TOWARDS AN ECOWAS OF PEOPLES

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1. **WEST AFRICA REGIONAL DYNAMICS**

West Africa is the western most region of the African continent. Geo-politically, the United Nations (UN) definition of West Africa includes 16 countries distributed over an area of approximately 5 million square kilometers. These countries include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.\(^1\) The region accounts for 4.6% of the world population and over 40% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1960 and 1995, the population of West Africa increased by 130 million people. At an average growth rate of 3% per annum, the population of West Africa is expected to reach 430 million by 2020.\(^2\)

Sadly, over last 20 years the region has experienced civil wars, trans-border conflicts, mutinies and coups d’états. This situation began with the outbreak of the Liberian civil war in 1989 which ushered in a proliferation of conflicts that resulted in the spread of over 154 000 refugees, as well as rebels, and illicit arms across porous borders. Countries that have escaped full scale war have experienced sporadic ethnic or religious inter-communal clashes or unrest caused by separatist movements that have the potential to further destabilise the region. Cumulatively, apart from the toll in human lives and the psychological trauma suffered by the populations, such conflicts have destabilised governments, weakened economies, and destroyed basic infrastructure. However, the challenges in West Africa are not limited to conflicts: the 2005 Human Development Report\(^3\) listed 13 of 16 West African countries as the poorest states in the world.

Further, the region has been described by the UN and the World Bank as the world’s most underdeveloped sub region. As an agrarian economy, most people are engaged in the production of primary goods which have seen a drastic decline of prices on the world market. As measured by the international extreme poverty threshold of US$1 a day, poverty incidence in West Africa ranges from 12.2% in Cote d’Ivoire to 88.2% in Guinea Bissau. A threshold of US$2 a day also portrays several West African countries as coming under a high poverty bracket, ranging from 49.4% in Cote d’Ivoire to 96.7% in Guinea Bissau, with oil-rich Nigeria having 90.8% and 90.6% in Mali.\(^4\)

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2. http://www.oecd.org/document/19/0,3343,en_38233741_38246806_38283987_1_1_1_1,00.html, accessed 11 February 2009
The fight against poverty has been one of the major concerns of the sub region with diverse interventions to alleviate it. Until recently, the focus on development policies had been more on economic structural adjustments, driven mainly by donors, with the support of international agencies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the African Development Bank (ADB). Although these programmes stabilised gains at the macro-level, they have done little to improve the living standards of the region’s community citizens.

The region’s historic fragmentation particularly at linguistic and monetary levels is reflected in the existence of three Regional Economic Communities (RECs). These communities are the West African Monetary and Economic Union (UEMOA), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Mano River Union (MRU). However, the Mano River Union (MRU) has been the region’s least successful regional integration project. The Union has been wrought with structural and operational challenges brought about by political instability in the Mano River basin.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST AFRICA

Civil society is a complex and evolving concept. Currently, two dominant definitions of civil society have gained prominence within the sub region. The first school of thought characterizes civil society as consisting of all the organisations and associations that exist outside the state including political parties and the market. In this description, civil society encompasses Community Based Organisations (CBOs), National Organisations and International Organisations.

However, the second definition of civil society fits the West African context. This school of thought defines civil society as the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests. In West Africa, these actors may include, Women’s Organisations, Traditional Rulers, Queen Mother’s Associations, Youth Organisations, Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), Trade Unions, the Media and Academia. Currently, a regional directory of CSOs developed by the West Africa Civil Society Institute clearly shows that there are over 3,000 organisations, associations, networks and groups working within the civil society sector at different levels in the region.

Over the years, these groups of actors have emerged as key stakeholders in development processes. This sector continues to play a critical role in supporting poverty reduction and promoting sustainable development, by enabling citizens to empower themselves and actively seek effective performance and accountability from the state and the private sector. At community, national and regional levels, CSOs in the region are recognised as a vital force in strengthening governance processes.
CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE RELATIONS

Civil society cannot be analysed in isolation from the state. CSOs and government are mutually dependent on each other. The state provides the legal framework for CSOs, and may assure rules of engagement, procedures for consultations, and even financial resources. Governments can also create an unfavourable enabling environment for civil society to function. Conversely, civil society can contribute to the state as a link between state and citizens, in promoting democratic values, building institutions, producing information and ideas, and building social capital. In the specific context of weak states, this relationship takes a different form and is often much narrower.

In its most extreme form, CSOs substitute for an absent state and perform tasks normally carried out by the state, for example during conflict situations as witnessed in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire. State, civil society relations are also antagonistic and adversarial during autocratic regimes as civil society is viewed as the voice of opposition to the state. However as the state becomes more functional and democratic, the role of civil society changes but should remain relevant. In these instances, it is important that civil society and state interactions are not mandatorily adversarial. Civil society should serve as a watchdog ensuring that the state fulfils the expectations of citizens. More importantly, civil society’s professional expertise should also be available to strengthen state institutions and structures. Similarly, the state should provide parameters for civil society to function through objective and appropriate legislation.

CHALLENGES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST AFRICA

Even though civil society continues to play a significant developmental role within the sub region, it is faced with a number of institutional, structural and capacity challenges.

- **Inadequate Institutional and technical Capacity:** The majority of CSOs in the region have weak internal structures and lack adequate corporate governance structures. Also, civil society actors lack the requisite management knowledge and skills competencies to effectively implement their interventions.

- **Narrow focus on NGOs:** Civil society encompasses broad based actors. These actors are found in organisations that may not necessarily be described as non-governmental. The prominence and growth of NGOs within the civil society sector has resulted in the tendency for NGOs to be seen as representing CSOs in general. This narrow categorisation of civil society often sidelines the contributions of important actors such as community based organisations, traditional rulers and the youth movement.

- **Lack of collaboration among CSOs:** Collaboration among civil society within the region is weak. While there are Networks and umbrella organisations functional in the region, competition over dwindling donor funding among network members fosters adversarial relationships rather than collaboration and complimentarity. This situation has resulted in the duplication of efforts and initiatives.
- **Weak Policy Influencing skills**: Over the years, a number of CSOs in the region have been involved in exemplary initiatives. However, the extent to which these initiatives inform or influence policy is intangible and in many cases not measured. Due to financial and skills capacity constraints most interventions that CSOs implement are not structured to influence policy.

- **Poor Information flow**: A thorough analysis of CSO sector shows that there is inadequate information flow among actors. Even though CSOs have generated a large scale of information on their activities; they fall short in their capacity to collect and to properly disseminate data to facilitate peer learning and experience sharing. As a consequence, civil society has found it extremely difficult to organise around an agenda with one voice.

- **Lack of documentation**: Though civil society has made key contributions to the development of the sub region, their work is largely unknown. This is because civil society actors have not embraced a culture of reflection and documentation. The focus of a majority of CSOs is on implementing interventions and not documenting the outcome of these interventions.

- **ECOWAS-Civil Society Collaboration**: Civil society’s collaboration with ECOWAS is inadequate. This is because most CSOs lack information and the capacity to collaborate. The numbers of civil society organisations that collaborate with the sub-regional community is limited and there is a clear disconnect between community actors and the work of ECOWAS. In addition, the majority of civil society actors are not aware of the history, policies and institutions within the ECOWAS Commission.

2. **THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES**

ECOWAS was created in 1975 to promote regional economic integration and to enhance close cooperation among its member states. At its inception, the hope was that ECOWAS would meet the region’s developmental challenges, particularly in four key areas; 1) expanding intra-community trade, 2) promoting free movement of persons, goods and services through improving physical infrastructure, transport and communication links between countries, 3) strengthening the weak production structures in the sub region in order to reduce ECOWAS’ excessive external dependence and critical lack of productive activity, 4) enhancing monetary and financial cooperation in order to create a single West African currency⁵.

Following a border clash between Mali and Burkina Faso in 1975, some member states recognised that defence and security was a critical part of regional cooperation. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the focus on security intensified with escalating national conflicts with regional ramifications. ECOWAS’s economic integration project had to take a back seat to the necessity for a functional security mandate that would promote peace in the region.

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Member states recognised that peace and security were necessary ingredients for economic development and that economic strategies had to be complemented by initiatives that addressed human development, social infrastructure, health, the environment, and ethnic and political conflicts. The Liberian war of 1989-1996 was largely responsible for bringing security to the core of ECOWAS’s mandate. By August 1990, there were 225,000 Liberian refugees in Guinea, 150,000 in Cote d’Ivoire, and 69,000 in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, 5,000 people had been killed and about 3,000 Nigerian, Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean citizens were being held hostage by the rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia led by Charles Taylor.

The magnitude of the impact of these conflicts led to the unprecedented emergence of a regional intervention force to mitigate the violence in Liberia and subsequently Sierra Leone. The ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) became a symbol of a regional response to growing insecurity in West Africa. Against this backdrop, ECOWAS revised its mandate to prioritise security as the central prerequisite for development. Thus, the 1999 Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security was enacted followed closely by the adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001. Together, these legal instruments constitute a comprehensive framework for addressing issues of peace, security, governance, democracy and citizens’ participation.

**PARTNERSHIP WITH CIVIL SOCIETY**

The revised 1993 ECOWAS treaty called on the regional community to co-operate with regional CSOs and encourage the broad participation of citizens in the integration process. This marked an important change in both the structure and character of West African cooperation. There was a shift to a more “people centered” agenda as opposed to the “overly state-centric approach of the past”.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) from within the region have been working with ECOWAS in implementing various instruments including the protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security signed in Lome on the 10 December 1999 and more recently, in January 2008, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework. This framework attempts to address operational and structural conflict prevention and provides entry points for civil society involvement.

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7 Treaty of ECOWAS, 1993, Article 81.
8 Ernest Aryeetey, Regional Integration in West Africa, ( Paris: OECD Development Centre,2001)
For instance ECOWAS has been working with regional civil society networks and organisations like the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), the West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP), the Foundation for security and Development in Africa (FOSDA), the West African Women’s Association (WAWA), the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), he and the Mano River Women’s Peace Network (MARWOPNET) on issues of governance, early warning, small arms proliferation, gender, elections observation among others. Examples of civil society and ECOWAS collaborations are further highlighted in the proceeding text.

**Forum of Associations Recognised by ECOWAS (FARE)**

FARE was created by ECOWAS to bridge the gap between civil society organisations and the regional economic community. The association has a membership base of about 30 CSOs that represent the different constituents of civil society in the region. The forum was designed to be an apex institution, which would serve as a forum for dialogue and between civil society and the regional body. Currently, input is being sourced from members of this forum to finalize ECOWAS’ Vision 2020 Strategic document. The overall objective of the vision is to create a regional integration project anchored on the aspirations of community citizens in West Africa. That is, a region without borders in which the populations can access and are able to harness its abundant resources by creating opportunities for production and a sustainable environment.

**The ECOWAS Early Warning System**

Thus far, the most significant ECOWAS-CSO collaboration has been the establishment of the ECOWAS Early Warning system (ECOWARN), collaboration between the regional community and WANEP. The ECOWARN is a mechanism for conflict prevention in which WANEP is a civil society lead agency in mobilisation of CSOs for data collection and analysis.

The ECOWARN System is a strategy adopted for the prevention and resolution of conflicts in its nascent stage before they degenerate into violent conflicts of the magnitude of those experienced in the sub-region over the past two decades. This community network is the critical web that feeds into four zonal bureaus and the Observation and Monitoring Centre at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria.

Through this initiative, civil society has been involved in monitoring, analysing and evaluating conflict information at the community and national levels. This strategy is aimed at saving the huge costs that go with resolving full-blown conflicts and undertaking post-conflict reconstruction as well as averting humanitarian catastrophe.

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9 See DRAFT ECOWAS Strategic Vision 2020: “Towards an ECOWAS of peoples”
The West African Civil Society Forum

In addition, ECOWAS in partnership with key civil society organisations founded the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF)\(^\text{10}\) in 2003. WACSOF is a network of civil society organisations from the 15 ECOWAS states. WACSOF members are from diverse backgrounds with experience in peace building, education, health, democracy, human rights, and gender.

The rationale for creating a regional civil society forum was based on the need to formalise dialogue between regional civil society organisations (CSOs) and the ECOWAS secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria. WACSOF involves civil society in the process of elaborating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating political, security, economic, social and cultural programmes of ECOWAS.

This platform provides civil society in the sub region with an official corridor to dialogue and engage with both national governments and ECOWAS. The aims and objectives of WACSOF broadly include the pursuit and promotion of continuous dialogue and engagement between civil society organisations in the sub region, ECOWAS and national authorities on vital issues that affect the citizenry, and to support the process of political and socio-economic development and integration of the sub region. In doing so, WACSOF seeks to promote and improve human security, peace, and regional integration.

WACSOF strategically organises its annual meetings to coincide with the ECOWAS Heads of States Summit, and makes policy recommendations to the summit. While this is significant progress in civil society’s collaboration with ECOWAS, it is difficult to measure the extent to which these recommendations are implemented by the Heads of States.

WACSOF and Elections Observation

Although election observation missions produce interesting reports highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of an electoral process and pointing out the lessons learnt, such reports are often not used for achieving the ultimate goals of an observation mission, which is, deepening democratic governance.

This realisation is what led to the establishment of an Electoral Assistance Unit within WACSOF to coordinate effectively all interventions by CSOs in electoral processes within the sub region so as to achieve the needed impact.

This unit which is supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) builds a strong and continuous relationship with Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) even beyond elections so that civil society interactions will not only be seen during elections but even in off-seasons.

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\(^{10}\) The West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) was pioneered by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Nigeria, and International Alert, London.
WACSOF’s engagement in elections in the sub-region was preceded by the dominance of the UN and other international and local non-governmental organisations. WACSOF has, however, institutionalised indigenous citizen-led election observation in the sub-region. WACSOF’s engagement in electoral processes in the sub-region is predicated on the need to contribute to regional integration efforts through the promotion of democracy and good governance.

Also, WACSOF sees its role in electoral processes as a conflict prevention mechanism given that most conflicts in the sub-region can be attributed to the poor management of electoral processes triggered in part by the tendency of some political stakeholders, especially ruling parties, to sabotage the holding of genuine, free and fair elections whose outcomes will reflect the will of the electorate.

WACSOF has successfully observed the conduct of the following elections:

- Ghana Presidential and Parliamentary Elections (December 2004);
- Togo Presidential Elections (April 2005);
- Guinea Bissau Presidential Elections (June and July 2005);
- Liberia General Elections (October and November 2005);
- Burkina Faso Presidential Elections (November 2005);
- Cape Verde Parliamentary and Presidential Elections (January and February 2006);
- Benin Presidential Elections (March 2006);
- The Nigerian Bye-elections in Ekiti State (April 2006);
- The Gambia Presidential elections (September 2006).

In 2007, elections were observed in Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo. There have been no missions in Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea and Niger.

**ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissioners (ECONEC)**

The ECOWAS Electoral Assistance Unit and WACSOF Electoral Assistance Unit spearheaded the formation of the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissioners (ECONEC). This is a regional network of the Heads of EMBs in ECOWAS Member States that contributes to improving the integrity of elections and ensures the promotion of transparent and credible elections in the sub region with the ultimate goal of helping entrench a democratic culture. This development provides a rare opportunity for the EMBs themselves to peer-review the quality of their work.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that the agenda to promote a people-centered regional integration project hinges on the quality of collaborative initiatives between civil society and governments. ECOWAS’ collaboration with CSOs highlights the importance of building strategic partnerships between civil society, governments and economic communities. Thus, it has become clear that the role of CSOs has gradually transformed from a “watchdog” position to that of providing a credible bridge between policy makers and community citizens.