

The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Africa the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijcsird.v8.i1.10

Abstract

This study of ECOWAS tries to provide insights that explain the implementation gap, as these may help inform, calibrate and target reforms as well as support efforts that are technically desirable and politically feasible. To do so, the study focuses on the key drivers and constraints that shape the ECOWAS agenda and influence implementation by analysing two policy areas: peace and security and food security (focusing on the agricultural sector and agro-food industries and trade). The study uses a political economy framework to answer two core questions: how do key actors and factors affect and shape the agenda setting of ECOWAS? And how do these different actors and factors influence what gets implemented and why?

Keywords: *Political Economy, Regional Integration, Africa, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*

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First Published by: The European Center for Development Policy Management, Belgium

Background to the Study

This study presents a political economy analysis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), focusing in particular on what drives and hampers this regional organisation in preventing and resolving conflicts in West Africa, and in promoting a regional approach to agriculture and food security. The report is part of a broader study that includes the African Union and four other Regional Economic Communities in Africa

Why a Political Economy Study of ECOWAS?

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the formal aim of promoting economic co-operation between 15 countries with different historic trajectories (colonisation, language, and administrative cultures) yet sharing similar socio-economic conditions. During the 1980s the regional body was confronted with a large number of political crises, ranging from civil war to various military or constitutional coups d'état. This forced ECOWAS to fully embrace the security agenda as a 'core business'.

The region is widely recognised as a trailblazer, including for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Several crises have been effectively addressed through regional diplomacy and military intervention. Over the years, ECOWAS has sought to promote an ever-widening regional integration agenda through a wide variety of strategies, action plans and programmes. Initially the regional body functioned through a state-centric, top-down approach to promoting regional integration. From the 1990s onwards, there were deliberate attempts by ECOWAS to also spur regional dynamics 'from below' through close collaboration between institutional actors, civil society and business organisations.

ECOWAS recently celebrated its 40th Anniversary. In reviewing the track record of the organisation, most analyses concur that important achievements were obtained in different domains, including restoring peace, containing conflicts, dealing with rigged elections, facilitating the free movement of people or supporting infrastructure development (trans-coastal and trans-Saharan roads).

Yet there is also a broad recognition that the initial aspirations have not been met. Overall progress in the actual implementation of ECOWAS policies in core areas such as trade, economic and monetary cooperation, energy and social development has been limited. There are still many obstacles to the free circulation of people (such as the existence of numerous check points, arbitrary and discriminatory treatment of citizens of other countries, migration laws) and goods (including the non-application of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, illegal tariff barriers, and non-tariff barriers). Other urgent crises remain unaddressed. The Sahel is being increasingly destabilised by cross-border crime, drug trafficking, the Tuareg conflict, terrorism and the spread of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The envisaged transition in the Vision 2020 from an 'ECOWAS of States' to an 'ECOWAS of People' has still a long way to go, particularly in terms of delivering tangible outcomes for citizens.

However, in assessing the performance of ECOWAS one cannot ignore the particularly harsh political, institutional and socio-economic conditions in which the integration project had to be pursued. The region ranks particularly low regarding all human development indicators. Thirteen ECOWAS countries are classified in the low Human Development category and 60 per cent of the population is estimated to live on less than one dollar a day. This brings along major shortcomings in policy and institutional capacity across the board.

Adapted from: <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/ECDPM-2016-Political-Economy-Regional-Integration-Africa-Executive-Summary-ECOWAS-Report.pdf>