

ECOWAS at 50: Looking Forward

Written by Adeleke Olumide Ogunnoiki

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ADELEKE OLUMIDE OGUNNOIKI, APR 19 2025

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – the brainchild of General Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria and President Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo, is an intergovernmental organisation in the West African sub-region. On the 28 May 1975, the Heads of State and Government of 15 West African countries convened in Lagos, Nigeria, where they signed the Treaty of Lagos establishing the Community. Headquartered in Abuja – Nigeria's state capital, ECOWAS aims to promote cooperation and the integration of West African countries. As a sub-regional organisation, its institutions and specialised agencies include the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the Community Parliament, the Commission (formerly the Executive Secretariat till 2006), the Community Court of Justice, ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), the West African Health Organization (WAHO), and the West African Power Pool (WAPP). As the Community celebrates its 50th anniversary, an analysis of its status, with a view to the future, is pertinent.

ECOWAS which began with 15 founding members is presently a Community composed of 12 member states – five Anglophone countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, The Gambia), five Francophone countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Togo, Guinea), and two Lusophone countries (Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau). In 1977, former Portuguese colony, Cabo Verde joined ECOWAS, making it a Community of 16 members. However, ECOWAS was back to being a 15-member state Community after Mauritania pulled out. In compliance with Article 91(1) of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993), Mauritania formally notified ECOWAS of its membership withdrawal in December 1999 which took effect a year later in December 2000.

Surprisingly, on 24 February 2017, the Kingdom of Morocco in the Maghreb region of North Africa applied for ECOWAS membership, riding on the back of its readmission into the African Union (AU) on 30 January. In 1984, Morocco unilaterally exited the AU's predecessor – the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) over the continental body's recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Though Article 2(2) of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty states that member states of the Community are those that ratify the treaty, an admission of Morocco will defeat the whole idea of ECOWAS as a Community composed of sovereign states geographically located in the West African sub-region. Morocco's membership application was *sui generis* and required careful consideration which is why ECOWAS in early June 2017 approved Rabat's application in principle at its 51st Summit in Monrovia, Liberia. Nevertheless, there have been objections in some quarters to a possible Morocco accession to the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, Femi Falana (SAN) citing that West Africa risks being flooded with manufactured goods from the European Union (EU), thus killing local industries and rendering many unemployed.

To have placed ECOWAS at a risk of disintegration are French-speaking Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the Sahel region. On 28 January 2024, the military juntas of the three countries announced their exit from ECOWAS which took effect on 29 January 2025. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger decided to leave the sub-regional organisation simultaneously owing to sanctions imposed on their countries, and according to them, the Community which has come under the influence of foreign powers, no longer follow the ideals of the founding fathers and Pan-Africanism. The departure of the three shook the Community to its very foundation. However, should the trio choose to rejoin the Community in the near future, ECOWAS says its admission door remains open and will gladly welcome them back with open arms.

ECOWAS is one of the best-performing Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in the African continent, according

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to the 2021 African Integration Report – anchored on the African Multidimensional Regional Integration Index (AMRII). In the report, ECOWAS and the East African Community (EAC) stood out with an impressive 100% and 96% score respectively *vis-à-vis* free movement of persons. In the area of trade integration, ECOWAS, EAC, and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), performed well, each scoring above 75%. Again, ECOWAS, COMESA, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) were all rated above 60% on environmental integration. Though ECOWAS was found wanting in the area of monetary integration and financial integration, ECOWAS and EAC outperformed other RECs on institutional and political integration.

Drawing from the above, ECOWAS has made significant progress with respect to integration. Formed in 1979, the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) is geared towards free trade by removing customs duties on goods in the sub-region. In 2013, the Community took a step further when it adopted a Common External Tariff (CET) as a way of strengthening its common market. Long before this, ECOWAS was supportive of the pan-African bank – Ecobank which was established in 1985. Following the adoption of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment (1979), the diverse peoples in the sub-region can move freely and reside in a member state for a maximum of 90 days. Complementing this is the ECOWAS Travel Certificate. Different from member states' national passports which have ECOWAS boldly written on them, the ECOWAS Travel Certificate is the Community's passport which was introduced in the 2000s. The passport is a valid travel document which can only be used within the sub-region.

Historically, ECOWAS has a track record of peacekeeping missions which is another notable achievement. Since the late 1970s, ECOWAS has adopted three significant protocols with respect to peace and security, peacekeeping, conflict prevention and resolution in the sub-region – the Protocol on Non-Aggression (1978), Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance on Defence (1981), and the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999). The security architecture of the Community began with the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) which was set up in 1990. This Monitoring Group of ECOWAS was instrumental in the resolution of the First Liberian Civil War (1989-1997), and the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002). Today, the Community's peace and security system includes the ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) which was activated in March 2025 as a counterterrorism measure in the sub-region.

What can be considered also is infrastructure development. To commence in 2026, the 1,028 kilometres Abidjan-Lagos Highway Corridor project will connect Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. This transnational road network project when completed will no doubt foster the economic integration of the five aforementioned countries in the Community. ECOWAS's new headquarters will be completed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) which is deepening cooperation with the Community. On 14 March 2018, ECOWAS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China for a grant of \$31.6 million to build the new headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria. When completed, 'The Eye of West Africa' will accommodate the growing number of staff members, unlike the old headquarters.

ECOWAS member states, individually or collectively, have been unable to stamp out insurgency and terrorism in the sub-region. Since the 2010s, Islamic militant groups such Boko Haram and the splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have been active in the Lake Chad region while Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) mainly operate in the Liptako-Gorma region that connects the landlocked countries – Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Going by the Global Terrorism Index (2024) data, the epicentre of terrorism has moved from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) – Burkina Faso being the country highly impacted by terrorism. Owing to inadequate support from ECOWAS in combating terrorism, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger created the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) on 16 September 2023.

Regarding maritime security, ECOWAS is faced with the problem of piracy. The Gulf of Guinea is a body of water from off the coastline of Senegal in West Africa to Angola in Central Africa. This waterway, which is strategic for vessels conveying oil to American and European markets, has become a hotspot for piracy. To quash piracy as well as armed robbery against ships and illicit maritime activities in West and Central Africa, the countries in ECOWAS,

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ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) signed the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (2013). Despite commendable efforts with respect to sub-regional maritime strategy, surveillance, information sharing, and coordination as well as the patrolling of waters, maritime exercises, and personnel training in cooperation with the United States (US), France, India, the EU, etc., piracy, armed robbery at sea, kidnapping of crew members for ransom, oil theft, and illegal fishing are yet to be repressed in the maritime domain of ECOWAS.

The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) is a testament to the determination of ECOWAS to uphold liberal democracy and good governance in the sub-region where the Republic of Ghana is arguably the beacon of democracy. However, democratic values in the sub-region and in sub-Saharan Africa generally have been challenged by some incumbent presidents with the intention of staying in power beyond the presidential two-term limit norm as observed in several Western democracies. This is particularly true in The Gambia where Yahya Jammeh was president-elect for the third time in 2006 and for a fourth term in office in 2011. Similarly in Togo, Faure Gnassingbé – son of one of the founding fathers of ECOWAS, was elected president for a third term in 2015 and a fourth term in 2020. Another example is Senegal where in 2012 the constitutional court permitted President Abdoulaye Wade to run for a third term.

Fast becoming an unpopular trend in West Africa is democratic backsliding which led to the criticism of ECOWAS for failing to avert *coup d'états* and address bad governance in the sub-region. Over the past five years, there has been a series of coups in three Francophone countries in the Sahel region – Mali (18 August 2020 and 24 May 2021), Burkina Faso (24 January 2022 and 30 September 2022), and Niger (26 July 2023). The suspension and imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS on these countries, and the threat of military action as a last resort in the case of Niger have proved ineffective in compelling the military juntas to restore constitutional democracy anytime soon. In Nigeria, in August 2024, there were the #EndBadGovernance protests where some protesters in the northern part of the country were seen flying the Russian flag.

The much-talked-about influence of France over its former colonies in West Africa has been problematic *vis-à-vis* the economic integration of ECOWAS's member states. With the exception of Guinea which opted for independence through a referendum in 1958, all former French colonies in the sub-region became newly independent states in the year 1960. Much as this was a welcome development, Paris has one way or the other denied them full sovereignty in the post-colonial era. In the last six decades, France has maintained its long-standing influence over its former colonies through *Françafrique* – which simply put is neo-colonialism. In the past, France inked bilateral defence pacts with several French-speaking West African countries that licensed its military presence, military intervention, and military bases on their soil which Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire have either expelled French troops or announced their withdrawal leading to the closure and handing over of French military bases in their country, in recent years. Economically, Paris has exploited minerals such as uranium in Niger for its nuclear energy sector. Furthermore, the French Treasury which holds 50% of the foreign exchange reserves of seven Francophone countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo) and one Lusophone country (Guinea-Bissau) in West Africa has monetary influence over them through the colonial currency – CFA Franc, which is pegged to the Euro.

Staying with the issue of currency, it has been on the wish list of ECOWAS to have a single currency for the Community, drawing inspiration from the Euro. However, getting the currency off the ground has been a Herculean task. ECOWAS deferred the introduction of the common currency to 2005, 2010, and 2014 and was unable to launch the currency in 2020 owing to the failure of member states to meet the convergence criteria on inflation, budget deficit, external reserves, debt-to-GDP ratio, etc. 2027 has become the new target date.

Not peculiar to ECOWAS is the global challenge of climate change. In recent years, climate change has induced the migration of nomadic herders seeking greener pastures for their cattle. Hence, Fulani pastoralists have clashed with farmers in several communities whose farmlands are not only trespassed but cash crops consumed or destroyed by voracious cattle. This has been the case in northern Ghana and North-Central, South-West, and South-East of Nigeria, to mention a few.

ECOWAS also faces a wave of transnational organised crime. The trafficking of cocaine in the West African sub-

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region, Guinea-Bissau as a transit country in particular, has been a legitimate concern of ECOWAS and indeed the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Taking advantage of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (1979) are human traffickers who within the sub-region recruit several unsuspecting minors and women for forced labour and prostitution. Following the ECOWAS Moratorium (1998), the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition, and other related Materials took effect on 14 June 2006. Under the convention, member states are obligated to curtail the proliferation and transfer of SALWs to unauthorised non-state actors such as terrorist groups, mercenaries, and rebel groups. Efforts in this regard so far are unsatisfactory and the continuous trafficking of SALWs has contributed to extremists and criminal groups' unabated violence in the sub-region.

Finally, viral disease outbreak is one of the most recent challenges faced by ECOWAS. In December 2013, the Ebola Viral Disease (EVD) broke out in Guinea and spread across the sub-region, revealing the lack of preparedness and shortage of health personnel in the Community. As a result of the Ebola outbreak, the Health Ministers of ECOWAS's member states had an extraordinary meeting in Accra, Ghana in July 2014. By 2016 when the Ebola epidemic had been contained, it had claimed the lives of more than 11,300 people mainly from the most affected countries – Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. This death toll remains the highest since the disease broke out in Zaire (present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) in 1976. While ECOWAS's securitisation of Ebola can pass as an achievement, the deadly virus remains a health challenge in the sub-region. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ebola virus emerged again in Guinea on 14 February 2021.

Thus far, the myriad of challenges bedevilling ECOWAS have overshadowed its achievements. Much as the sub-regional organisation is bound to make strides in the years ahead. On top of its lofty Vision 2050 it must brace for political, economic, security, health, cyber, and technological challenges. ECOWAS needs to take a reforming mindset, build institutional capacity, and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation with foreign powers such as the US, China, Russia, India, and Turkey as well as other international organisations. Equally important is the unity and political will of member states. Finally, and amidst all this change, it must not lose sight of its primary aim which is to achieve sub-regional cooperation and economic integration – which will likely be the main yardstick employed in appraisals of the Community's performance.

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