in point.

The next most important event in the search for a West African transport region probably occurred in 1968, when Nigeria and Guinea were commissioned by the West African Regional Group to prepare a report on priority studies for the Group.<sup>38</sup> Nigeria and Guinea recommended the standardization of road regulations, the harmonization of immigration, customs and police procedures; the creation of service facilities along the international roads; the creation of a highway federation to facilitate the flow of information, and the establishment of priorities for road projects within a sub-regional network. However, progress to-date has been tremendous. Other important limitations to economic integration are some territorial disputes among West African countries themselves, or among West African nations and neighboring countries in other regions. For example: (a) Libya claims about 19,400 km<sup>2</sup> in northern Niger; (b) the exact locations of the Chad-Niger-Nigeria and Cameroon-Chad-Nigeria three-points in Lake Chad have not been determined, so the boundary has not been demarcated and border incidents have resulted, and Nigerian proposals to reopen maritime boundary negotiations and demarcate the entire land boundary have been rejected by Cameroon, and (c) there is a permanent dispute for a short section of the boundary between Senegal and Gambia.<sup>39</sup> There are also differences in relation to the relative burden of military expenditures among the West African countries. These problems have created hiccups in the total integration of the region even though efforts to resolve them are still ongoing.

### **Achievements of ECOWAS**

#### ***Increased Level of Awareness of Integration in ECOWAS***

One of the notable developments within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is the increased level of awareness and commitment to regional integration among its member states and citizens.<sup>40</sup> Over the years, the concept of regional integration has evolved from a primarily governmental agenda to one that is increasingly recognized and supported by a broader segment of society, including civil society organizations, businesses, and the general public. This growing awareness is crucial for the successful implementation of ECOWAS's goals and objectives.<sup>41</sup>

**Public Awareness and Engagement:** In the early years of ECOWAS, the idea of regional integration was largely confined to diplomatic circles and high-level political discourse. However, over time, there has been a concerted effort to engage the public in the integration process. Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Youth Council, the ECOWAS Volunteer Program, and various public information campaigns have been instrumental in raising awareness about the benefits of regional integration. These efforts have helped to foster a sense of regional identity and solidarity among the citizens of West Africa,<sup>42</sup> which is essential for the long-term sustainability of integration efforts.

**Civil Society Involvement:** Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a pivotal role in promoting awareness of regional integration within ECOWAS. These organizations have been active in advocating for the implementation of ECOWAS protocols, particularly those related to human rights, governance, and free movement.<sup>43</sup> CSOs have also been involved in monitoring the performance of member states in adhering to ECOWAS standards, thereby increasing accountability and transparency in the integration process. Their involvement has helped to bridge the gap between policymakers and the public, ensuring that the integration agenda reflects the needs and aspirations of the people.

***Private Sector and Economic Integration:*** *The private sector has become increasingly aware of the opportunities presented by regional integration within ECOWAS.<sup>44</sup> Businesses and entrepreneurs have recognized the potential for expanding markets, reducing costs through harmonized regulations, and benefiting from economies of scale. As a result, there has been a growing interest in cross-border trade and investment within the region. The increased engagement of the private sector is crucial for economic integration, as it drives innovation, competition, and economic growth across member states.<sup>45</sup>*

***Educational and Cultural Exchanges:*** *Educational and cultural exchanges have also contributed to the increased awareness of regional integration. Programs such as the ECOWAS Fellowship Program and the promotion of cultural festivals and sports events have fostered greater understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures within the region.<sup>46</sup> These exchanges have helped to build a shared sense of identity among West Africans, which is essential for overcoming the historical and linguistic barriers that have traditionally impeded integration efforts.*

*The increased level of awareness of integration within ECOWAS represents a significant achievement in the region's journey toward unity and cooperation. By engaging a wider range of stakeholders, including the public, civil society, the private sector, and the media, ECOWAS has laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and participatory integration process.<sup>47</sup> Continued efforts to raise awareness and promote regional solidarity will be essential for overcoming the challenges that remain and for realizing the full potential of ECOWAS as a driver of economic development and political stability in West Africa.*

### ***Free Movement Protocol***

The success of attaining the goals and objectives of ECOWAS is hinged on the free movement of persons, goods, and capital within the sub-region. This explains why Viner (1950) opines that the effectiveness of any integration is seen in terms of its relative size.<sup>48</sup> He further notes that the recognition of the need for economic integration includes the free flow of persons, goods, services, the right of residence and establishment of businesses. Envisaging the importance of this, Article 27 of the ECOWAS Treaty of 1975 provided for the free flow of economic interaction believing that this would eventually lead to community citizenship among member nations. This development is considered a positive step in the integration process.

This goal was broken into three phases. First, the protocol relating to the Right of Entry and abolition of visas was implemented from 1980 - 1985. The second phase was the Right of Residence which was signed in 1986 but left the host state to determine the criteria for guaranteeing the employment of migrant workers and members of their families. The third phase was the right of establishment that was adopted in 1990.<sup>49</sup> The third phase was envisaged to provide the opportunity for a community citizen to settle or establish in any of the member States and have access to economic activities, to carry out these activities as well as to set up and manage enterprises, in line with the legislation of the host member state as applicable to its own nationals. However, member nations in line with domestic laws reserved the right not to allow entry of any person suspected to be of questionable character. It could be observed that the right of residence in the protocol was enforceable as of July 1988 but that of establishment is yet to be fully implemented.<sup>50</sup> To attain this objective, ECOWAS on May 12, 2000, agreed to introduce a new passport consisting of three categories that is for citizens of the sub-region. The red passport was designed for the diplomatic personnel, blue for the service, and green for the ordinary group. In addition, a common approach to migration was



adopted that entails protocol on free movement, promoting management of regular migration, policy harmonization, and control of irregular migration and human trafficking.

The gain in the implementation of the protocol was made manifest in the volume of human and goods traffic witnessed daily despite the official and artificial border restrictions. The flow of population from the sub-region constitutes a relatively large proportion of all immigrants in most of the member States. For instance, statistics from the Ghana Immigration Service show that at least one-third of all arrivals in Ghana between 1999 and 2002 were from ECOWAS Member States. However, no accurate statistic is available in respect of such movement since the borders are porous and a trip to border points from Lagos to Accra on more than three occasions by the principal researcher revealed that the volume of human traffic through unofficial channels was more than the official channels. The greatest challenges to the full realization of this objective include corrupt practices at the border, the expulsion of citizens from member states, lack of coordination between the ECOWAS secretariat and security personnel in all the border posts, and language barriers.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Enhancement of Transnational Transport System***

One of the primary goals of the meeting of heads of State and Government, held in Abuja in March 2000 was the creation of a borderless sub-region. The issues of inadequate and poorly maintained transport and communication facilities were identified as major constraints to cross-border trade, economic activities, and the movement of persons and goods. To achieve this objective, the feasibility study of the road from Lagos to Accra and Lagos to Ouagadougou was carried out while the construction of the road later followed. Also, that same year ECOWAS launched ECOAIR, a private sub-regional airline all in an attempt to foster smooth movement of goods and services. In February 2002, at Ouagadougou, it was agreed that the 'certificate' for travelling within Community nations would become an ECOWAS passport.<sup>52</sup> In the same spirit, President YayiBori of Benin Republic called on the Nigerian government to partner with his country to reconstruct Lagos - Republic of Benin road towards the end of July 2012 (News Agency of Nigeria, 2012).<sup>53</sup> A further step in the integration effort was manifested in a five-day meeting of fifteen countries in the West African Road Safety Organization that started on August 28, 2012. However, the common currency and ECOAIR that were expected to take off by 2004 have not yet been implemented.<sup>54</sup> Also; the same problems confronting freedom of movement are true of transnational transport systems.

### ***Trade Liberalization***

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) was designed to progressively establish a customs union among member states over 15 years from January 1990 when the scheme took effect. The goal was to ensure the free movement of transport, goods, and persons within ECOWAS, including the removal of all tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. The groups of goods covered under ETLS are unprocessed goods (i.e., agricultural products), handcrafts, and industrial goods produced within the ECOWAS region. The above manifested in various protocols formulated such as the Preferential Trade Area (PTA) which implies the charging of lower tariffs on imports produced by the member states.<sup>55</sup> The Free Trade Area (FTA) stipulates that no tariff be charged on fellow members' goods. The Custom Union on FTA provides for the usage of common tariffs on imports from non-member nations while the common market was designed to ensure the free movement of factors of production. The study reveals that despite inherent constraints, the implementation of the protocol has achieved some measure of success. In the spirit of the protocol, checkpoints were dismantled and border patrols were installed by Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Mali to monitor and police national frontiers. This was

confirmed by the researcher when he traveled by road to Ghana in August 2015. There also existed closer ties between the police and internal security outfits among Member States. However, it was only within the Nigerian side that offensive checkpoints were still maintained as one of this researcher counted twenty-six checkpoints between the Seme border and Agbara in Lagos on July, 2015.<sup>56</sup>

### **ECOWAS efforts toward Community Citizen**

In principle, ECOWAS intends to promote and build community citizenship among the member nations. This is perceived by some scholars as the creation of a homogenous society leading to the unity of the countries of West Africa, by elimination of all types of obstacles to the free movement of goods, capital, and persons as contained in Article 7 of the Treaty. The Treaty thus confers the status of Community citizenship on the citizens of member States and also encourages member States to abolish all obstacles to freedom of movement and residence within the Community. Citizenship<sup>57</sup> is defined as the relationship between the state and its population. Rights and privileges, duties and obligations are the main elements that define this relationship. Citizens in this sense possess certain rights and privileges and carry out certain obligations to enable the state to function effectively and guarantee their rights. To achieve these objectives, seven protocols relating to free movement were signed. The study rightly observed that in principle, the political and legal frameworks instituted were pointers in the right direction that ECOWAS was committed to ensure that the goals of community citizenship are achieved but the institutional framework to make it a reality is lacking. Nonetheless, significant achievements have not been recorded because of some of the challenges earlier mentioned.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Peace Making***

One of the primary achievements of ECOWAS is their invaluable role and significant progress made with specific reference to conflict management and resolution within the sub-region. The Community has been very active in preventing new crisis that could truncate the fragile peace and tranquility of the sub region. This explains the provision for the protocols for democracy and good governance and zero tolerance for military coup<sup>59</sup>. The establishment of ECOMOG and the deployment of troops to Liberia, Sierra Lone among others have in no small way stabilized peace in the nations. The ECOWAS suspended Guinea, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire following coups and worked relentlessly to frustrate dissent in those countries. Through these concerted efforts, Guinea now has democratically elected leaders since 2010 while same is true of Niger. But by 2022, the two countries have retarded back into full blown military rule. Also, ECOWAS supported the legitimate winner of Cote D'Ivoire presidential election. They intervened in Guinea Bissau by sending 600 peace keepers helped significantly to stabilize the government. In Mali with UN resolution 2056 of July 6, 2012, about 3000 military personnel was on ground while members States refused to recognize the secessionist region but exhibited the preference to adopt negotiation with the rebels.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Financial Intégration***

The financial market in West Africa is not broad and largely shallow, while there is limited financial transactions among member States officially. However, there is a remarkable improvement in financial transactions among West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) countries as this has the potential to wake non-WAEMU countries up from their slumber. The Francophone countries except Guinea Bissau, formed the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) in 1994. The countries equally have a common monetary policy under the control of a common Central Bank, the Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO) which is guaranteed by the French Treasury.<sup>61</sup> This has

indeed made their local sub-regional integration far more easy ahead of the rest of Anglophone countries. Such achievement manifested in the adoption of the single currency (CfA). Others include the adoption of Uniform Laws or Acts that transfer the development and enactment of uniform business laws from national authorities to a supranational body. The laws were further empowered through the adoption of the Common Court to have final jurisdiction over business law cases. The study acknowledges that there might be constraints based on frictions between the national courts and the Common Court, but that is not strong enough to undermine the achievement recorded. Among the actions taken by the ECOWAS was the introduction of ECOWAS travelers' cheques (WAUA). The West African Unit of Account is designed to harmonize the sub-region's monetary policy and facilitate cross-border relatively hitch-free financial transactions. The adoption of a common currency by 2004 was muted during the ECOWAS' Ministers meeting in Ouagadougou.<sup>62</sup> This was postponed several times before the roadmap for the ECOWAS Single Currency Program 2009-2020 was adopted in 2009. This led to setting January 2015 as the new date for achieving the second monetary union. Though this is a commendable step as manifested in member States' commitment to it, but the constraints associated with coordination and the demonstrated inability of some of the institutions responsible for carrying out some of its activities are enormous. In addition, there is yet no effective integration of legal framework and payment infrastructure.<sup>63</sup>

### **Problems and Challenges of ECOWAS**

The ECOWAS was established in 1975 with the ambitious goal of fostering economic integration and political cooperation among its 15 member states. As one of Africa's leading regional organizations, ECOWAS has been instrumental in promoting trade, peace, and stability in West Africa. However, despite its notable achievements, the organization continues to grapple with a multitude of problems and challenges that hinder its effectiveness and limit its potential.

ECOWAS's challenges are multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, and social dimensions. Economic disparities among member states, political instability, and governance issues have posed significant obstacles to regional integration. Moreover, the region faces growing security threats, such as terrorism and transnational crime, which strain ECOWAS's capacity to maintain peace and security.<sup>64</sup> In addition; infrastructure deficits, poverty, and unemployment persist, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development.

This introduction outlines the key problems and challenges that ECOWAS faces, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of how these issues impact the organization's ability to fulfill its mandate. By examining these challenges, we can gain a better understanding of the complexities involved in regional cooperation and the critical areas that require attention for ECOWAS to realize its vision of a united, prosperous, and peaceful West Africa.

### ***Economic Factors Challenging ECOWAS till Date***

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long sought to achieve economic integration and development across its member states. However, several economic challenges have hindered these efforts, affecting the region's overall progress and stability. These challenges are deeply interwoven with the region's historical context, global economic dynamics, and internal disparities. The key economic factors challenging ECOWAS include:

### ***Economic Disparities Among Member States***

One of the most significant challenges facing ECOWAS is the vast economic disparities among its member states. The region is composed of countries with varying levels of economic

development, ranging from relatively advanced economies like Nigeria and Ghana to some of the world's poorest nations, such as Niger and Liberia.<sup>65</sup> These disparities make it difficult to harmonize economic policies, implement common tariffs, and achieve equitable integration. The differences in GDP, industrial capacity, and economic structure have led to uneven benefits from integration initiatives, fostering skepticism and reluctance among less-developed members.

### ***Dependency on Primary Commodities***

Many ECOWAS countries are heavily reliant on the export of primary commodities, such as oil, cocoa, and minerals, making their economies vulnerable to global price fluctuations. This dependency limits economic diversification and increases the risk of economic instability due to external shocks. For instance, the economies of Nigeria and Ghana, which rely heavily on oil and gold exports, respectively, have been adversely affected by global commodity price downturns.<sup>67</sup> This vulnerability hampers long-term economic planning and reduces the region's resilience to external economic shocks.

### ***Inadequate Infrastructure***

Infrastructure development in the ECOWAS region is generally inadequate, posing a significant barrier to economic integration and growth. Poor transportation networks, unreliable energy supply, and limited access to technology hinder trade and investment. These infrastructural deficiencies increase the cost of doing business, reduce competitiveness, and limit intra-regional trade.<sup>68</sup> Despite initiatives like the West African Power Pool (WAPP) and various road and rail projects, progress has been slow, and infrastructure remains a critical bottleneck for economic development in the region.

### ***Limited Intra-Regional Trade***

Intra-regional trade within ECOWAS remains low compared to other regional blocs. While ECOWAS has implemented various initiatives to promote trade among member states, including the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET), several barriers persist. These include non-tariff barriers, cumbersome customs procedures, and inadequate infrastructure.<sup>69</sup> The reliance on external markets rather than trading within the region exacerbates economic vulnerability and limits the benefits of regional integration.

### ***Monetary Policy and Currency Issues***

ECOWAS has long aspired to establish a single currency for the region, known as the ECO, to facilitate trade and economic integration. However, the implementation of this currency has faced significant delays due to economic disparities, political disagreements, and differing monetary policies among member states.<sup>70</sup> The region currently operates with multiple currencies, with eight Francophone countries using the CFA franc, which is pegged to the euro, and others having independent currencies. These differences create exchange rate risks and complicate cross-border trade and investment.

### ***High Levels of Poverty and Unemployment***

Poverty and unemployment remain pervasive across the ECOWAS region, posing serious challenges to economic development and social stability. High poverty levels limit consumer demand, reduce savings, and constrain domestic markets, making it difficult for economies to grow and diversify. Unemployment, particularly among the youth, exacerbates social unrest and fuels migration and insecurity.<sup>71</sup> Addressing poverty and unemployment is crucial for

creating a more stable and prosperous region, yet progress has been slow due to structural economic challenges and governance issues.

### ***Informal Economy***

The informal economy plays a significant role in the livelihoods of many West Africans, accounting for a large share of employment and economic activity in the region. However, the dominance of the informal sector presents challenges for economic planning, taxation, and formal economic growth. The informal economy is often characterized by low productivity, lack of regulation, and limited access to finance, which restricts economic development and complicates efforts to integrate these activities into the formal economy.<sup>72</sup>

### ***External Debt and Fiscal Challenges***

Many ECOWAS member states face significant external debt burdens, which constrain their fiscal capacity to invest in development and infrastructure projects. High levels of debt servicing divert resources away from critical sectors like health, education, and infrastructure. Additionally, fiscal deficits and reliance on external financing expose these economies to international market volatility and increase their vulnerability to economic shocks.<sup>73</sup> Managing external debt and achieving fiscal sustainability remain pressing challenges for the region.

### ***Impact of Global Economic Conditions***

Global economic conditions, such as recessions, financial crises, and trade policies of major economies, have a direct impact on the ECOWAS region. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, severely disrupted global trade and investment flows, leading to economic contractions in many West African countries. The region's economic recovery has been uneven, with some countries still struggling with the aftershocks of the pandemic.<sup>74</sup> Additionally; the global shift towards green energy poses challenges for oil-dependent economies within ECOWAS, which may face declining revenues as the world moves away from fossil fuels.

### ***Trade Barriers and Protectionism***

Despite the goals of ECOWAS to promote free trade within the region, various trade barriers still exist. Protectionist policies, including tariffs, import bans, and restrictive trade regulations, are sometimes imposed by member states to protect domestic industries.<sup>75</sup> These measures contradict the principles of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and hinder the free flow of goods and services across borders. Additionally, issues such as smuggling and corruption at border posts further complicate trade within the region. Non the less, the economic challenges facing ECOWAS are multifaceted and deeply rooted in both historical legacies and contemporary global dynamics. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to harmonize economic policies, improve infrastructure, enhance trade, and diversify economies within the region.<sup>76</sup> While ECOWAS has made strides in promoting economic integration, overcoming these obstacles is crucial for realizing the full potential of the region's economic cooperation and achieving sustainable development.

### ***Political Challenges Facing ECOWAS till Date***

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has encountered a variety of political challenges that have significantly impacted its ability to achieve its goals of regional integration, peace, and stability. These challenges have persisted from its inception to the present day, influencing the effectiveness and credibility of the organization. Some of these key political challenges include:

### ***Political Instability and Governance Issues***

One of the most persistent challenges facing ECOWAS is the political instability within its member states. Several countries in the region have experienced military coups, civil wars, and prolonged periods of authoritarian rule, which have disrupted the political landscape. For instance, recent coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Niger (2023) underscore the fragility of democratic governance in the region.<sup>77</sup> Such instability not only threatens the internal security of individual states but also complicates ECOWAS's efforts to promote regional integration and collective decision-making.

### ***Weak Democratic Institutions***

Many ECOWAS member states struggle with weak democratic institutions, which are often characterized by poor governance, corruption, and lack of accountability. These weaknesses undermine the rule of law and hinder the development of strong, stable political systems. Elections in some member states have been marred by allegations of fraud, voter suppression, and political violence, leading to contested results and further instability.<sup>78</sup> The inability to uphold democratic norms and processes diminishes the region's overall political cohesion and undermines ECOWAS's credibility as a promoter of democracy.

### ***Sovereignty and National Interests***

The principle of state sovereignty remains a significant obstacle to deeper political integration within ECOWAS. Member states often prioritize their national interests over regional objectives, leading to reluctance in implementing ECOWAS protocols and agreements.<sup>79</sup> This is particularly evident in areas such as economic policy harmonization, security cooperation, and the enforcement of democratic norms. The tension between regional commitments and national sovereignty hampers collective action and weakens the organization's effectiveness.

### ***Leadership and Political Will***

The success of regional integration efforts within ECOWAS is heavily dependent on the political will of its leaders. However, there has often been a lack of consistent leadership and commitment to ECOWAS's goals. While countries like Nigeria have played a pivotal role in driving the organization's agenda, fluctuating levels of engagement from other member states have created challenges in maintaining the momentum. The absence of a unified vision among the region's leaders has often led to delays in decision-making and implementation of key initiatives.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Ethnic and Religious Tensions***

Ethnic and religious tensions in various member states have contributed to political instability, complicating ECOWAS's peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. These tensions often stem from historical grievances, marginalization, and competition for resources, leading to violence and separatist movements. ECOWAS's ability to address these internal conflicts is limited, as they are deeply rooted in the social and political fabric of the member states.<sup>81</sup> The ongoing violence in northern Nigeria, the Sahel region, and parts of Côte d'Ivoire are examples of how ethnic and religious conflicts continue to challenge the region.

### ***Security Threats and Terrorism***

The rise of terrorism and insurgency, particularly in the Sahel region, poses a significant political challenge to ECOWAS. Groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Islamic State affiliates have exploited political instability and weak state structures to establish a foothold in the region.<sup>82</sup> These security threats not only destabilize individual countries but also create a broader regional crisis that ECOWAS has struggled to

manage effectively. The organization's limited resources and coordination difficulties have hindered its ability to respond adequately to these transnational threats.

### ***External Influence and Geopolitical Interests***

ECOWAS is also affected by external geopolitical interests, including those of former colonial powers, international organizations, and emerging global powers like China and Russia. These external actors often have competing interests in the region, which can complicate ECOWAS's efforts to maintain political autonomy and pursue its regional agenda.<sup>83</sup> The influence of external powers can sometimes exacerbate internal divisions within ECOWAS, as member states may align with different international partners based on their own political and economic interests.

### ***Challenges in Conflict Resolution***

While ECOWAS has been lauded for its peacekeeping efforts, its conflict resolution mechanisms have faced significant challenges. Interventions by ECOWAS, such as those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and more recently in Mali, have often been complex and resource-intensive, with mixed outcomes. The organization has faced criticism for inconsistencies in its approach, delays in intervention, and the challenges of maintaining neutrality in deeply polarized conflicts.<sup>84</sup> These difficulties have highlighted the need for stronger institutional mechanisms and more effective conflict prevention strategies. The political challenges facing ECOWAS are deeply rooted in the historical, social, and economic complexities of the West African region. While the organization has made commendable efforts to promote political stability and regional integration, these challenges continue to undermine its effectiveness.<sup>85</sup> Addressing these issues will require stronger political will, enhanced institutional capacity, and greater cooperation among member states to build a more resilient and united West Africa.

### **Conclusion**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) since its establishment in 1975 under the treaty of Lagos has stood the test of time as a regional organization. While its achievements over the years are laudable, the various teething problems that remained unresolved among the member states have been a source of concern to the sub-region. Against the background of these problems faced by ECOWAS, this paper posits that:

- i. Political leaders in West Africa should strengthen democratic structures through the enactment proactive electoral laws that will guarantee free and fair elections in the region. Our democratic institutions should be made stronger just like in the western world where the system withstands democratic shocks as experienced during elections. The case in point here is the recent election that produced the present forty-year-old President of Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye. The ability of ECOWAS leaders to get rid of the sit-tight mentality within its fold, will go a long way in preserving our democracy and provide the needed economic prosperity to the people.
- ii. ECOWAS leaders must learn how to navigate the diplomacy of handling military regimes in the sub-region. The recent event which has led to the suspension of three members (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) who are under military government must be revisited immediately. The Organization must set up a high powered mediation team to deal with such sensitive matters, if it must continue to be seen as relevant. The hasty and unprofessional diplomatic moves by the Organization in this matter have led the three countries in trying to form a parallel organization to the

- ECOWAS. This on its own does not bring unity to the sub-region. The organization must imbibe the spirit of tolerance which it presently lacks.
- iii. ECOWAS should set up an Organ that must deal with insecurity and other forms of threat in the sub-region. This organ will have the responsibility of coordinating any military action that is needed to safeguard the sub-region. This can come in the form of collaborative Border Military Force that can deal with any insurrection within the sub-region. A case study can be derived from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) established by the European Union and its allies. The region's dependence on primary commodities, coupled with the rise of security threats such as terrorism, banditry and kidnapping has further complicated the economic and political landscape.<sup>87</sup> This also needs attention if the organization must be a going-concern.
  - iv. On the front of economic integration, the Organization can create a strong economic zone with the establishment of one currency and a large market. Though this may be very difficult based on the colonial cleavages of the Anglo/Francophone leanings, this can be worked out through sincere negotiations. The establishment of a large market will bring economic prosperity to the citizens of the sub-region and the benefits cannot be overemphasized. The use of the Euro currency within the European Union has brought tremendous economic benefits to the citizens and has helped to break economic barriers among the members; this can be emulated by ECOWAS.
  - v. ECOWAS must try to reinvigorate its financial resources and institutional capacity. Due to the limited fund and lack of political will, ECOWAS struggled to implement its policies effectively and faced problems in attracting investment and support for regional projects. In addition, the organizations lack the necessary infrastructure and experience to efficiently manage its operations, leading to ineffective coordination and implementation of regional programs. This inefficiency can be greatly improved through sincere collaboration by member states.

On the whole, ECOWAS should highlight the importance of political will, financial resources, and institutional capacity in achieving the organization's objectives. By addressing these challenges and building on its accomplishments, ECOWAS can continue to lead efforts in promoting regional integration, development, and peace in West Africa while future studies must dwell on the need for improved political cohesion and more robust implementation mechanisms for economic policies and strong integration.

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