

## **ECOWAS at 50: Resilience, Growth and a new Vision for Global Relevance**

By

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the 50-year journey of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), assessing its resilience, growth, and the potential for a new vision aimed at enhancing its global relevance. The study addresses the challenges ECOWAS has faced in its quest for regional integration, political stability, and economic cooperation amidst global shifts. The objectives are to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of ECOWAS, analyze its response to socio-political and economic challenges, and propose strategies for redefining its role on the global stage. Drawing on the theory of regionalism and integration, the study adopts a qualitative methodology, combining a review of archival records, policy documents, and expert interviews. Findings reveal that while ECOWAS has made significant strides in fostering economic growth and peacekeeping, its effectiveness has often been hampered by political instability, external dependency, and internal conflicts. The conclusion underscores the need for ECOWAS to redefine its vision by focusing on sustainable development, intra-regional trade, political cohesion, and global diplomacy. Recommendations include strengthening regional institutions, enhancing member-state cooperation, and adopting new strategies for tackling emerging challenges like climate change, migration, and security threats, ensuring ECOWAS becomes more resilient and relevant in global affairs over the next 50 years.

**Keywords:** ECOWAS, Regional Integration, Peace and Security, Economic Cooperation, Global Relevance, Trade Liberalization.

### **Introduction**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded in 1975 as a regional organization aimed at fostering economic integration, political stability, and development within West Africa. Over the past five decades, ECOWAS has faced numerous challenges, including political instability, economic disparities, and security threats, while also achieving significant

milestones in fostering regional cooperation and collaboration. As ECOWAS approaches its 50th anniversary, it stands at a crucial crossroads in its evolution contemplating its resilience in the face of complex socio-political and economic dynamics, its contributions to regional growth, and its capacity to assert itself as a global player in international affairs. In light of the rapidly changing global landscape, characterized by shifting geopolitical alignments, rising economic powers, and unprecedented global challenges such as climate change and pandemics, ECOWAS must rethink its strategies and objectives. This reflection offers an opportunity to reassess its achievements, challenges, and future role in ensuring not only regional integration but also global relevance (Olayiwola, 2021; Abdulyakeen and Daniel, 2020; Bassey, 2020; Ceesay, 2019).

While numerous studies have explored the achievements and challenges of ECOWAS, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding a comprehensive analysis of its trajectory over the past fifty years particularly in terms of resilience, growth, and the prospects for redefining its global relevance in the 21st century. Existing research predominantly focuses on individual aspects of ECOWAS's work, such as its peacekeeping efforts, its economic initiatives, or its response to security issues, but fails to provide a unified framework that considers all these factors together as part of a long-term vision for the organization's future. This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting an integrative analysis of ECOWAS's evolution, assessing its resilience against internal and external challenges, its contributions to West African economic growth, and its emerging strategies to enhance its global relevance. The study will also examine the potential for ECOWAS to redefine its role in a rapidly changing global order, considering the need for innovation in its policies, governance structures, and engagement with global actors. Additionally, this study will explore the alignment between ECOWAS's goals and the broader international

agendas, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate action, and peace and security frameworks, to determine how ECOWAS can enhance its global stature and influence. The findings will not only contribute to academic literature but will also provide valuable insights for policymakers, regional leaders, and international partners invested in the future of West Africa and its place in the global community. This study will explore the progress ECOWAS has made in the areas of economic resilience, political stability, and regional development over the past fifty years, while also focusing on its evolving vision for the future. By reflecting on its strategic priorities and challenges, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on how ECOWAS can strengthen its position in the international system and ensure its continued relevance in an increasingly multipolar world.

### **ECOWAS's Origins and Early Development**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos by 15 West African countries. The primary objective of ECOWAS was to foster economic integration and promote cooperation among the member states to facilitate sustainable development, peace, and political stability in the West African region. Its formation marked a significant milestone in Africa's efforts toward regional cooperation and integration, driven by the recognition that regional unity would provide a stronger foundation for economic development, reduce dependency on external powers, and improve the collective bargaining power of West African nations on the global stage (Danjuma and Success, 2012; Ibeanu, 2022). The formation of ECOWAS occurred against the backdrop of a post-colonial Africa that was grappling with various challenges, including political instability, economic fragmentation, and the lingering effects of colonialism. West African countries, having gained independence from European

powers in the 1960s, were faced with the task of rebuilding their economies and societies, while addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. The newly independent nations recognized that economic cooperation and collective action were essential for addressing these challenges. At the same time, the Cold War context in global politics influenced the shaping of ECOWAS. Many of the West African states had close ties to former colonial powers such as France and the United Kingdom, and the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union created a complex geopolitical environment. The desire to reduce reliance on former colonial powers and strengthen intra-African ties in the face of external influences was an important motivating factor behind the establishment of ECOWAS.

The Treaty of Lagos laid the groundwork for the creation of ECOWAS and outlined the core principles and objectives of the organization. The founding members of ECOWAS were Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). The Treaty sought to promote economic integration through the establishment of a common market, the creation of a free trade area, and the coordination of economic policies and development strategies among member states. Specifically (Ibeanu, 2022; Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2020; Ikeone, 2018) argues that, the Treaty focused on achieving several key objectives:

- i. Economic Cooperation: Promoting the economic development of the region through collaboration in sectors such as agriculture, industry, transport, and energy.
- ii. Establishment of a Free Trade Area: Eliminating trade barriers within the region to encourage the free flow of goods and services.

- iii. Infrastructure Development: Enhancing regional infrastructure, including transportation networks (e.g., roads, railways, ports) and energy supply, to improve economic connectivity.
- iv. Peace and Security: Promoting peace and stability in the region, recognizing that political and economic instability were significant threats to the region's development.

The Treaty envisioned that West African states would gradually work toward creating a single economic space, beginning with efforts to harmonize trade policies and customs regulations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is hinged on two theories, namely: regional integration theory, and development theory. The adoption of these theories became imperative as no single theory can on its own sufficiently capture and explain all the dimensions of issues raised in this research as well as the complexities associated with impact of ECOWAS resilience, growth at 50 and a new vision for global relevance

### **Regional Integration Theory**

Regional integration theory was first significantly advanced by scholars like Ernst B. Haas and Amitav Acharya. Haas' "functionalism" and the works of Leon Lindberg contributed greatly to understanding the dynamics of regional integration, particularly within economic and political frameworks. Regional Integration Theory studies how countries within a specific geographic area cooperate politically, economically, and socially. It focuses on processes like trade agreements, collective decision-making, and shared governance. Key stages include free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, and economic unions. Theories like neofunctionalism,

intergovernmentalism, and constructivism offer insights into the motivations and dynamics of integration. While integration can lead to increased stability and economic growth, it faces challenges such as sovereignty concerns, economic inequalities, and political resistance. Successful examples include the European Union (EU) and ASEAN. Integration fosters cooperation for shared regional benefits.

### **Assumptions**

Regional Integration Theory is grounded in several key assumptions that guide the processes and dynamics of regional cooperation. Here are some of the major assumptions:

- i. It is assumed that member states will benefit economically through increased trade, reduced barriers, and shared resources, leading to higher economic growth and development for the region as a whole.
- ii. The theory assumes that states within a region share common economic, political, or security interests that provide a foundation for cooperation and integration.
- iii. A key assumption is that member states are willing to compromise aspects of their national sovereignty to achieve greater regional integration, either in economic, political, or security matters.
- iv. Integration is viewed as a gradual, step-by-step process. Early cooperation in specific areas (such as trade or infrastructure) will create momentum for deeper political integration over time, as predicted by theories like neofunctionalism.

- v. There is an assumption that more powerful or wealthier states may exert influence over the integration process, shaping policies to align with their interests. However, the goal is to achieve mutual benefits that also support less powerful members.
- vi. Integration assumes the establishment of regional institutions (like a common market or regional parliament) to manage and oversee cooperation, mediate conflicts, and ensure compliance with agreed policies.
- vii. It is assumed that regional integration can help member states become more resilient to external economic or political pressures by pooling resources, coordinating policies, and speaking with a collective voice on the global stage.

#### **Applicability to ECOWAS at 50:**

ECOWAS's ability to overcome regional crises, such as civil wars and security challenges, reflects its growing interdependence and institutional resilience. Through its peacekeeping efforts (e.g., ECOMOG) and mediation roles, ECOWAS exemplifies the resilience of regional organizations to conflicts and political instability. ECOWAS has facilitated increased trade and economic cooperation through the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and other agreements, contributing to the region's growth. The organization has also promoted infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity and trade. The integration of diverse African economies within ECOWAS offers an opportunity to enhance the region's global relevance. The organization's agenda to enhance trade, regional policy frameworks, and collaborative international efforts positions ECOWAS as an emerging actor on the global stage.

## **Development Theory**

The Modernization Theory (post-World War II) initiated by theorists like Walt Rostow and Paul Baran shaped early thinking around economic development, while later theories like Dependency Theory proposed by Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory brought alternative views on development in the context of the global South. Development Theory explores the processes and strategies for improving economic, social, and political conditions in less developed regions. It examines the causes of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment, aiming to create sustainable progress. Key approaches include modernization theory, which focuses on economic growth and industrialization, and dependency theory, which highlights how developing countries are exploited by developed nations. Theories like world-systems theory view global inequalities as part of a broader economic system. Human development theory emphasizes social factors, including education and health, alongside economic progress. Post-colonial and feminist perspectives challenge traditional development models. Theories evolve with a focus on sustainability, inclusivity, and global interconnectedness.

## **Assumptions**

Development Theory is based on several key assumptions that guide its understanding of how societies evolve and achieve progress. Some of the major assumptions include:

- i. Many development theories assume that societies progress through a series of stages, typically from traditional to modern, with economic growth and industrialization being key drivers of development (e.g., Modernization Theory).



- ii. Development is often equated with economic growth, with the belief that increased wealth will lead to improvements in living standards, infrastructure, and social well-being. iii. In some theories, particularly Modernization Theory, it is assumed that developing countries must follow the path of industrialized, Western nations to achieve progress, adopting similar political, economic, and cultural systems.
- iv. Dependency Theory posits that developing nations are underdeveloped because of historical exploitation by developed countries, and their continued dependence on these nations perpetuates inequality and underdevelopment.
- v. World-Systems Theory argues that global inequality is rooted in a hierarchical world economy, with core nations dominating the periphery, and peripheral nations being economically dependent and exploited.
- vi. Many development theories assume that strong state intervention and institutions are necessary for development, through policies that regulate markets, manage resources, and address social inequalities.
- vii. Modern development theories emphasize that development is not only economic but also includes social aspects like health, education, and political participation, with human wellbeing and capabilities being central to the development process.

### **Applicability to ECOWAS at 50:**

ECOWAS's development projects over the past 50 years have been aimed at not just economic growth but sustainable development, addressing issues of poverty, infrastructure, and human capital. The organization's focus on integrating sustainable development goals (SDGs) into its strategy shows its commitment to long-term resilience. Over its 50-year existence, ECOWAS has

made strides in reducing barriers to trade, establishing a common currency (the ECO), and enhancing economic stability among member states. The theory of development through integration supports these efforts as ECOWAS seeks to become a major economic bloc. ECOWAS is focusing on creating a regional economic powerhouse by promoting sustainable development and reducing dependence on foreign aid. By fostering economic cooperation and stability, ECOWAS aims to position itself as a key player in global affairs, emphasizing self-reliance, trade, and regional autonomy in the face of global challenges.

## **Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining historical analysis and contemporary assessments. The research is organized into three key stages: document analysis, expert interviews, and case studies. A thorough review of ECOWAS' foundational treaties, key policy documents, annual reports, and academic literature spanning its 50-year history will be conducted to trace the organization's development and strategic evolution. This includes analyzing records related to regional economic integration, peacekeeping missions, and socio-political interventions. Semistructured interviews will be conducted with policymakers, diplomats, scholars, and analysts who have worked closely with ECOWAS. These interviews aim to gather insights into the challenges, successes, and perceptions regarding ECOWAS' role in regional and global affairs. Specific case studies will be explored to highlight ECOWAS' response to regional conflicts (e.g., Liberia and

Sierra Leone) and its economic initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). These cases will provide deeper insights into the organization's resilience and adaptability. Qualitative data will be analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns,

successes, and areas for improvement, with particular emphasis on ECOWAS' ability to evolve and its potential for enhancing global relevance.

### **Institutional Framework and Early Challenges**

According to (Usman, 2023; Unya, 2022; Team, 2023 Abdulyakeen, A. and Bashir, 2020), in its early years, ECOWAS faced numerous challenges related to its institutional structure, funding, and political will among member states. The organization's primary body, the ECOWAS Commission, was tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Treaty of Lagos and coordinating regional policies. However, ECOWAS's effectiveness in achieving its early goals was hindered by several factors:

- i. Many West African countries faced internal political instability and civil conflicts during the 1970s and 1980s, which affected their ability to prioritize regional integration. Military coups, authoritarian regimes, and political unrest in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia diverted attention from economic cooperation.
- ii. The member states of ECOWAS were characterized by vast economic disparities, with countries like Nigeria and Ivory Coast having more developed economies, while others such as Mali and Niger were largely agrarian and underdeveloped. These disparities made it difficult to implement economic integration policies that would benefit all members equally.
- iii. ECOWAS's financial and technical resources were limited, hindering its ability to fund ambitious regional projects, such as infrastructure development and trade liberalization.
- iv.

Many member states were also more focused on their national development agendas, often at the

expense of regional cooperation. National sovereignty concerns and domestic challenges limited the willingness of some governments to cede authority to a regional body like the role of France in scuttling ECOWAS integration efforts.

Despite these challenges, ECOWAS made important strides in the early years, particularly in laying the institutional foundations for regional cooperation. The establishment of the ECOWAS Fund for financing development projects and the creation of several specialized agencies (such as the West African Monetary Institute and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development) were key early achievements.

### **The 1980s and the ECOMOG Intervention: A Shift toward Peace and Security**

While ECOWAS was primarily focused on economic integration, the organization began to realize the importance of maintaining political stability for economic progress. In the 1980s, the organization increasingly turned its attention to addressing security challenges in the region. The outbreak of civil wars in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991) underscored the need for ECOWAS to adopt a more proactive role in maintaining peace and security. One of the most notable interventions during this period was the formation of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a peacekeeping force established to address the crises in Liberia. ECOMOG became ECOWAS's primary tool for managing regional conflicts and demonstrated the organization's evolving role in peacekeeping and conflict resolution. The intervention in Liberia, although controversial and challenging, marked a critical turning point in ECOWAS's development, as the organization expanded its mandate beyond economic cooperation to include peace and security (Akenwale, 2021; Abdulkadir, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

ECOWAS's resilience, especially in the face of political, economic, and security challenges, has been a key factor in its continued relevance and evolution over the past five decades. While the organization has faced numerous setbacks, it has demonstrated significant adaptability and capacity to overcome challenges that threatened its stability and goals. These challenges range from internal political instability, economic disparities, and conflicts, to external threats like terrorism and organized crime. This section will examine ECOWAS's resilience in addressing these challenges, focusing on its institutional responses, peacekeeping efforts, and efforts to maintain regional cooperation despite persistent obstacles (ECOWAS, 2020; UNECA, 2019).

Political instability has been a major challenge for many ECOWAS member states, especially in the early years of the organization. Many countries in West Africa have experienced military coups, authoritarian regimes, and civil wars, creating an environment where regional cooperation was often undermined by internal strife. For instance, military coups in Ghana (1979), Liberia (1980), Nigeria (1983), and Sierra Leone (1992), coupled with fragile democracies, often posed challenges for ECOWAS's mandate of promoting political stability. Despite these internal challenges, ECOWAS has remained resilient by gradually transforming its institutional approach to governance. In response to political instability, ECOWAS has adopted several protocols aimed at encouraging democratic governance and human rights. For example, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) established clear mechanisms for addressing unconstitutional changes of government, mandating sanctions against member states that fail to uphold democratic principles (Abdulkadir, 2016; Adebajo, 2014). This protocol represented a significant step toward fostering political stability, ensuring that member states could work together to address coups and authoritarianism within the region (Kolapo 2006; Laursen, 2008).

Additionally, ECOWAS has taken a firm stance against unconstitutional regimes, as seen in its response to the 2012 coup in Mali. The organization imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions and took a leadership role in facilitating peace talks, which ultimately helped stabilize the country and led to a transition to democratic rule. This proactive stance against unconstitutional governance has significantly contributed to ECOWAS's resilience in maintaining political

stability, despite the volatility in the region.

ECOWAS has faced stark economic disparity between its member states. Countries like Nigeria and Ivory Coast have relatively more developed economies, while others, such as Niger and Mali, face significant developmental challenges. These disparities have made it difficult to harmonize economic policies and achieve the level of integration that ECOWAS initially envisioned. Despite these challenges, ECOWAS has remained resilient by adapting its strategies to promote regional cooperation in a way that accommodates varying levels of development. ECOWAS has focused on facilitating trade and economic growth through initiatives such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which aims to promote the free movement of goods and services within the region. Although implementation of ETLS has been slow, it has nevertheless contributed to fostering trade relations among member states, thus creating a foundation for economic growth despite the challenges posed by regional disparities. ECOWAS has also sought to address infrastructural and financial barriers to economic growth. The creation of the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) has provided member states with the financial support needed to fund development projects, such as infrastructure, energy, and agricultural development (Omo-Ogbebor (2017). These financial institutions have been crucial in fostering regional economic cooperation, particularly for the less-developed member states, and have contributed to ECOWAS's economic resilience. Moreover, the establishment of the West African Monetary Zone

(WAMZ), which aims to create a single currency for West Africa (the eco), has been a long-term vision for achieving greater economic integration. Although progress has been slow due to political and economic challenges, the Eco project reflects ECOWAS's commitment to enhancing regional economic stability and integration in the face of economic disparities.

One of the most significant challenges to ECOWAS's resilience has been the region's ongoing security crises. West Africa has witnessed several conflicts and civil wars, particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, which have threatened regional stability and economic development (Karaki, 2017; Ejemeyovwi, Osabuhen and Osabohen, 2018). These conflicts have often been fueled by ethnic tensions, political power struggles, and weak state institutions, posing significant risks to regional peace and security. In response to these threats, ECOWAS developed a unique institutional approach to peacekeeping and conflict resolution. The formation of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the early 1990s marked a defining moment in the organization's security framework. ECOMOG's first major intervention was in Liberia (1990) during the country's civil war, where ECOWAS deployed peacekeepers to stabilize the situation and negotiate peace. The intervention in Liberia was followed by similar peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone (1997) and Guinea-Bissau (1998), demonstrating ECOWAS's commitment to maintaining peace and security in the region. While these peacekeeping operations were not without challenges and criticisms, including questions over the effectiveness and impartiality of ECOMOG forces, they underscored ECOWAS's resilience in adapting its role beyond economic integration to include active conflict management. The peacekeeping efforts led by ECOWAS helped prevent further escalation of regional conflicts and laid the groundwork for ECOWAS's evolving role as a key actor in West African peace and security. ECOWAS's resilience in the face

of security challenges was further reinforced by the adoption of the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (1999), which established a framework for rapid intervention in conflict situations. This protocol has empowered ECOWAS to intervene more quickly and decisively in cases of instability and conflict, enhancing its capacity to manage crises and prevent the spread of violence (World Bank, 2023).

In recent years, West Africa has been confronted with new security challenges, including the rise of terrorism and organized crime, particularly in the Sahel region. Groups such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have increasingly targeted countries such as Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, destabilizing the region and exacerbating existing political and economic vulnerabilities. In response to these emerging threats, ECOWAS has shown resilience by adapting its security strategies to address the changing nature of conflict (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2020; De Souza, 2015). ECOWAS has strengthened its collaboration with regional and international partners, including the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU), to coordinate efforts against terrorism and organized crime. The creation of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the establishment of the Regional Centre for Small Arms (RECSA) are examples of ECOWAS's efforts to combat the proliferation of weapons and address the root causes of extremism and instability in the region. Furthermore, ECOWAS has worked to build the capacity of national security forces through training and support programs, ensuring that member states are better equipped to handle the increasing security threats. The organization has also sought to address the socio-economic factors that fuel extremism, such as poverty and lack of education, through its development initiatives.



One of the primary goals of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) since its inception in 1975 has been to foster economic integration and promote sustainable growth across the West African region. The organization was founded on the belief that regional cooperation would help address the economic challenges faced by individual countries, including poverty, underdevelopment, and limited access to markets. However, the journey toward economic integration has been complex and marked by both achievements and obstacles. ECOWAS has made significant strides in encouraging trade liberalization, infrastructural development, and regional cooperation, but economic disparities, political instability, and global economic shifts have presented ongoing challenges.

### **Early Economic Integration Efforts**

The formation of ECOWAS was largely driven by the desire to create a unified economic space that would enhance regional development and reduce dependency on external economies. The Treaty of Lagos (1975), which laid the foundation for ECOWAS, outlined economic cooperation as one of its core objectives. The treaty called for the establishment of a common market and the gradual reduction of trade barriers among member states. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), adopted in 1979, was one of the first significant steps toward regional economic integration. (Ikeone, 2018; Ibeanu, 2022; Abdulyakeen, 2021). The ETLS aimed to reduce or eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers within the region, facilitating the free movement of goods and services across borders. Initially, the scheme focused on trade in industrial products, but over time, it was expanded to cover other sectors such as agriculture and services. Despite the ambitious goals of the ETLS, the progress in fully implementing regional trade liberalization has been slow and uneven. A range of factors, including political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and the

lack of a common monetary system, hindered the realization of ECOWAS's economic vision. Nonetheless, the ETLS remains a key feature of ECOWAS's strategy for economic growth and integration, with efforts continuing to reduce trade barriers and encourage economic cooperation among member states.

According to Sassay (2020), one of the major obstacles to economic integration within ECOWAS has been the significant economic disparity between its member states. While some countries, such as Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Ghana, have relatively strong economies, others, like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, face significant development challenges. These disparities have made it difficult to harmonize economic policies and achieve the kind of deep economic integration envisioned by ECOWAS's founders. The uneven distribution of wealth and development has also led to imbalances in trade relations between member states. Larger, more industrialized economies have greater bargaining power within the region, while smaller and poorer economies often struggle to compete on an equal footing. This has created tensions and slowed the process of regional integration, as less developed nations fear being sidelined in favor of wealthier members. ECOWAS has made efforts to address these economic disparities through its Specialized Agencies and initiatives such as the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID). EBID provides financial support for infrastructure development and other key sectors, particularly in less developed countries. Additionally, ECOWAS has worked to promote regional projects aimed at enhancing economic connectivity, such as the West African Power Pool (WAPP), which seeks to improve energy access and ensure a stable power supply across the region. By addressing these infrastructure gaps, ECOWAS hopes to reduce the economic imbalances between its member states and encourage more balanced regional growth (Dipelu, 2017; Olayiwola, 2021).

The lack of adequate infrastructure especially in transportation, energy, and telecommunications has long been a major bottleneck to economic development in West Africa. ECOWAS recognized early on that regional integration would be impossible without significant improvements to the region's infrastructure. In response, ECOWAS has prioritized infrastructure development through a range of initiatives. The ECOWAS Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP), launched in 2010, aims to address the region's infrastructural deficits by facilitating the construction of transportation corridors, energy infrastructure, and ICT networks. The plan focuses on projects that connect member states, such as the development of transnational highways, rail networks, and regional energy grids. By improving connectivity across the region, these infrastructure projects are designed to reduce trade costs, enhance economic productivity, and facilitate the movement of goods and people. The West African Power Pool (WAPP), an initiative aimed at creating a unified regional electricity market, is another example of ECOWAS's efforts to improve infrastructure. WAPP allows member states to share power, making it easier to meet energy demand and stabilize energy prices (Danjuma & Success, 2012). Similarly, the ECOWAS Transport and Transit Facilitation Programme (ETTFP) seeks to reduce barriers to the free movement of goods and people by improving transportation networks and removing bottlenecks at border crossings. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain in terms of financing and implementation. Infrastructure projects in the region are often hindered by limited funding, slow implementation, and political disagreements. Nonetheless, these initiatives represent an important step toward improving the region's economic connectivity and laying the foundation for future growth.

### **The Role of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET)**

In 2000, ECOWAS introduced the Common External Tariff (CET), which was designed to unify the trade policy of the region and replace the individual tariffs that were previously in place for non-member states. The CET aims to protect the region's industries by creating a common customs regime for goods imported from outside West Africa, thereby ensuring a more coordinated approach to trade and fostering greater regional economic integration (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2020). The introduction of the CET was a major milestone in ECOWAS's economic strategy, as it helped to standardize the region's trade policies and reduce tariff-related inefficiencies. However, the implementation of the CET has been slow and uneven. Some countries, particularly those with more developed economies, have been reluctant to fully implement the policy due to concerns over the impact it could have on their domestic industries. Additionally, the lack of adequate infrastructure and customs procedures has further delayed the effective implementation of the CET. Despite these challenges, the CET is an important tool for economic integration, as it helps to create a more level playing field for trade and encourages greater collaboration between ECOWAS member states (Abdulyakeen and Sylvester, 2021; Akenwale, 2021; Adediji, 2002).

One of the boldest economic integration goals for ECOWAS has been the introduction of a single currency for the region, the Eco. The idea of a common currency has been on ECOWAS's agenda since the 1980s, with the long-term goal of achieving greater economic cohesion and facilitating trade by eliminating currency exchange costs and fluctuations. However, the path toward a single currency has been fraught with challenges. France has historically held significant economic interests in West Africa, often leading to tensions with the realization of ECOWAS's goals. France's influence over former colonies through trade, currency control, and resource extraction

has allowed it to maintain economic dominance in the region. By promoting its own economic and geopolitical interests, France has sometimes undermined ECOWAS's efforts toward regional integration and autonomy. The use of the CFA franc, for example, ties many West African economies to France, limiting their financial sovereignty. France's support for bilateral agreements and trade deals also often bypasses ECOWAS frameworks. Additionally, French military and political involvement in West African conflicts has helped maintain its influence, hindering the full integration of ECOWAS's security and political goals. France's actions can be seen as limiting the independence of ECOWAS member states, preventing them from achieving unified economic and political autonomy. These factors illustrate France's role in complicating ECOWAS's realization as a fully integrated regional body. Differences in economic policy, fiscal discipline, and political will among member states have slowed progress. For example, countries like Nigeria, which has the largest economy in the region, have been reluctant to commit to a single currency until they are assured that other countries are ready to meet the necessary economic and fiscal criteria. Additionally, there have been concerns over the ability of some member states to meet the macroeconomic convergence criteria required for the introduction of the Eco. Despite these challenges, ECOWAS has continued to push for the introduction of the Eco, viewing it as a vital step toward achieving deeper economic integration and strengthening the region's global competitiveness. The proposed Eco currency could be a game-changer for West Africa's economic future, facilitating cross-border trade, reducing transaction costs, and enhancing the region's economic resilience (Ikeonu, 2018; Ibeanu, 2022; Akinyemi, 2023). While ECOWAS has made notable progress in regional integration and economic growth, the region still faces several challenges, including political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and external economic pressures. Furthermore, the global economic environment has posed additional challenges. The

COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, disrupted supply chains, reduced trade, and hindered growth across the region, underscoring the vulnerability of West African economies to global economic shocks. Despite these challenges, ECOWAS has demonstrated resilience by adapting its strategies to mitigate the impact of these crises. The organization has focused on diversifying the regional economy, with an emphasis on agriculture, technology, and industrialization. Additionally, ECOWAS has worked to strengthen intra-regional trade, which has proven to be more resilient to global disruptions than trade with external partners.

### **Global Relevance and ECOWAS's International Role**

Over the past fifty years, ECOWAS has evolved from a regional economic organization to an influential player in international politics and security, carving a niche for itself in the global arena. As the world has become increasingly interconnected, the relevance of regional organizations like ECOWAS has grown in importance. West Africa's political, economic, and security dynamics not only impact the region but also have broader implications for global stability and prosperity.

ECOWAS's ability to adapt and engage with international partners has allowed it to play an essential role in addressing regional challenges while contributing to global peace and development. This section examines ECOWAS's growing international relevance and its evolving role in global governance, diplomacy, and security (Ceesay, 2019; Abdulyakeen, 2023; Abdulkadir, 2016).

ECOWAS's role in the broader African context has been pivotal in shaping the continent's approach to political and economic integration. As a key regional body in West Africa, ECOWAS works closely with the African Union (AU) to promote African unity and development. Both organizations share the goal of fostering peace, security, and economic cooperation across Africa, and they have collaborated extensively to address the continent's most pressing issues. ECOWAS has contributed significantly to the AU's agenda on peace and security. As the African Union's primary peacekeeping and conflict management body, ECOWAS has often led the charge in responding to crises within West Africa. For example, the deployment of ECOWAS forces during the Liberian Civil War (1990) and the Sierra Leone Civil War (1997) set important precedents for the AU's Peace and Security Architecture, which emphasizes regional solutions to African conflicts. ECOWAS's experience in peacekeeping has made it a key partner in the AU's broader continental peace and security framework. ECOWAS also plays an important role in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This landmark agreement, which came into force in 2021, aims to create a single market for goods and services across Africa. ECOWAS's involvement in regional trade initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ), has positioned it as an important actor in advancing the AfCFTA's goals. Through these initiatives, ECOWAS is working to facilitate trade, investment (De Souza, 2015; Ikeonu, 2018).

ECOWAS's involvement in peacekeeping and conflict resolution within West Africa has elevated its global profile as a regional actor committed to promoting stability. The organization's ability to deploy peacekeeping forces and mediate conflicts has made it a critical partner for the United

Nations (UN), particularly in addressing crises that have regional and international consequences. ECOWAS's ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) operations in the 1990s were a major milestone in the organization's security initiatives. The deployment of ECOMOG forces to Liberia and Sierra Leone helped bring an end to protracted civil wars and prevent further escalation of violence. According to Sessay (2020), in addition to peacekeeping, ECOWAS has been involved in preventive diplomacy and conflict mediation efforts. The organization has used its diplomatic influence to help broker peace agreements and facilitate post-conflict reconstruction in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. ECOWAS's ability to act swiftly and decisively in conflict situations has led to collaborations with other international bodies, including the UN and the European Union (EU). For example, ECOWAS has partnered with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone to manage peace processes and implement post-conflict recovery programs. ECOWAS's involvement in regional peacekeeping also aligns with the UN's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which emphasizes the need for regional organizations to take the lead in preventing mass atrocities and maintaining peace (Dipelu, 2017; ECOWAS, 2020).

As global security challenges have become more complex, ECOWAS has adapted to address emerging threats such as terrorism and organized crime. The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and other extremist groups in the Sahel region has drawn significant international attention due to their destabilizing effects on both regional and global security. ECOWAS has recognized the urgency of these threats and has taken a proactive stance in countering terrorism and extremism. In collaboration with the African Union (AU) and other international partners, ECOWAS has developed a Counter-Terrorism Strategy aimed at addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as



poverty, inequality, and lack of education, while strengthening regional security cooperation. The creation of the West African Network of Security Services (WANSS), which includes law enforcement agencies, intelligence sharing, and cross-border cooperation, reflects ECOWAS's commitment to a unified approach to combating terrorism. ECOWAS has also worked with international partners, such as the United States, France, and the European Union, to combat organized crime, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the illegal trade of arms. The organization has helped coordinate cross-border efforts to address these issues, recognizing that many of these crimes are not confined to one country and require regional collaboration. Through the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), ECOWAS facilitates information exchange and joint operations among the police forces of its member states (Sessay, 2020; Unya, 2022; Usman, 2023). This cooperation extends to tackling the financing of terrorism and organized crime, as well as improving border security. ECOWAS's efforts to address these security

challenges have further cemented its role as a key player in global security.

ECOWAS's economic diplomacy has been a cornerstone of its international role, as it seeks to improve trade relations, attract investment, and integrate West Africa into the global economy.

The organization has worked to strengthen ties with major international partners, including the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other global economic institutions. One of ECOWAS's most significant economic diplomacy initiatives is its Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU, which aims to foster trade between the two regions. While the implementation of the EPA has faced challenges, it has provided a framework for trade liberalization and market access for West African countries. In addition to the EU, ECOWAS has engaged with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other global financial institutions to secure development funding for key infrastructure projects and economic

development programmes (Team, 2023; Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). Through its participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO), ECOWAS has also advocated for more inclusive global trade policies that benefit developing countries. The organization's commitment to regional integration through trade agreements, such as the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET), has allowed it to become a stronger voice in global economic discussions, advocating for the interests of West African countries on the international stage.

In addition to its security and economic roles, ECOWAS has recognized the global significance of addressing climate change and promoting sustainable development. The impacts of climate change, such as droughts, desertification, and flooding, are increasingly felt in West Africa, and ECOWAS has prioritized climate change adaptation and resilience-building within its broader development agenda. ECOWAS has worked with international organizations, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), to support member states in addressing climate change. The organization has developed policies aimed at promoting renewable energy, improving water resource management, and supporting sustainable agriculture across the region. Additionally, ECOWAS has committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has aligned its regional development plans with global initiatives to combat poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Through its efforts, ECOWAS aims to contribute to global sustainable development by fostering environmentally responsible economic growth in West Africa (Dipedu, 2017; Adedeji, 2002; Akenwale, 2021).

## **The Need for a Comprehensive Analysis: ECOWAS at 50**

As the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) reaches its fiftieth anniversary, it becomes increasingly important to undertake a comprehensive analysis of its achievements, challenges, and future potential. ECOWAS has made significant strides in the areas of regional integration, economic development, peacekeeping, and international diplomacy. However, as the organization faces new challenges such as political instability, global economic fluctuations, and emerging security threats it is critical to assess its current trajectory and future direction in order to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness on the global stage.

Over the past five decades, the political, economic, and security landscape in West Africa has undergone profound transformations. The shifting dynamics in global trade, international politics, and regional security have had direct implications for ECOWAS's role in shaping the future of West Africa. As the region grapples with the aftereffects of colonialism, global economic crises, and the rise of transnational security threats, ECOWAS must adapt its strategies to address the evolving needs of its member states. A comprehensive analysis of ECOWAS at fifty must not only assess the organization's historical successes but also evaluate its ability to navigate emerging challenges. These include the growing influence of external powers in Africa, the impact of climate change on regional security and economic development, and the ongoing political instability in key member states. Understanding the changing geopolitical context is essential for determining ECOWAS's capacity to continue fulfilling its mandate and contribute meaningfully to regional and global governance (UNECA, 2019; ECOWAS, 2020).

## **Proposal on "The Future of ECOWAS: Resilience, Growth, and Global Relevance"**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has achieved considerable progress over its 50-year history, fostering regional cooperation, promoting peace, and encouraging economic integration. However, as global dynamics continue to evolve, ECOWAS must adapt to emerging challenges to remain resilient, stimulate growth, and enhance its global relevance. This proposal outlines a strategic vision for ECOWAS's future focusing on strengthening its institutional framework, enhancing economic integration, prioritizing security, and boosting its global position.

**Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Greater Integration:** ECOWAS has made notable strides in fostering regional integration, but much remains to be done. For ECOWAS to be a more cohesive and effective entity, its institutional structures must be reinforced: Empower the ECOWAS Commission to implement policies with more autonomy. This includes streamlining decision-making processes and ensuring that regional policies are executed swiftly and effectively. Strengthening the commission's mandate will help translate regional agreements into tangible outcomes for member states. Build capacity within regional bodies such as the ECOWAS Parliament and the Court of Justice to ensure they effectively represent the interests of citizens and resolve conflicts within the region. A stronger institutional framework will increase ECOWAS's legitimacy and ability to enforce regional agreements.

**Advancing Economic Integration for Sustainable Growth:** One of ECOWAS's core goals is to create a common market that encourages trade, investment, and growth. To accelerate economic integration and stimulate growth, the following steps should be taken: ECOWAS must prioritize

the full implementation of the Common External Tariff and remove non-tariff barriers to trade. This will facilitate regional trade and create a more integrated market, driving economies of scale and attracting investment. Investing in regional infrastructure such as transport corridors, energy projects, and ICT networks is critical for unlocking the region's economic potential. ECOWAS should prioritize large-scale projects, especially those that link landlocked countries to coastal nations, facilitating better market access. Strengthen efforts toward financial integration by establishing a unified regional currency or improving the existing CFA franc system. This will help reduce currency volatility, boost intra-regional trade, and encourage regional investment.

**Ensuring Regional Security and Political Stability:** A secure and stable environment is essential for economic development and integration. To bolster regional security and ensure political stability, ECOWAS should focus on the following: The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) has proven its importance in peacekeeping missions, but its capacity needs to be enhanced. ECOWAS should invest in modernizing and equipping the ESF, ensuring that it can swiftly respond to regional conflicts, prevent crises, and protect democratic governance. ECOWAS must continue to advocate for the promotion of democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. This includes supporting efforts to prevent coups, electoral fraud, and political instability, and enforcing its protocols on the peaceful transfer of power. Strengthening partnerships with continental bodies like the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) will provide greater resources and support for ECOWAS-led security initiatives. Joint efforts in peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and diplomatic mediation can enhance ECOWAS's influence in regional security.

**Enhancing Global Relevance and Influence:** To elevate its global stature, ECOWAS must broaden its external relations and increase its influence in international affairs: ECOWAS should

proactively build stronger partnerships with global powers, including the European Union, China, the United States, and emerging economies like India. These partnerships should focus on trade, investment, technology transfer, and collaborative solutions to global challenges such as climate change and migration. ECOWAS should work to position West Africa as a hub for investment by improving ease of doing business, enhancing regional supply chains, and creating investor-friendly policies. ECOWAS's collective bargaining power can attract foreign investments that benefit the entire region. ECOWAS should develop a robust regional diplomatic strategy to advocate for its interests on the global stage. This could include hosting high-profile international forums, leveraging its role as a regional peacekeeper, and being a strong voice for African integration in multilateral platforms such as the United Nations.

**Fostering Inclusivity, Innovation, and Sustainability:** Finally, the future of ECOWAS must include a strong focus on social development and environmental sustainability: The youth and women are key drivers of socio-economic transformation. ECOWAS must support initiatives that foster education, entrepreneurship, and participation of youth and women in political and economic activities across the region. As the global focus shifts toward sustainability, ECOWAS must integrate climate change adaptation and environmental sustainability into its development agenda. This includes promoting green technologies, sustainable agriculture, and regional efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change. ECOWAS should invest in regional education and healthcare to build a resilient and skilled workforce. By strengthening human capital, ECOWAS will improve productivity and reduce poverty, contributing to long-term growth.

## Conclusion

The future of ECOWAS lies in its ability to adapt to changing regional and global dynamics. With economic growth, political stability, and enhanced cooperation, the region holds the potential to become a significant player on the global stage. By focusing on resilience, sustainable development, and global partnerships, ECOWAS can foster a future marked by prosperity, peace, and influence. However, the path to realizing this vision requires collaborative effort, innovation, and a strong commitment to the well-being of the people in the region. As ECOWAS celebrates its 50th anniversary, it stands at a critical juncture. The organization's founding principles of promoting regional integration, peace, and development remain as relevant today as they were in 1975. However, given the changing global context, ECOWAS must reassess its strategies and adapt its policies to maintain resilience, achieve sustainable growth, and enhance its global relevance.

## Recommendations

Below are key recommendations for ECOWAS as it enters its next 50 years, focusing on resilience, growth, and a renewed vision for global relevance.

- i. ECOWAS should prioritize the full implementation of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). Creating a unified regional market will increase intra-regional trade, reduce dependency on external economies, and foster economic resilience. This can be achieved by improving crossborder infrastructure, removing non-tariff barriers, and harmonizing economic policies. ECOWAS should position itself as a driving force behind the successful implementation of the

AfCFTA, ensuring that West Africa maximizes the potential of this pan-African initiative. ECOWAS can act as an intermediary in facilitating trade agreements, customs harmonization, and providing a platform for businesses to access new markets across the continent. ECOWAS should focus on diversifying its regional economy, especially by encouraging investment in sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, technology, and manufacturing. This can help reduce reliance on extractive industries, create jobs, and enhance long-term growth. ECOWAS should invest in building innovation ecosystems to boost entrepreneurship, particularly among young people.

- ii. **Promote Good Governance, Democracy, and Political Stability:** ECOWAS must continue to be a staunch advocate for democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights across the region. Strengthening electoral processes, supporting political reforms, and holding governments accountable for democratic backsliding will ensure political stability in the region. ECOWAS should enhance its diplomatic efforts and sanctions mechanisms to deter military coups and unconstitutional changes of government, as seen in recent years.
- iii. ECOWAS has been instrumental in conflict resolution and peacekeeping efforts in the past. It should continue to strengthen its ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), ensuring that it is adequately funded, well-equipped, and capable of responding rapidly to crises. Additionally, ECOWAS must invest in early warning systems to prevent conflicts before they escalate, while promoting regional dialogue and mediation. Strengthening institutions that uphold transparency, fight corruption, and ensure the efficient use of public resources is crucial. ECOWAS should invest in fostering governance best practices among its member states, ensuring effective management of public services, and reducing inequalities.



- iv. **Focus on Sustainable Development and Climate Action:** ECOWAS should prioritize regional cooperation on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Collaborative efforts in the development of renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and climate-resilient infrastructure should be at the forefront of its development agenda. By sharing knowledge and resources, ECOWAS member states can tackle the region's vulnerability to climate-induced crises, such as droughts and flooding. ECOWAS should advocate for sustainable natural resource management, especially in sectors like agriculture, forestry, and mining. Implementing region-wide environmental standards and promoting responsible business practices will help protect ecosystems, improve livelihoods, and ensure long-term resource availability.
- v. **Foster Innovation, Digital Transformation, and Education:** ECOWAS must foster a culture of innovation and technology entrepreneurship. Encouraging investment in tech startups, digital infrastructure, and research and development in areas such as fintech, agritech, and healthtech will drive economic transformation. ECOWAS could also facilitate regional partnerships for technology transfer, capacity building, and innovation hubs. Investing in education, particularly technical and vocational training, will equip the youth of West Africa with the skills needed to drive economic growth. ECOWAS should champion initiatives that promote educational equity, improve access to quality education, and integrate digital literacy into national curricula to prepare young people for the future job market.
- vi. **Enhance Regional Security and Cooperation:** ECOWAS must prioritize enhancing its security cooperation to combat terrorism, transnational crime, and instability in the Sahel and coastal regions. This could include strengthening the ECOWAS Early Warning and

Response Mechanism (ECOWARN), enhancing cross-border security, and improving collaboration with international partners like the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and other regional organizations. Given the increasing security challenges in some member states, ECOWAS should focus on security sector reform to ensure that national security forces are well-trained and accountable.

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