

TRAJECTORIES OF SUB-REGIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: An Assessment of ECOWAS

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An Abstract

When the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was formed in 1975, its objective was largely socio-economic – *“to promote cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity... and in social and cultural matters for the purpose of raising the standard of living of its peoples, of increasing and maintaining economic stability... and contributing to the progress and development of the African continent”* (1975 ECOWAS Treaty, Article 2). None of the sixty five articles of the Treaty alluded to sub-regional defence and security; but three decades on, ECOWAS is by far better known for managing sub-regional conflict than economic integration.

Though the UN Charter of 1945 made provision in its Chapter VIII for (sub-) regional involvement in the maintenance of international peace and security, it was not until the 1990s that regional organisations assumed greater responsibility for regional security. Opinions, however, are divided on the role of regional bodies in conflict management.

On the one hand, regional intervention is justified on the ground, that states in a particular region are better acquainted with the problems and characteristics of the area and better able to understand the motives and pressures which impel the conflicting parties; and therefore, in a better position to know the kind of settlement which stands a better chance of being viable. And on the other, it is argued that in any particular conflict situation that attracts regional intervention, member-states invariably have their own separate and often conflicting agendas to the effect that conflict dynamics and mediatory processes become more complex and intractable. The ECOWAS experience exhibits these potentials and dangers of sub-regional conflict management.

ECOWAS took the first steps towards sub-regional conflict management with the adoption of the Protocol on Non-Aggression in 1978 and the Protocol relating to Mutual Assistance on Defence in 1981. The latter, particularly, made elaborate provisions for managing conflict within the Community. But that document was allowed to be so infested by the virus of non-implementation that in its interventions in Liberia (1990), Sierra Leone (1997) and Guinea Bissau (1999), ECOWAS had to adopt adhoc measures.

Since December 1999, ECOWAS has adopted the comprehensive Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution Peacekeeping and Security as a permanent framework for managing security, but to what extent has it succeeded so far?

The Ivorian crisis and the renewed Liberian conflict provide useful benchmarks for assessing the ECOWAS Mechanism.

Against a brief historical sketch of how ECOWAS transited from regional integration to conflict management, this paper assesses the varying phases of that enterprise and concludes that in spite of its shortcomings, the ECOWAS experience remains the most progressive in Africa.