PART II

ECOWAS' Institutional Responses to Conflicts

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ECOWAS and Regional Responses to Conflicts

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Introduction

This paper traces the trajectory of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from an organisation preoccupied with economic matters at inception to an emerging Regional Security Community today. It argues that, over the last thirty-five years, the changing global and regional human security dynamics have dictated the organisation's journey, often obliging it to juggle between its original mandate and emerging priorities. Starting with a discussion about the original *raison d'être* of ECOWAS, the paper tracks the organisation's daring forays into hard regional security matters as events force it to recognise the unavoidable relationship between development and security. Learning on its feet, the Organisation has responded to the realities on the ground by fashioning normative frameworks to underpin its practice in marrying economic integration with regional security.

The paper recognises the challenges facing ECOWAS. These relate to, on the one hand, contentious issues of national sovereignty and the Anglophone-Francophone divide that tend to slow down progress and; on the other, internal human and financial resource constraints and West Africa's status as one of the most impoverished regions of the world, have limited its achievements over the years. Nonetheless, the paper concludes that ECOWAS has performed creditably over the years and it is rightly seen today as a pace setter in continental integration processes within the framework of the human security agenda. To this end, the paper argues that the transformation of ECOWAS from a Secretariat into a Commission in 2007 with greater supranational powers (at least on paper, but has to go beyond the paper) has the potential to boost the regional integration drive at the institutional and programmatic levels, not least in the field of peace and security.

The Genesis of ECOWAS

ECOWAS emerged in May 1975 at the height of the Cold War. Proxy wars were the order of the day, with France pitching its wits against the Anglo-Saxon Axis, and the Communist Soviet Union and Maoist China forcing their way into the cracks created by the battles between the traditional powers. France saw Nigeria as too large and a threat to its *chasse gardée* – Francophone West Africa – which was in the making using the economic might of Cote d'Ivoire and the cultural heritage of Senegal. For example, Cote d'Ivoire was used as an instrument in the attempt to break up Nigeria during the Biafra War. Politically, dictators and autocratic civilo-military diarchies held sway in almost all the countries in the sub-region. On the economic front, a global economic downturn and the inability of individual raw material-based economies of the sub-region to compete at the world stage deepened economic hardships and instability.

Given the geo-strategic environment at the time, it was next to impossible to propose any common security umbrella for the sub-region. Consequently, when two military rulers – the Anglophone General Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria and the Francophone General Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo – came up with the idea of a common regional organisation, they sold the least line of resistance – economic integration – as the basis of integration to guarantee the acceptance of the project. Even then Cameroun, to the immediate east of Nigeria and naturally belonging to the West African sub-region, declined the invitation fearing the dominance of Nigeria.

The Treaty establishing ECOWAS came into being in May 1975 with a vision to create a single regional economic space as a building block for the continental common market, through integration and collective self-reliance; an economic space with a single market and single currency capable of generating accelerated socio-economic development and competing more meaningfully in the global market of large trade blocs and uneven patterns of trade between the industrialised Global North and raw material-based economies of the Global South. The attempts at the time to address the issues of peace and security were informed by the realities of Cold War politics. The key normative documents on peace and security then were the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression, followed later in 1981 by the Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defense, both of which were designed primarily to reinforce state sovereignty by addressing external threats and aggression. The boldest attempt by the organisation to bridge the linguistic and political divide came in 1979 with the adoption of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment. The protocol set out the vision and principles to underpin the creation of a borderless sub-region with a common community citizenship of equal rights.

The New Threats to Development, Peace and Security

Fast-forwarding to the mid-1980s, new global dynamics and local responses had emerged to threaten a derailment of the ECOWAS economic integration efforts. The easing of Cold War tensions was accompanied by a dramatic spike in violent internal power struggles that threatened state implosion across the continent. It did not take long for ECOWAS to realise the changing nature of threats to stability. It became obvious that a nexus existed between the so-called internal conflicts and collective development efforts. Barely a decade after the creation of ECOWAS, violent internal conflicts erupted in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991) as a new phenomenon not confined to the borders of individual nation states, but with serious regional implications, both in their causes and effects. So similar were the cause of the wars that all the member-States of the sub-region could identify with them. They included the unequal and unfair burden of poverty on different social and ethnic groups within the community, bad governance and the denial of human rights and the rule of law. They also included endemic corruption, a lack of probity and accountability in political and natural resource governance, exclusion and, above all, a population explosion and infrastructure collapse that had created a major youth crisis.

Starting off as internal struggles for power and control over resources, these devastating conflicts soon took on a regionalised nature, fuelled by the illegal exploitation and exchange of natural resources for the acquisition of small arms and light weapons and characterised by the proliferation of private armies without borders made up of mercenaries, dispossessed youth and bandits. It quickly became clear that the mechanisms that were put in place to safeguard national sovereignty and ward off external aggression were grossly inadequate to meet the challenges of an increasingly interdependent region in which the ripples of refugee flows, disrupted infrastructure, the proliferation of weapons and the export of violence, were felt far and beyond national borders.

The ECOWAS Response

The regionalised 'internal' conflicts threatened to derail the original economic agenda of ECOWAS. Worse still, the implosion of states in the sub-region coincided with the spread of global anarchy that followed the collapse of the former Soviet Union and, most notably, the beginning of the First Gulf War. With the attention of the international community focused elsewhere – Africa no longer of interest to the major western powers (except for the buying and selling of primary commodities and mineral resources), therefore, ECOWAS had to reposition itself and act locally to avert the looming regional crises. However, the legal instruments and protocols in the possession of ECOWAS at the time only anticipated inter-state and not intra-state conflicts. For example, the existing

protocols were clearly designed to prevent conflicts between member states; nothing was in place for 'interference' in the internal affairs of member states. In the absence of an enabling legal framework for intervention there was division amongst its leadership, thus complicating efforts to resolve the conflicts in the sub-region. While some states dragged their feet, citing the respect of the OAU's 'non-interference' principle to justify inaction, others argued, quite rightly, that 'non-interference' should not be equated with indifference to grave human rights violations. ECOWAS, led by a coalition of willing states, overcame the absence of an enabling legal framework for intervention by initially creating ad-hoc mechanisms and, thereafter, more permanent structures through a systemic search for conflict prevention and conflict management tools to address the compelling dynamics of the new conflicts. The creation of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to intervene in Liberia and Sierra Leone was, therefore, an act of absolute necessity dictated by the unfolding realities. It also heralded the period when, for a time, the military agenda overshadowed the economic preoccupation of ECOWAS.

Militarily, few ECOWAS member states had the capability to undertake strategic force generation and projection without outside assistance. The absence of interoperability – uniform operational doctrine and equipment – between the Anglophone and Francophone troops contributing states was further compounded by the fact that no structure existed at the then ECOWAS Executive Secretariat to manage peacekeeping operations since ECOWAS was designed primarily to serve economic integration. By August 1990, there were 225,000 Liberian refugees in Guinea, 150,000 in Cote d'Ivoire, 69,000 in Sierra Leone and a huge Liberian colony in Nigeria. Furthermore, 5,000 people had been killed and about 3,000 Nigerian, Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean citizens were being held hostage by the insurgents from National Patriotic Front of Liberia led by Charles Taylor. The apparent global 'disinterest' in the unfolding drama and the humanitarian imperative left ECOWAS with no other choice but to react to stop the carnage.

Under a shaky peace agreement, the ECOMOG Force that was put together in a rush was meant to supervise a cease-fire, while an interim government was to be established, which would organise elections after twelve months. ECOMOG was designed primarily as a peacekeeping force and had no mandate to enforce the peace. When the troops arrived, they were stiffly resisted by the rebel group. On the ground, the troops had to switch between self-defense, peace-enforcement, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. It took a lot of courage, trial and error tactics in uncharted waters, and commitment by a few member states, particularly Nigeria, for ECOMOG to eventually emerge with a reasonable degree of credibility and accomplishment. In the end, though, the economic and human toll of the intervention on ECOMOG forced the regional organisation to *de-facto* cede control of the country to Charles Taylor through elections that he was bound

to win, not because he was loved, but because the population was tired of war and feared that any other outcome would prolong it. Thus began the disastrous reign of Taylor in 1997.

Building on Experiences: From Ad-hoc to Permanent Structures for Peace and Security

With subsequent missions, however, ECOWAS responses to crises became more rapid and an incremental projection of professionalism was clearly visible in later interventions in Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Liberia again in 2003 and, more recently, in Cote d'Ivoire. Moreover, serious thought was now given to the development of robust institutional frameworks for conflict management. From then on, ECOWAS leaders raised peace and security matters to the same status as the development agenda and enacted new statutes to reflect the new realities.

The ECOWAS Peace and Security Mechanism

The ECOWAS Treaty was revised in 1993 to confer supranationality on the regional body. In 1999, the institution adopted the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (The Mechanism), followed closely by the adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001. Together, these legal instruments constituted a comprehensive framework for confronting the new threats to peace and security on a more permanent basis and dealing with the entire conflict chain from pre-crisis tensions through to peace-building. The Mechanism provided for the establishment of the Early Warning System and organs including the Council of the Wise, Special Mediators and Offices of the Special Representative for the gathering and analysis of conflict indicators and preventive diplomatic work respectively. The ECOWAS Council of the Wise is one instrument that has been utilised in various mediation efforts and also in the observation and monitoring of elections, which have become a major trigger to conflicts in the sub-region. The ECOWAS President also deploys Special Representatives to conflicts zones to interface with local actors, AU, EU and UN representatives on the ground to monitor daily developments and intervene in a timely manner to diffuse potential tensions during peace processes. Additionally, ECOWAS fields Special Mediators to complement the efforts of representatives on the ground. The Organisation established the Mediation and Security Council as the highest decision making body on peace and security, advised by the meetings of the Defense and Security Commission (now Committee) of Chiefs of Defense Staff and the Executive Secretary (now the President). The adoption of the Mechanism was a landmark event and represented the most advanced attempt yet at creating a 'Security Community' on the continent. The OAU was later to borrow extensively from it to underpin the evolving continental peace and security architecture.

Testing the Mechanism

When crisis erupted in Cote d'Ivoire in September 2002, the implementation of the Mechanism was still in its early stages, but, thanks to it, the political and military responses to the conflict were markedly different. The Mechanism was activated. The Defense and Security Committee, the Mediation and Security Council and the Authority of Heads of State and Government played their roles as required by the Mechanism. In fact, ECOMICI rapidly deployed and quickly stabilised the situation.

Given the resource handicap facing ECOWAS, the institution requested for assistance from UNDPKO and member states for the ECOWAS Mission in Cote d'Ivoire (ECOMICI). The ECOMICI advance team sent in to conduct a reconnaissance of the theatre of operation received assistance from France, which operated a military base in Bouake in the north. The US also sent officers to assist. Logistics were provided principally by France, USA, Belgium, UK and a host of other European countries. Thus, unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone, the launching of ECOMICI was indeed an example of international cooperation in support of ECOWAS. The same pattern was later repeated in the preparations for, and deployment of, the second ECOMOG Mission to Liberia (ECOMIL). Indeed, the post-Mechanism ECOMOG missions served principally as bridgeheads for the later deployment of larger UN, as well as international humanitarian missions, through 're-hatting'. It is no coincidence that the latter-day ECOWAS interventions were characterised by greater civilian political oversight, fewer civilian casualties and instances of human rights violations.

That ECOWAS has developed a comparative advantage in the area of conflict management and has become a reference point in the continent is beyond question. With every new threat to peace and security, ECOWAS has been perfecting its capacity for early response. This has been amply demonstrated by the organisation's ability to contain the crises in Guinea Bissau (2003) and Togo (2005), and preventing the descent of the political upheavals into outright war.

Cooperation between ECOWAS, AU and UN in Peace and Security

The design and implementation of ECOWAS strategies to meet the challenges of regional peace and security are carried out in close collaboration with the African Union and the United Nations. Among other initiatives, the ECOWAS Early Warning System and the evolving ECOWAS Standby Force (successor to ECOMOG) are constitutive elements of the continental peace and security architecture. In the area of peace support operations, ECOWAS has always acted in concert with the African Union and UN, with the latter often designating Special Representatives to conflict zones to interface with ECOWAS. Currently, the AU has appointed mediators to Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Togo, among others.

ECOWAS and AU

Since the creation of the OAU in May 1963, several African leaders have been putting forward the idea of a standing continental force – the African High Command – capable of rapid intervention to maintain peace on the continent. This idea is coming to fruition under the auspices of the AU through the establishment of the African Standby Force (ASF). The idea flows logically from recommendations in the Brahimi Report on the reform of UN peace support operations, particularly with regard to the setting up of a Standing High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG). Designed for rapid deployment in peace-keeping, the ASF comprises five brigades, one brigade to be provided by each of the five African Regional Economic Communities. The evolving 'Standby' approach will provide ECOWAS and AU with a rapid force generation capability in times of emergencies. Under the arrangement, military and civilian units will be identified, trained and equipped in member states ready for contingency operations. It also provides for the development of standardised operational procedures to enhance interoperability, and the creation of logistics depots in the continent to facilitate rapid deployment, self-reliance and sustainability of future operations (ECOWAS is already setting up such a depot in Sierra Leone).

With active financial and logistical support from UN and development partners, particularly the EU, ECOWAS is well placed to be the first REC to deliver its brigade to the ASF. To promote these initiatives, ECOWAS has set up a Mission Planning and Management Cell, and is actively training personnel – military and civilian – in member states. The Nigerian National Defense Academy, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Ghana and the Malian Military Academy in Bamako have been identified as centres of excellence to spearhead capacity building at the strategic, operational and tactical levels respectively.

At the AU Summit in Accra in July 2007, the decision was taken to accredit REC liaison officers to the African Union to ensure better coordination between the institutions. Building on this initiative, the RECs and AU signed a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding at the January 2008 Summit in Addis Ababa to increase cooperation and collaboration between them in the implementation of the continent's peace and security agenda. The MOU is underpinned by the principles of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage. Thus, while recognising the primary responsibility of AU in the maintenance and promotion of peace, security and stability in Africa, the memorandum also acknowledges the role and responsibility of RECs in these domains in their respective regions of mandate. The MOU identifies nine areas of cooperation, namely the operationalisation of the African Peace and Security Architecture; conflict prevention, management and resolution; humanitarian action and disaster response; post-conflict reconstruction and development; arms control and

disarmament; counter-terrorism and the prevention and combating of trans-national organised crime; border management; capacity building, training and knowledge sharing; and resource mobilisation.

ECOWAS and the UN

Over the past two decades, more so in the last ten years, ECOWAS has been steadily developing collaborative action with the United Nations system in the area of peacekeeping and peace-building. It would be recalled that the UN Charter confers on the UN Security Council the ultimate responsibility to order military intervention in a member state to guarantee international peace and security. Consequently, ECOMOG military interventions in conflicts have to receive prior authorisation or eventual validation from the UN to secure legitimacy. Importantly, Chapter Eight of the UN Charter recognises the possibility of regional institutions, such as ECOWAS, taking appropriate action over matters relating to international peace and security, provided such institutions and/or their activities are consistent with the purpose and principles of the UN.

All peace agreements relating to recent conflicts in the sub-region have been negotiated under the coordinated and collaborative umbrella of ECOWAS, AU, UN and EU. The comparative advantage of UN in expertise, human and financial resources has ensured that peacekeeping operations have often transited from ECOWAS mandate to that of the UN or been carried out jointly. Also, the very important DDR components of peace support operations, as well as capacity-building and post-conflict elections, have always been conducted under the auspices of the UN but in consultation with ECOWAS. Indeed, ECOMOG has always intervened in conflicts in West Africa to create the necessary conditions for the deployment of broader UN peacekeeping missions.

Thus, a new formula for crisis response based on the Mechanism is slowly evolving whereby, with the emergence of internal conflict or unrest, an immediate political solution is sought through fact-finding missions and facilitation, using the ECOWAS Council of the Wise and Special Mediators. Failing a resolution, a vanguard force may be dispatched to separate belligerents and limit the spread and adverse impact of the conflict. Based on the situation, the force is expanded and stabilisation sought. Finally, as negotiated and based on need, the ECOWAS force is converted to a UN mission. This 'formula for success' has already taken place in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire.

On broader human security matters, ECOWAS maintains effective cooperation with the UN Regional Office for West Africa in the fight against cross-border and transnational crime, and youth employment, and the two institutions have been probing areas of joint action on broader conflict prevention issues..

The Scourge of Small Arms

In the conflicts that have engendered severe insecurity and hampered developmental efforts in West Africa, small arms and light weapons have become veritable weapons of mass destruction. Estimated at 8 million in circulation in West Africa, these weapons have fuelled conflicts, facilitated the spread of armed non-state actors and the upsurge in crime and banditry post-conflict. In the efforts to stem the flow of these weapons, ECOWAS adopted a Moratorium in 1999 on the importance and exportation of weapons and promoted in-country as cross-border initiatives in a micro-disarmament drive. With the assistance of UNDP and developing partners from EU, ECOWAS has converted the Moratorium into a permanent binding instrument to counter this scourge. Further, a dedicated Small Arms Unit has been set up at the ECOWAS Commission to provide a strategic framework for the fight against weapons proliferation, complemented by a UNDP – supported operational field unit – the ECOWAS Small Arms Control Project (ECOSAP).

Promoting Good Governance and Democracy as a Conflict Prevention Strategy

ECOWAS places a high premium on political governance, evolution of democratic institutions, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. In the past, weak governance had blighted the development of many West African countries. Manifestations of weak governance included bad government policies and an economic and political climate that discouraged investment in the ECOWAS region. They also included corruption and bureaucratic systems that were impervious to scrutiny and not answerable to the public, as well as the absence of strong mechanisms that ensured that peoples' voices were heard and their rights upheld, such as parliaments, the media and the justice system.

Over the last decade, however, several West African countries have demonstrated a firm commitment to sound democratic practices by creating the required peaceful and stable framework for political and economic governance. The ECOWAS/NEPAD agenda places a high premium on deepening democratic culture and achieving good governance in West Africa. ECOWAS Member States adopted the Protocol on Democracy and Good governance in December 2001 as a supplementary protocol to the mechanism on Conflict Prevention. Together, the two ECOWAS protocols provide the supernatural framework and authority for ECOWAS intervention in Member States on issues relating to governance, democratic culture and human rights, respect for constitutionalism and the rule of law, probity and accountability, peace and security.

Emanating from these protocols is ECOWAS adherence to the policy of 'zero tolerance' towards unconstitutional and violent usurpation of power, backed by a strong determination to ensure credible, transparent, and free and fair elections

in the sub-region. This new policy was amply demonstrated by the proactive steps that ECOWAS took in Guinea-Bissau in 2003 to oppose the military coup d'etat and also in 2005, when ECOWAS stepped in to ensure a succession that was in conformity with the constitution of Togo, following the death of President Gnassingbe Eyadema.

Drawing from a pool of experts provided by Member-States, ECOWAS Council of Elders, the ECOWAS Parliament and West African civil society organisations, ECOWAS has established the practice of fielding pre-election fact-finding missions, election monitoring and observation teams in the course of electoral processes in West African States. Together with counter-part missions from development partners, such as the EU and other international organisations, the practice has not only assured proper national preparations towards elections, it has also greatly reduced election-induced violence and improved the credibility and transparency of elections in West Africa.

Over the last decade, as a consequence, we have witnessed measurable progress in the consolidation of democracy in several countries. As a measure of the progress made, five states have already agreed to submit themselves to the NEPAD Peer Review Process. Ghana, Senegal, Cape Verde and Benin have reached the threshold for debt cancellation under the PRSP programme and have also qualified for substantial assistance from the US under the Millennium Challenge Account.

To streamline and operationalise election intervention, ECOWAS has established the Electoral Assistance Unit within the secretariat to work with member states and civil society institutions, as well as the evolution and harmonisation of systems, processes and electoral procedures that produce transparent, free and fair results. Keen observers of West Africa, and indeed Africa, will not have failed to realise the pivotal role that civil society has played and continues to play in the incremental transition towards open societies and the law in the sub-region. There have been valiant acts of student movements, organised as well as unorganised labour, professional associations, actors in the formal sector, research institutes, churches and mosques, traditional rulers, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations in the relentless struggle against dictatorship, military rule and bad governance in West Africa. Commendable as their actions have been, these important institutions have tended to be weak and their interventions often spontaneous and uncoordinated.

In the efforts to streamline and valorise CSO contributions to peace and security, ECOWAS facilitated the emergence of a coordinating structure for the disparate civil society groups in West Africa with the help of development partners and leading West African NGOs. As a consequence, the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) was created in December 2003 with the objective of facilitating the emergence of networks of CSOs in member-states, enhancing their organisational capacity and mobilising critical civil society inputs across the

sub-region to strengthen and accompany ECOWAS interventions and dialogue with external partners.

Intensifying the Integration Agenda under a New Vision

Having pointed to the original *raison d'être* of ECOWAS – regional economic integration – it is necessary to emphasise that ECOWAS continues to march relentlessly towards integration under its new vision and within the framework of the AU vision, the NEPAD initiative and the UN Millennium Development Goals. The belief is that it is the only sustainable way that the root causes of conflict can be tackled. In addition to the obvious imperative for peace and security, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) recognises infrastructure development, good political and economic governance as necessary pre-conditions for sustainable socio-economic development and human security. Though ECOWAS has been engaged in many aspects of NEPAD goals for several years even before the formal launching of NEPAD, the opportunities the initiative provided is appreciated as a usual platform for dialogue with development partners and, more importantly, for inter-state interaction and peer learning. Further, NEPAD helps RECs to refocus their objectives and link regional initiatives to continental development programmes. This logic convinced West African leaders to designate ECOWAS as the focal point for NEPAD implementation and regional trade negotiations with the EU.

The New ECOWAS Vision and its Priorities

ECOWAS has kept its mission objectives under regular review, taking on board the new regional and global dynamics. The new vision of ECOWAS aims to create a borderless sub-region in which the peoples enjoy its enormous resources through the creation of opportunities of production and jobs; a space in which the people transact business and trade and live in peace within the rule of law; a zone that forms an integral part of the larger African continental space, under construction, within an even border (meaning?) context of a global village where all human beings live in dignity through an equitable exchange and mutual solidarity.

The overall objectives of ECOWAS' vision are, therefore, to sustain economic growth and promote intra-ECOWAS trade, develop regional infrastructure, promote and sustain social and environmental harmony, eradicate poverty and food insecurity; enhance trade negotiation capability and regional access to markets; and maintain regional peace and security. To this end, ECOWAS has adopted strategies to roll out regional infrastructure, including rail and road networks, power generation, schools and other social amenities. It aimed to adopt a common regional currency – the Eco – by 2010 to boost regional trade, having already implemented a visa-free regime within the sub-region to facilitate free movement and common citizenship. Further, it has adopted common regional poverty reduction and agricultural policies in the fight against poverty with a view to ensuring food security.

Prioritising Conflict Prevention

To build and sustain peace and stability, there is the need to go beyond containment, often by military measures, towards strategies aimed at the core causes of societal discord. Indeed, at the centre of the root causes of conflict is alienation borne out of the unequal burden of poverty, the scramble for limited economic opportunities and power which, in turn, set off systemic marginalisation, exclusion and institutional corruption. Against the backdrop of a population boom in West Africa, and indeed in the entire continent, the pressures on the economies and the entire society cannot be underestimated.

The UNDP Human Development Report, while not without its limitations, remains the only authoritative document that attempts to offer a comprehensive comparative study of the state of human development between the regions of the world. The 2006 Report puts West Africa in a disturbingly bad light in relation to other parts of the world, despite the relative progress in the democratisation progress in the past few years. The report divides the 177 states examined into three broad categories of human development – high, medium and low. Needless to emphasise, all West Africa states except, perhaps two, fall under the Low Human Development categories, with the last five spots in the global league table occupied by our sub-region. Against this backdrop, West Africa is experiencing the fastest population growth and youth bulge in the world. From the figure of 120 million in 1975, West Africa's population is projected to hit 430 million by 2020, with 45 per cent under the age of 15. With current average annual economic growth of 4 – 4.5 per cent and population growth rates at 3.5 per cent, the sub-region would need to grow its economy at the rate of 7 per cent per annum to have any meaningful impact on poverty reduction. While the report credits sub-Saharan Africa with an appreciable rise in literacy rates among the youth (within 15-24 age bracket) at 71 per cent, the figure masks the quality deficiencies, gender and ethnic distortions and the dearth of employment opportunities for the youth.

Against the backdrop of weakening state capacity to feed, educate and facilitate employment opportunities for their populations, these statistics are laden with foreboding implications. In the conflicts that ravaged the West Africa sub-region only a few years ago, the unemployed and unemployable youth became the endless pool from which warlords and other adventures recruited foot soldiers and marauding bandits to terrorise their populations. Some of the roots of the phenomenon of non-state combatants, child soldiers and suicide bombers can be traced to the problem of the youth crisis, and the need to critically examine the factors that engender them.

The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework

As can be seen from preceding paragraphs, the ECOWAS peace and security architecture boasts an impressive array of instruments, not least the mechanism,

for the top-down approaches to interventions in times of crisis. The inadequacies of the mechanism become glaring, however, when one considers the helplessness of ECOWAS when dealing with so-called internal conflicts, particularly in 'ungovernable spaces', such as Casamance, the Niger Delta and trouble spots in the north of Ghana, Mali and Niger. The organisation has been weak in promoting the bottom-up approaches to peace-building, using its resources on the ground and local peace constituencies. Remedying the situation calls for a conflict prevention mechanism that would promote cooperation between ECOWAS, member states and civil society in dealing with causes of conflicts, rather than their effects.

Recognising these challenges, the organisation in January 2008 adopted the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework as a tool to encourage such cooperation among ECOWAS resources and stakeholders on the ground around key conflict-inducing factors. The rationale for adopting the ECPF is to raise conflict prevention and peace-building to the same status as the development agenda. Its core objective is to strengthen and consolidate the human security architecture in West Africa, i.e. the creation of conditions to eliminate pervasive threats to people's and individual rights, livelihoods, safety and life; the protection of human and democratic rights and the promotion of human development to ensure freedom from fear and freedom from want. The framework aims to encourage collaborative interventions by field ECOWAS resources (the Council of the Wise, field agencies and the Zonal Bureaux for Conflict Prevention) and local civil society peace constituencies in conflict prevention and peace-building around concrete initiatives. These include natural resource governance, security governance, youth empowerment, gender equality and cross-border initiatives. Other areas of concern in the framework include early warning and action, preventive diplomacy, political governance, human rights and peace education.

It is hoped that the active cooperation between civil society groups and ECOWAS in-country in the implementation of the Conflict Prevention Framework will enrich the ECOWAS peace and security architecture by filling the bottom-up approach gap.

Conclusion: Responses to Conflicts as Work in Progress

The evolving ECOWAS security architecture has been informed largely by the sometimes bitter field experiences that the organisation has endured in its attempts to respond to violence and insecurity in the sub-region. Consequently, it has been obliged to apply a trial and error methodology as it fathoms appropriate tools to respond to human and regional security challenges. In the event, ECOWAS has accumulated vast expertise in dealing with instability. Though its response mechanisms to conflict are far from perfect, they are rightly regarded as a trail blazer in the continent.

It is pertinent to recognise the limitations of ECOWAS in meeting the regional challenges that confront it. ECOWAS is yet to acquire a reasonable degree of real supranationality in relation to member states and, consequently, its ability to intervene in member states to address grave insecurity is very much a function of the political will of individual member states. In particular, ECOWAS is constrained in its ability to bring large and medium states in line with the provisions of the protocols that they have ratified, particularly with regard to political governance matters and local internal conflicts, such as Casamance and the Niger Delta. So far, ECOWAS has been able to intervene more decisively in member states whose internal governance institutions and processes have collapsed and where central authority is under severe challenge.

The effectiveness of ECOWAS's response mechanisms will eventually be determined by deepening the regional democratic processes to such an extent that there will be a regional consensus on what constitutes good governance. For this to happen, the role of civil society at the regional level and within individual member states is critical (as well as the role of community-based/grassroots organisations/ethnic nationality groups in valorising true citizenship for the mass majority of the people).

Not only are civil society organisations the critical institution to forge democratic spaces within member states around acceptable international and regional norms, despite their seeming elitist look, and the norms routinely violated and truncated by the major western powers when their salient geo-political, strategic and economic interests are at stake. The civil society also constitutes the pressure needed to oblige large and medium member states to comply with regional norms. Thus, to establish a functioning response mechanism to conflicts, ECOWAS must recognise the enormity of the security challenges in the sub-region and appreciate the fact that achieving its set targets would require not only the mobilisation of its member states and organised civil society to accompany the efforts, but also the forging of cooperation and collaboration with development partners. ECOWAS' desire and efforts to constructively engage West African civil society and build lasting relations with EU and other partners in the realisation of its agenda are informed by these realities.

Finally, much as it is necessary to prepare for active intervention to pacify violent enclaves and mitigate humanitarian emergencies, ECOWAS must place greater emphasis on prevention. ECOWAS must develop effective strategies to sanitise natural resource governance, facilitate in-country and regional infrastructure development, ensure youth employment and combat the HIV/AIDS and Malaria pandemics. To this end, the operationalisation of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework with critical stakeholders must constitute immediate ECOWAS priorities.