

## Two Decades of ECOWAS: Assessing Regional Economic Integration and Security Efforts (2000–2024)

Jibrin Ubale Yahaya

Department of Political Science, National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja;  
[jibrinubaleyahaya@gmail.com](mailto:jibrinubaleyahaya@gmail.com); Tel: +2348035876786

### Abstract

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has played a pivotal role in shaping regional integration, fostering economic growth, and addressing security challenges in West Africa since its inception. This paper critically examines the achievements and failures of ECOWAS in promoting regional economic development and ensuring security from 2000 to 2024. Key achievements include strides in trade liberalization through the implementation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and efforts to establish a common currency. Additionally, ECOWAS has demonstrated notable success in peacekeeping operations, such as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali, leveraging its regional security architecture. However, the study highlights significant challenges, including limited progress in achieving deeper economic integration due to infrastructural deficits and weak governance. The recurring instability in member states, exacerbated by terrorism, coups, and cross-border crimes, has also tested ECOWAS's ability to maintain regional peace. Using secondary sources and expert interviews, this paper identifies gaps in institutional capacity, inconsistent political will, and inadequate funding as critical impediments. The findings underscore the need for a recalibration of ECOWAS's strategies to enhance its effectiveness in addressing the dual mandates of economic and security governance, offering policy recommendations for a sustainable regional framework.

**Keywords:** ECOWAS, Economic Integration, Regional Security, West Africa, and Policy Evaluation

### Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, has undergone significant transformation in the past two decades, particularly in its dual mandate of fostering regional economic integration and maintaining peace and security. Between 2000 and 2024, ECOWAS intensified its efforts to harmonize trade regimes, promote cross-border infrastructure, and implement a common external tariff (CET), reflecting aspirations toward a cohesive economic bloc akin to the European Union. Simultaneously, the organization expanded its interventionist role in regional security crises, evolving into a norm-setting and peace-enforcement body in the face of persistent political instability, terrorism, and transnational crimes (Adebajo, 2002; Bach, 2016).

This period witnessed a notable shift from mere economic cooperation to a more ambitious integration agenda. Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the adoption of the ECOWAS Common Currency (ECO) plan, and protocols facilitating the free movement of persons and goods were designed to deepen economic ties among member states (Ukeje & Gona, 2011). However, the implementation of these policies has been uneven, often hindered by institutional inefficiencies, divergent national interests, and socio-political disruptions.

On the security front, ECOWAS's engagement in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and more recently, Burkina Faso and Guinea, demonstrates a growing reliance on multilateral responses to conflict management in West Africa (Olonisakin, 2008; Adetula, 2020). The establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) marked a significant institutionalization of regional military cooperation. Nonetheless, the region continues to grapple with emerging threats, including violent extremism in the Sahel, maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and unconstitutional changes of government, all of which test the limits of ECOWAS's mandate and operational capacity (Loimeier, 2021).

Over the past two decades, ECOWAS has undertaken significant efforts to promote economic integration and regional security. Despite these efforts, the region continues to face profound challenges, including stagnant intra-regional trade, uncoordinated economic policies, political instability, and rising insecurity due to terrorism, insurgencies, and unconstitutional changes of government. While initiatives like the Common External Tariff and ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) missions demonstrate ambition, their effectiveness has been constrained by structural weaknesses, lack of member-state compliance, and resource constraints.

Existing literature largely focuses on either economic or security dimensions, often neglecting the interconnectedness of these issues. Furthermore, much of the analysis remains descriptive, emphasizing the initiatives undertaken without critically evaluating their outcomes or long-term impacts. The role of divergent political interests and socio-economic disparities among member states in shaping ECOWAS's effectiveness also remains underexplored. This creates a gap in understanding the systemic factors that hinder ECOWAS's ability to achieve its dual objectives.

This study seeks to address these gaps by critically examining the interplay between economic integration and security initiatives within ECOWAS. It will explore how institutional weaknesses, external influences, and internal political dynamics have shaped its trajectory, offering insights into strategies that could strengthen ECOWAS's role in fostering sustainable development and stability. This study aims to critically assess the progress and limitations of ECOWAS in achieving its twin objectives of economic integration and regional security over the last two decades. By exploring policy evolution, institutional reforms, and practical outcomes, this paper highlights the dynamic interplay between economic imperatives and security challenges that shape West Africa's regional governance landscape.

## Methodology

This study employed both primary and secondary sources of data to examine the regional integration and security efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) between 2000 and 2024. Primary data were collected through expert interviews using a purposive sampling technique—a non-probability method that is well-suited for qualitative research where the goal is to gain detailed, context-specific insights from knowledgeable individuals directly involved in or observing the subject matter (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2014). The purposive selection of respondents was guided by their institutional relevance, professional experience, and scholarly engagement with ECOWAS-related activities and policy.

A total of 24 respondents were selected from key institutions. These included five staff from the ECOWAS Commission Office in Abuja, given their direct involvement in designing and implementing regional integration and security policies. Five staff members from Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were also interviewed due to their central role in regional diplomacy and ECOWAS–Nigeria relations. Additionally, two policy analysts from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs were engaged for their expertise in regional governance and strategic policy analysis. From the academic sector, participants were drawn from multiple institutions across Nigeria to ensure geographic and intellectual diversity. These included two scholars each from the National Open University of Nigeria, Federal University Dutse, Yobe State University, the University of Nigeria Nsukka, the University of Lagos, and the Federal University Akwa Ibom. These academics were selected for their backgrounds in international relations, regional integration, security studies, and public policy.

**The composition of interview respondents is summarized below:**

Institution / Category	Number of Respondents	Justification for Inclusion
ECOWAS Commission Office, Abuja	5	Direct institutional actors involved in integration and security policy design
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Nigeria)	5	Key national stakeholders in regional diplomacy and ECOWAS-Nigeria relations
Nigerian Institute of International Affairs	2	Policy think-tank with specialization in foreign and regional policy analysis
National Open University	2	Academic experts with research in regionalism and

of Nigeria		ECOWAS governance
Federal University Dutse	2	Regional academic input from northern Nigeria with IR specialization
Yobe State University	2	Academic experts from a security-challenged region, relevant to security studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka	2	Leading university with specialization in political science and African studies
University of Lagos	2	Renowned IR scholars and access to ECOWAS-related research projects
Federal University, Akwa Ibom	2	Southern Nigeria-based input to reflect geographical diversity and academic range
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	

**Source: Expert Interviews, 2025.**

Data collection was conducted via online Zoom interviews, a method increasingly adopted in post-pandemic qualitative research due to its flexibility, efficiency, and ability to connect geographically dispersed experts. This approach facilitated real-time interaction, ensured informed consent, and enabled participants to contribute insights without physical constraints (Salmons, 2015). A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore thematic areas such as institutional performance, policy coordination, integration challenges, and regional security responses. All interviews were audio-recorded—with the consent of participants—and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic coding and analysis were conducted using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and expert perspectives that inform the study's findings and interpretations.

Secondary data were drawn from official ECOWAS publications, policy briefs, academic journals, and institutional reports to contextualize and triangulate the primary data, ensuring a comprehensive and evidence-based evaluation of ECOWAS's regional performance over the last two decades.

### **Regional Integration and Security in West Africa**

Regional integration refers to the process by which neighboring states enter into an agreement to enhance cooperation through common institutions and rules, often for economic, political, or security gains (Balassa, 1961). For ECOWAS, the initial objective was economic integration, but the evolution of intra-regional challenges—armed conflict, terrorism, and democratic backsliding—necessitated expansion into peacekeeping and governance (Hartmann, 2017; Adebajo, 2002). This dual mandate sets ECOWAS apart from many other regional blocs.

The concept of regional security involves collective efforts by regional organizations or states to manage internal threats, cross-border instability, and governance crises (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In West Africa, these threats have historically included civil wars (Liberia, Sierra Leone), jihadist terrorism (Sahel belt), and unconstitutional regime changes (Mali, Guinea, Niger). ECOWAS's evolution reflects this conceptual linkage between economic and security dimensions.

ECOWAS has made significant strides toward trade liberalization, especially through the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET) introduced in 2015. These frameworks aim to promote free movement of goods, services, and capital (UNECA, 2018). Scholars such as Ogbonna (2019) note that intra-ECOWAS trade remains low—hovering between 10% and 15%—due to persistent non-tariff barriers, infrastructural deficits, and lack of production complementarity among member states.

Moreover, Okpeh (2021) highlights how weak customs harmonization and high informal trade reduce the effectiveness of trade protocols. Meanwhile, economic giants like Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire dominate regional exports, creating disparities in benefit distribution, which affect cohesion (Akopari, 2017). Despite these challenges, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which overlaps with ECOWAS, has reinvigorated interest in regional industrialization, especially in value chain integration, agriculture, and digital trade (UNECA, 2022). However, the effectiveness of ECOWAS in leveraging AfCFTA opportunities remains under-evaluated.

The transformation of ECOWAS into a security actor was catalyzed by the ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s. From 2000 onward, the creation of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) marked a formal institutionalization of regional military responses (Williams, 2016). Recent interventions in The Gambia (2017), Mali (2021), and Guinea (2021) show ECOWAS's evolving role in conflict prevention and regime stabilization. However, critics argue that the organization remains reactive rather than preventive (Olonisakin, 2015). Coulibaly (2023) underscores the challenges of political

will, poor funding, and divergent national interests, which often delay decisive interventions.

The Sahel insurgency has also tested ECOWAS's coordination with external actors like the African Union (AU), United Nations, and France. Despite various regional strategies—such as the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013)—terrorism continues to spread, partly due to porous borders and lack of shared intelligence (Bøås & Torheim, 2020).

Institutional bottlenecks within ECOWAS, including overlapping mandates, weak enforcement mechanisms, and limited human resource capacity, are well documented (Zondi, 2020). Governance reforms remain slow, with the ECOWAS Commission struggling to assert supranational authority over member states' domestic policies (Ibrahim & Nuhu, 2022). Additionally, the frequent postponement of protocols and poor compliance with decisions—such as the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance—undermine ECOWAS's credibility. Authors like Adejumobi (2019) attribute this to the regional culture of “sovereignty first,” where domestic elites resist deeper integration when it conflicts with regime interests.

A recurring theme in the literature is ECOWAS's financial dependence on external partners like the EU, USAID, and China. While donor support has enabled critical programs, it has also led to questions of ownership and autonomy (Lavergne, 2005). Interviews with ECOWAS officials (cited in Hartmann, 2017) confirm that budget constraints often delay peace operations and that donor conditionalities sometimes shift the organization's priorities. Moreover, regional infrastructure projects like the West African Power Pool and the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor heavily rely on donor funding, which raises sustainability concerns in the face of political instability.

Emerging concerns—such as digital economy governance, youth unemployment, and climate-security linkages—are receiving growing attention. Scholars like Olanrewaju and Ajayi (2023) argue that ECOWAS must reorient toward inclusive, future-ready policies that integrate human security with traditional defense. Furthermore, the literature suggests that a hybrid governance approach—which combines state actors, civil society, and private sector—is essential for a resilient regional integration model (Adetula, 2016).

Overall, the literature reflects a complex portrait of ECOWAS—one marked by normative ambition, institutional evolution, and practical constraints. While the organization has registered gains in trade liberalization and regional security responses, challenges in compliance, funding, and political cohesion persist. The next phase of research must examine how ECOWAS can re-engineer its strategies to better navigate the 21st-century landscape.

Furthermore, while ECOWAS has made substantial progress in fostering economic integration in West Africa, challenges related to economic disparity, policy harmonization, and infrastructural limitations continue to undermine the full potential of its regional policies. Addressing these challenges will require a more nuanced approach to balancing national interests with regional goals and improving the capacity of member states to implement ECOWAS directives effectively.

**Table: Key Issues, Countries Involved, Impact, Successes, and Failures in ECOWAS Economic Integration**

Key Issues	Countries Involved	Impact	Identified Successes	Identified Failures
<b>Trade Facilitation</b>	Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal	- Increased trade volumes among key economies due to the adoption of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and Common External Tariff.	Successful implementation of CET and ETLS, boosting intra-regional trade.	Non-tariff barriers such as border delays and corruption persist, reducing efficiency.
	Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso	- Enhanced market access for smaller states; however, they struggle to compete with larger economies.	Smaller economies benefited from improved access to regional markets.	Smaller economies face infrastructural deficits and limited industrial capacities to maximize trade benefits.
<b>Free Movement of People</b>	All ECOWAS member states	- Visa-free travel fosters labor mobility, cultural exchange, and regional	Introduction of the ECOWAS Biometric Identity Card simplified citizen travel across member	Weak enforcement of free movement protocols leads to inconsistencies and periodic



		cooperation.	states.	border closures.
	Nigeria, Ghana, Niger, Burkina Faso	- Cross-border collaboration among neighboring countries is encouraged, improving socio-economic ties.	Increased workforce mobility in key sectors like agriculture and trade.	Lack of efficient infrastructure for transportation and border management hampers potential benefits.
<b>Industrial Policy</b>	Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal	- Large-scale projects like the West African Gas Pipeline foster regional energy security and industrial growth.	Major infrastructure projects contributed to energy access and industrialization in larger economies.	Uneven industrial development leaves smaller states like Liberia and Guinea struggling for inclusion.
	Togo, Benin, Guinea, Liberia	- Regional industrial policies promote energy cooperation and regional development.	Industrial policy frameworks diversified economies in larger member states.	Lack of harmonization and financial resources limited regional industrial expansion.
<b>Economic Disparity</b>	Nigeria, Ghana (stronger economies)	- Wealth disparities between larger and smaller economies create imbalances in the distribution of benefits from regional integration.	Regional initiatives provided platforms for dialogue and cooperation.	Smaller economies like Liberia and Sierra Leone struggle to benefit equally due to weak local industries.
	Liberia, Sierra	- Unequal	Support	Limited



	Leone, Guinea-Bissau (weaker economies)	access to resources and markets exacerbates economic inequality within ECOWAS.	initiatives for least-developed countries (LDCs) helped to some extent.	implementation of equitable policies leaves disparities largely unaddressed.
<b>Policy Harmonization</b>	Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal	- Divergent fiscal and trade policies hinder regional economic cohesion.	Progress in the adoption of the CET demonstrates some success in harmonization.	Inconsistent compliance and enforcement of regional agreements weaken overall impact.
	All member states	- Weak institutional frameworks and political will slow the process of achieving a unified economic space.	Ongoing efforts to strengthen institutional capacity through reforms and capacity building.	Lack of uniformity in policy implementation across states undermines the goals of economic integration.
	All member states	- Weak institutional frameworks and political will slow the process of achieving a unified economic space.	Ongoing efforts to strengthen institutional capacity through reforms and capacity building.	Lack of uniformity in policy implementation across states undermines the goals of economic integration.

**Sources: Literature Review, and interviews 2024.**

The table presents a comprehensive analysis of the economic integration efforts of ECOWAS member states, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges. Key issues include trade facilitation, free movement, industrial policy, economic disparity,

and policy harmonization. Trade facilitation has been significantly boosted by the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET), benefiting larger economies like Nigeria and Ghana. However, non-tariff barriers, such as border delays and corruption, hinder these gains. Free movement of people has been facilitated by visa-free travel and the ECOWAS Biometric Identity Card, but weak enforcement and infrastructural gaps hinder full implementation. Industrial policy has been driven by large-scale projects like the West African Gas Pipeline, but uneven development and inadequate harmonization have excluded smaller economies. Economic disparity remains a significant challenge, with the wealth gap between stronger economies and weaker ones often being limited. Policy harmonization has shown progress in adopting the CET, but inconsistencies in compliance and enforcement continue to undermine integration. Weak institutional frameworks and political reluctance delay the realization of a unified economic space, necessitating robust reforms and stronger political commitment. The table underscores the complexities of regional economic integration within ECOWAS, with systemic issues like economic disparity and weak institutional frameworks remaining significant barriers.

However, while ECOWAS has achieved significant success in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, its efforts to address insurgencies and governance crises have often been less effective. The lack of a coordinated response, limited resources, and complex political environments have impeded the organization's ability to address security threats in the region comprehensively. Addressing these challenges will require stronger institutional capacity, improved coordination with international partners, and a focus on long-term governance reforms to prevent the recurrence of conflicts and insurgencies in West Africa (Adebayo, 2021).

**Table: Key Issues, Countries Involved, Impact, Successes, and Failures in ECOWAS Regional Security**

Key Issues	Countries Involved	Impact	Identified Successes	Identified Failures
<b>Peacekeeping Missions</b>	Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia	- Stabilized war-torn regions and restored democratic governance.	Deployment of ECOMOG forces successfully ended conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone.	Limited resources delayed intervention in critical conflicts.
	Mali, Guinea-Bissau	- Improved security and	Timely intervention in	Inability to address root

		governance in countries with prolonged crises.	The Gambia facilitated a peaceful transition of power in 2017.	causes of conflicts leads to recurring instability.
<b>Conflict Resolution</b>	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso	- Facilitated negotiations and mediated peace agreements, reducing tensions.	Mediated peace agreements in Mali, including the 2015 Algiers Accord.	Continued insurgencies in Mali despite agreements show limited implementation.
	Liberia, Sierra Leone	- Strengthened post-conflict recovery and reconciliation.	Post-conflict recovery programs in Liberia and Sierra Leone improved governance.	Weak follow-up mechanisms led to partial success in rebuilding institutions.
<b>Addressing Insurgencies</b>	Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon (Boko Haram)	- Cross-border collaboration under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).	MNJTF disrupted Boko Haram's operations, recovering territories.	Insurgencies persist due to poor coordination and insufficient funding.
	Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger	- Expansion of violent extremism destabilized the Sahel region.	Initial successes in joint military operations reduced insurgent activities temporarily.	Failure to prevent extremist groups' expansion into new territories.
<b>Governance Crises</b>	Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali	- Military coups undermined regional democratic stability.	ECOWAS imposed sanctions and suspended memberships of	Sanctions often failed to compel quick restoration of democratic governance.

			countries following coups.	
	Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau	- Crisis mediation helped prevent escalation into widespread violence.	Mediation resolved short-term crises, such as the 2011 Ivorian election dispute.	Lack of consistent enforcement of democratic principles weakened ECOWAS credibility.
<b>Terrorism and Organized Crime</b>	Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire	- Increased regional instability and loss of life due to terrorism and organized crime.	Collaborative security frameworks like MNJTF improved cross-border responses.	Weak intelligence sharing and operational inefficiencies limited the response's effectiveness.
<b>Resource and Capacity Constraints</b>	All member states	- Limited funding and logistical capacity hampered timely responses to security crises.	International partnerships provided additional funding and technical assistance.	Dependence on external support undermines regional self-reliance.

#### Sources: Literature Review and Interviews

ECOWAS has been instrumental in promoting regional security by addressing key issues, countries involved, and the outcomes of its interventions. Peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia have demonstrated the organization's capacity for decisive action, but delays because of resource constraints have allowed conflicts to escalate before resolution efforts begin. Conflict resolution efforts in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have reduced tensions, but weak follow-up mechanisms limit long-term success.

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has been instrumental in combating Boko Haram in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, achieving territorial recovery and disrupting insurgent operations. However, joint military operations in the Sahel initially

reduced extremist activities but failed to prevent their spread into new areas due to poor coordination and inadequate funding.

Governance crises in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali have challenged ECOWAS's commitment to democratic principles, with conflict mediation efforts demonstrating short-term successes but underscoring the need for consistent enforcement of democratic norms. The rise of terrorism and organized crime has exacerbated instability across Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, necessitating enhanced regional collaboration.

Resource and capacity constraints are recurring themes across all issues, hampering ECOWAS's ability to respond promptly and effectively to security crises. International partnerships have provided crucial funding and technical assistance, but over-reliance on external support undermines the region's self-sufficiency. Strengthening institutional frameworks, fostering greater regional cooperation, and enhancing self-reliance are crucial for ECOWAS to fulfill its mandate of ensuring lasting peace and stability in West Africa.

### **Case Studies on Notable Successes and Failures**

Despite its structural weaknesses, ECOWAS has had several successes that showcase its potential as a regional body capable of addressing complex issues. One of the most notable successes occurred in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, when ECOWAS intervened in the aftermath of the post-election violence. Following the disputed elections, ECOWAS was able to rally regional support for President Alassane Ouattara, leading to the peaceful transfer of power and the end of a civil war. The success of this intervention was largely attributed to ECOWAS' ability to leverage diplomatic efforts alongside its military presence, and it stands as a testament to the effectiveness of the regional body in conflict resolution (International Crisis Group, 2011).

However, ECOWAS has also faced significant failures that highlight its institutional limitations. The 2012 crisis in Mali is a prominent example of ECOWAS' struggles in dealing with insurgencies and governance crises. When Islamist militants seized control of northern Mali, ECOWAS struggled to develop a coordinated response. Although it eventually deployed a peacekeeping force (AFISMA), the mission was hampered by logistical challenges and insufficient funding. The lack of a rapid and effective response allowed the insurgency to spread, and it was not until France intervened militarily in 2013 that the situation was stabilized. This failure exposed the significant gap in ECOWAS' capacity to respond to complex security threats (Chijioke & Adeleke, 2020).

Another key failure occurred in Guinea-Bissau, where ECOWAS faced challenges in dealing with the political instability that resulted from military coups. Despite ECOWAS' attempts to mediate and restore democracy, its efforts were often thwarted by political divisions within the region and a lack of enforcement mechanisms. The 2012 coup in Guinea-Bissau was a stark reminder of ECOWAS' limitations in preventing military takeovers and addressing governance crises in member states (Kieh, 2019).

### **Key Findings and Discussion on ECOWAS Operations success and failures**

#### **- *Structural Weaknesses***

Using the diverse views of the 24 respondents, the study generated rich, multifaceted insights into ECOWAS's regional integration and security initiatives between 2000 and 2024. Staff from the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja emphasized the progress made in institutionalizing core protocols—particularly in areas such as trade liberalization, conflict resolution, and peacekeeping frameworks. One respondent from the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Directorate highlighted the establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force and the increasing role of ECOWAS in conflict mediation as “a milestone that positions the region as a leader in African-led peace operations.” Officials from Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered critical yet constructive perspectives, noting the persistent challenge of harmonizing national interests with regional obligations. As one diplomat observed, “ECOWAS's normative ambitions often clash with the political realities of member states, especially where sovereignty concerns override regional commitments.” These respondents also stressed Nigeria's pivotal role in sustaining the financial and operational viability of ECOWAS, pointing to the need for broader burden-sharing among member states.

Experts from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs provided policy-oriented evaluations, pointing to the mixed results of ECOWAS's economic integration agenda. While acknowledging the success of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), they flagged the limited impact of the Common External Tariff (CET) and the repeated delays in adopting the single currency, ECO. According to one senior analyst, “The political will to implement the ECO has been repeatedly undermined by monetary policy disparities and nationalist economic strategies.”

Academic respondents from universities across Nigeria added theoretical depth and regional specificity to the discourse. Scholars from northern institutions such as Yobe State University and Federal University Dutse focused on security dynamics in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. They critiqued ECOWAS's response to violent extremism as “slow and largely reactive,” noting gaps in intelligence-sharing, coordination with the African Union, and grassroots engagement. In contrast, southern-based academics from

the University of Lagos and Federal University Akwa Ibom emphasized issues of political economy, free movement of persons, and youth unemployment. A political scientist from Lagos remarked that “integration must go beyond elite diplomacy—it must speak to the economic insecurities and aspirations of ordinary West Africans.”

Respondents from the National Open University of Nigeria and University of Nigeria Nsukka provided nuanced assessments of ECOWAS’s legal and institutional evolution. They noted the gradual shift from intergovernmental cooperation to a more rules-based community, especially with the operationalization of the ECOWAS Court of Justice. However, concerns were raised about compliance and enforcement mechanisms. One professor stated, “Norms without enforcement capacity remain aspirational at best.”

Together, the views of these respondents, triangulated with secondary data, reveal a complex portrait of ECOWAS as both an ambitious and constrained regional body. Progress has been made in areas such as institutional development, conflict prevention, and trade policy frameworks. Yet, structural challenges—including political instability, resource asymmetry, and uneven policy implementation—continue to limit ECOWAS’s transformative potential. The analysis underscores the importance of strengthening political will, enhancing institutional accountability, and deepening citizen-centered regionalism as ECOWAS enters its next phase.

#### - *Operational Challenges*

Drawing on the views of the 24 expert respondents, this study identified several operational challenges that hinder the effectiveness of ECOWAS in fulfilling its regional integration and security mandate, particularly in the areas of resource availability and human capacity.

A recurrent theme among respondents was the persistent issue of resource and capacity constraints, which corroborates existing literature. ECOWAS’s financial instability, largely stemming from inconsistent and delayed contributions by member states, was cited as a major operational bottleneck. Respondents from both the ECOWAS Commission and the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern about the heavy reliance on external donors—such as the EU, UN, and individual Western governments—for funding peacekeeping missions, electoral observation teams, and infrastructure projects. One official from the ECOWAS Abuja office noted:

We often wait for donor commitment before any mission is deployed, which delays responses and weakens credibility in crisis situations.” This finding aligns with secondary sources that highlight the dependency dilemma, raising questions about the long-term autonomy and sustainability of ECOWAS’s interventions (Adebajo, 2002; Adetula, 2020).



In addition to financial limitations, respondents pointed to significant human capacity deficits within the organization. While ECOWAS has made notable institutional strides, such as establishing specialized directorates and peace and security mechanisms, it still suffers from a shortage of in-house technical expertise. Scholars from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Yobe State University specifically identified capacity gaps in conflict mediation, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic planning, areas critical to successful intervention. As one academic respondent emphasized:

There is institutional ambition, but insufficient manpower to match it. Most policy documents are produced with external consultants, not internal staff.” This observation is echoed by internal ECOWAS evaluation reports, which note that the organization’s reliance on short-term technical assistance undermines institutional memory and limits sustainable capacity building.

Moreover, staff retention remains a challenge. Respondents from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs and the University of Lagos observed that ECOWAS’s inability to offer competitive remuneration or long-term career progression discourages skilled personnel from remaining within the organization. One senior policy analyst remarked:

Talented staff often move to UN agencies or international NGOs. The brain drain within ECOWAS is real.” This view highlights the need for a more robust human resource strategy within ECOWAS, aimed at recruitment, training, and retention of expert professionals across sectors.

Taken together, the perspectives of the 24 respondents underline those operational challenges are deeply structural—rooted in financial fragility, donor dependency, and weak institutional capacity. These insights confirm that while ECOWAS has made normative and procedural progress, its ability to act swiftly and independently is severely constrained by internal operational weaknesses. Addressing these gaps requires not only reforms in member state financing mechanisms but also a long-term investment in human capital development and organizational self-reliance.

#### **- *Achievements in Democratic Governance***

Using insights from the 24 expert respondents and secondary sources, this study finds that ECOWAS has made substantial contributions to democratic governance in West Africa, particularly through its support for peaceful transitions of power and the strengthening of electoral processes. These achievements, while uneven and sometimes constrained by financial and institutional limitations, underscore ECOWAS’s evolving role as a normative and operational actor in promoting constitutional rule across the sub-region.

The 2017 intervention in The Gambia was consistently cited by expert respondents as a high point of ECOWAS's democratic governance record. When then-President Yahya Jammeh refused to concede defeat after losing the December 2016 presidential election, ECOWAS responded with a blend of diplomatic pressure and credible military deterrence under the framework of the ECOWAS Standby Force. This led to a peaceful transition of power to Adama Barrow. Respondents from the ECOWAS Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the intervention as a defining moment of regional resolve, while scholars from institutions such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Federal University Dutse emphasized its symbolic importance in reinforcing the principle of "zero tolerance for unconstitutional change of government." One academic stated that, "the Gambian case showed ECOWAS could enforce democratic norms beyond just issuing communiqués—it acted, and it succeeded."

Secondary sources confirm this perspective, portraying the intervention as a model of preventive diplomacy, norm enforcement, and collective security (Olonisakin, 2017; Afolabi, 2019). The continued deployment of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) further reflects a commitment not only to transition, but also to post-crisis democratic consolidation.

Beyond conflict resolution, ECOWAS has also advanced electoral monitoring, which both expert respondents and academic literature regard as vital to promoting electoral integrity across the region. Respondents from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs and several academic institutions cited Liberia and Sierra Leone as examples where ECOWAS electoral observer missions helped build voter confidence and deter electoral malpractice. An expert from the University of Lagos remarked:

"The presence of ECOWAS observers has a psychological and practical effect—it assures the electorate and signals to ruling elites that electoral conduct is being scrutinized."

Indeed, studies support the view that ECOWAS election observation missions have contributed to greater transparency, peaceful voting processes, and legitimacy of electoral outcomes in several post-conflict countries (Bach, 2016; ISS, 2022). The deployment of fact-finding missions, technical support teams, and long-term observers has become a regular component of ECOWAS's democratic architecture.

However, expert interviews also drew attention to logistical, financial, and political limitations that hinder the effectiveness and reach of electoral monitoring. Several respondents expressed concern about the selectivity and short-term nature of some missions, noting that without sustained engagement—including support for electoral reforms and civic education—observer missions risk being symbolic rather than transformational. As one scholar from Yobe State University observed:

“Monitoring elections is not enough. ECOWAS must go further to support institutional reforms that make elections credible year-round, not just on voting day.”

These concerns are echoed in policy analyses that emphasize the need for ECOWAS to strengthen pre- and post-election frameworks, support independent electoral commissions, and institutionalize democratic practices at the national level (Adetula, 2020; Loimeier, 2021).

In summary, the findings from the 24 expert respondents, reinforced by scholarly and policy literature, suggest that ECOWAS has carved out a critical but still developing role in democratic governance in West Africa. Its achievements in peaceful transitions—particularly in The Gambia—and in electoral monitoring in fragile states like Liberia and Sierra Leone, demonstrate both the potential and limits of regional intervention. Going forward, the sustainability of these achievements depends on ECOWAS’s ability to deepen institutional support, secure adequate resources, and apply its governance principles consistently across all member states.

#### **- *Failures in Crisis Response***

Despite notable efforts in promoting democratic governance, ECOWAS has struggled to respond effectively and promptly to emerging crises, particularly unconstitutional changes of government. Expert interviews and scholarly literature converge on two key themes: delayed interventions and the ineffectiveness of sanctions.

##### ***a. Delayed Interventions***

A recurring critique among both practitioners and academics is ECOWAS's sluggish response to military coups, especially in Mali (2020, 2021) and Guinea (2021). According to experts from the ECOWAS Commission and Nigeria’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, institutional paralysis stemming from divergent member-state interests and weak collective leadership impeded timely action. One ECOWAS official noted, “*By the time consensus is reached among Heads of State, the situation on the ground has often escalated beyond initial containment*”. This view aligns with existing literature, which argues that ECOWAS lacks the logistical readiness and strategic cohesion needed for rapid response (Adebajo, 2021; Bah, 2023).

Moreover, academic experts from Yobe State University and the University of Lagos stressed that the absence of a permanent standby force or rapid deployment unit significantly undermines ECOWAS’s capacity to project immediate deterrent power. This operational gap not only prolongs instability but also diminishes the credibility of the organization as a crisis manager. The case of Burkina Faso, where repeated coups

occurred within a short time frame (2022–2023), further underscores these institutional and structural weaknesses (Adetula, 2023).

### ***b. Sanctions Ineffectiveness***

In addition to slow responses, ECOWAS has faced criticism for its reliance on sanctions that are often perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Interviews with policy analysts from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs and scholars from the University of Nigeria Nsukka pointed out that sanctions imposed on Mali, Guinea, and Niger were inconsistently applied and lacked enforcement teeth. “*Sanctions without enforcement only serve to demonstrate frustration, not authority,*” remarked one respondent from the National Open University of Nigeria.

This view is reinforced by research from Olayode (2022) and the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI, 2023), which argue that the targeted governments typically exploit ECOWAS’s enforcement weaknesses, while civilians bear the brunt of economic restrictions. Experts from Federal University Dutse and Akwa Ibom University further stressed the need for ECOWAS to adopt smarter sanctions—those that target military elites and their financial networks—rather than broad economic embargoes that deepen humanitarian crises without achieving political concessions.

Collectively, these failures point to a broader institutional dilemma: while ECOWAS has normative commitments to democratic consolidation, its enforcement mechanisms remain underdeveloped, politically constrained, and strategically inconsistent. Without deeper reforms to improve cohesion, enforcement capacity, and rapid decision-making, ECOWAS risks eroding its legitimacy as a regional guarantor of democratic order.

#### ***- Financial Dependence on External Partners***

A critical and recurring theme in the assessment of ECOWAS’s institutional performance is its persistent dependence on external funding. Both academic literature and expert interviews underscore that this financial reliance undermines the regional body’s operational autonomy and constrains its ability to implement long-term strategies aligned with regional priorities.

#### ***- Autonomy Issues and Donor Conditionalities***

Literature has long observed that ECOWAS’s overreliance on external partners—particularly the European Union (EU), United Nations (UN), and individual Western states—has weakened its policy independence. Scholars such as Adebawo (2022) and

Sesay (2021) argue that while donor funding has enabled ECOWAS to carry out peacekeeping, electoral monitoring, and institutional development, it often comes with conditions that influence agenda-setting and dilute the region's ownership of its initiatives. As Sesay puts it, *“External donors are not mere financiers; they are also agenda-setters.”*

This concern is echoed in the expert interviews. Respondents from ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja and regional think tanks such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) noted that international partners often dictate funding priorities, sidelining context-specific needs. One ECOWAS programme officer observed, *“When 70% of your operational budget comes from donors, it becomes difficult to say no when their priorities shift—whether or not they align with our regional objectives.”* Experts also emphasized that this reliance hinders ECOWAS’s ability to maintain sustained security engagements in conflict-prone areas such as the Sahel, where long-term funding is critical.

#### **- Sustainability Challenges**

The interviews also highlighted sustainability as a major institutional concern. Respondents from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs and Yobe State University described ECOWAS’s funding model as “ad hoc and donor-driven,” making it vulnerable to global financial shocks or changes in foreign policy of key partners. For instance, the partial withdrawal of European support for the ECOWAS Standby Force after 2021 reportedly stalled planned security deployments in Burkina Faso and northern Nigeria, according to multiple expert accounts.

Moreover, financial experts from ECOWAS’s Budget and Finance Department cited irregular member-state contributions as an internal constraint that compounds external dependence. Although the ECOWAS Community Levy was designed to ensure sustainable regional financing, enforcement mechanisms remain weak. As a result, some states default on their obligations, increasing the reliance on foreign partners to fill the gap (ECOWAS Commission Annual Report, 2023). The literature supports this view, pointing out that donor dependence reduces the incentive for institutional financial reform. Scholars such as Olaniyan (2023) stress the need for ECOWAS to strengthen internal revenue mechanisms and improve fiscal transparency to reduce donor dependency and reclaim strategic autonomy.

Overall, while external funding has enabled ECOWAS to scale up its interventions in peace, security, and governance, this support comes at the cost of institutional autonomy and strategic independence. As the organization aspires to become a self-reliant regional body, reducing financial dependence through improved domestic revenue mobilization and enforcement of member contributions will be essential.

Over the past two decades, ECOWAS has made significant strides in fostering economic integration and addressing regional security challenges. Achievements such as the

ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, the adoption of a Common External Tariff, and peacekeeping successes in Liberia and Sierra Leone highlight its potential as a unifying force in West Africa. However, persistent challenges, including structural inefficiencies, resource constraints, and uneven policy harmonization, undermine its broader objectives. The region's inability to fully address economic disparities and insurgencies underscores the need for robust institutional reforms and enhanced member-state collaboration. While ECOWAS has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating complex issues, its long-term effectiveness hinges on prioritizing equitable development, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, and reducing external dependencies. As the organization stands at a crossroads, renewed commitment from member states is essential to realize the vision of a stable, prosperous, and integrated West Africa.

### Key Recommendations

To strengthen ECOWAS's effectiveness in promoting regional integration, peace, and sustainable development, the following actionable and streamlined recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhance Economic Contributions to Regional Integration**  
ECOWAS should fully implement the Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) by eliminating non-tariff barriers, simplifying customs processes, and curbing corruption at borders. It should promote industrial growth by investing in regional value chains and critical infrastructure, particularly in energy and transportation, to reduce economic disparities across member states.
2. **Strengthen Security Management Capacities**  
The ECOWAS Standby Force should be expanded and better funded to enable timely interventions in insurgencies and cross-border threats. A regional intelligence-sharing framework should be established to improve the coordination of anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations. More effective diplomatic protocols and sanction mechanisms should be developed to prevent and resolve political crises within member states.
3. **Address Systemic Challenges and Institutional Bottlenecks**  
Institutional reforms are needed to minimize bureaucracy, clarify agency mandates, and enhance inter-agency coordination within ECOWAS. The harmonization of national and regional policies should be prioritized to ensure cohesive economic and security planning. Investing in internal capacity building is essential to retain skilled staff and reduce overdependence on external technical assistance.
4. **Propose Actionable Improvements for Economic and Security Objectives**  
ECOWAS must establish sustainable financing by increasing member-state



contributions and decreasing reliance on external donors. Strategic partnerships with the private sector should be fostered to stimulate economic development and enhance regional competitiveness. Protocols and frameworks should be periodically reviewed and revised to remain responsive to evolving regional and global challenges.

These targeted measures, if effectively implemented, will reinforce ECOWAS's institutional resilience, economic integration, and security architecture across West Africa.

## References

- Adebajo, A. (2002). *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Adebayo, A. (2019). "ECOWAS and Peacekeeping: Achievements and Challenges." *Journal of African Peace Studies*, 14(2), 118-134.
- Adebayo, A. (2020). Policy Harmonization and Regional Integration in ECOWAS: Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of African Development and Policy*, 6(4), 78-90.
- Adejumobi, S. (2019). "Regional Integration and the Crisis of Legitimacy in ECOWAS." *Journal of African Union Studies*, 8(1), 23-45.
- Adeoye, B. (2021). ECOWAS Investment Bank and Regional Development: A Review of Contributions to Infrastructure Projects in West Africa. *African Journal of Economics, Politics and Development*, 15(2), 122-135.
- Adetula, V. (2023). "Regional Security in West Africa: ECOWAS and the Coup Dilemma." *African Affairs*, 122(489), 167-185.
- Adetula, V. A. O. (2016). "African Conflicts, Development, and Regional Organizations in the Post-Cold War International System." *Nordic Africa Institute Working Paper*.
- Adetula, V. A. O. (2020). "Regional Security and the Limits of ECOWAS Interventionism." *African Affairs*, 119(474), 297-321.
- Afolabi, B. O. (2019). "Preventive Diplomacy in West Africa: ECOWAS and the Gambian Crisis." *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 6(1), 45-64.
- Akokpari, J. (2017). "Dilemmas of Regional Integration and Development in Africa." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 11(7), 193-205.



- Alabi, G. O., & Akinyemi, A. O. (2015). *ECOWAS and its role in regional integration and peacebuilding in West Africa: A critical analysis*. African Journal of Political Science, 10(2), 35-50.
- Bach, D. C. (2016). *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, Institutions and Trans-State Networks*. London: Routledge.
- Bah, A. B. (2023). *Coups and Countercoups: Understanding the Return of Military Rule in West Africa*. CODESRIA.
- Balassa, B. (1961). *The Theory of Economic Integration*. Homewood: Irwin.
- Bamfo, B., & Shoukri, M. (2020). *The challenge of economic integration in ECOWAS: A critical evaluation of the Common External Tariff (CET) and its impact on trade in West Africa*. Journal of African Trade, 7(3), 58-72.
- Bøås, M., & Torheim, L. E. (2020). "Responding to Jihadism in the Sahel: The Role of ECOWAS." *Conflict, Security & Development*, 20(5), 549–569.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chijioke, A. U., & Adeleke, M. A. (2020). *The ECOMOG intervention in Liberia: An analysis of peacekeeping in post-conflict West Africa*. International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies, 12(1), 45-61.
- Coulibaly, A. (2023). "Security Complexities in West Africa: Is ECOWAS Still a Viable Actor?" *West African Review*, 43(2), 56–77.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ebeh, R. (2021). The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and its Impact on Intra-Regional Trade in West Africa. *Journal of Economic Integration*, 20(3), 55-70.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press.
- Hartmann, C. (2017). "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia." *Africa Spectrum*, 52(1), 85–99.
- Ibrahim, J., & Nuhu, K. (2022). "Institutional Challenges in ECOWAS and the Political Economy of Reform." *African Governance Review*, 14(1), 12–27.

- Institute for Security Studies (ISS). (2022). *ECOWAS and the Crisis of Democratic Governance in West Africa*. Pretoria: ISS Africa.
- International Crisis Group. (2011). *Côte d'Ivoire: The road to peace*. International Crisis Group. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/road-peace>
- Interviews with ECOWAS, MFA, and Academic Experts, Conducted via Zoom (2024).
- Kieh, G. K. (2019). *The political economy of ECOWAS and the Guinea-Bissau crisis: A historical perspective*. West African Politics Journal, 4(2), 22-37.
- Lavergne, R. (Ed.). (2005). *Regional Integration and Cooperation in West Africa: A Multidimensional Perspective*. Ottawa: IDRC.
- Leke, A. (2020). Economic Disparities and Policy Integration within ECOWAS: A Critical Examination. *Journal of African Economic Development*, 29(1), 15-30.
- Loimeier, R. (2021). "The Rise of Jihadist Movements in the Sahel: Conflict, Fragmentation and Regional (In)Security." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59(3), 345–369.
- Obi, C. (2020). "The Role of ECOWAS in Conflict Resolution in West Africa." *African Journal of Political Science*, 10(4), 220-234.
- Obi, T. (2020). Free Movement Protocol and Economic Integration in West Africa: An Overview of ECOWAS Policies. *West African Political Science Review*, 10(2), 41-53.
- Ogbonna, C. (2019). "Economic Integration and the Challenges of Implementation in ECOWAS." *African Journal of Economic Policy*, 26(2), 45–66.
- Okpeh, O. O. (2021). "Trade Liberalization in West Africa: A Historical Analysis of ETLs and CET." *West Africa Economic Journal*, 17(3), 79–102.
- Olanrewaju, F. O., & Ajayi, A. I. (2023). "Youth, Security and Regional Governance in ECOWAS." *African Development*, 48(1), 1–23.
- Olayode, K. (2022). "Sanctions and Sovereignty: ECOWAS's Struggles in Post-Coup Contexts." *Journal of African International Relations*, 18(2), 45–62.
- Olonisakin, F. (2008). *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone: The Story of UNAMSIL*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- Olonisakin, F. (2015). "ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding." In Francis, D. J. (Ed.), *Peace and Conflict in Africa*, Zed Books.
- Olonisakin, F. (2017). "ECOWAS and the Gambian Transition: Diplomacy, Deterrence, and the Limits of Regional Influence." *Conflict Trends*, 2017(1), 10–17.
- Oluwaseun, A. (2022). Regional Integration and Free Movement: Assessing the Impact of ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol on Labor Mobility in West Africa. *African Social Policy Review*, 18(4), 102-117.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pérouse de Montclos, M. A. (2020). "Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger: Governance and Insurgency in the Sahel." *African Security Review*, 29(3), 1-17.
- Rosamond, B. (2000). *Theories of European Integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Salmons, J. (2015). *Doing Qualitative Research Online*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Tranholm-Mikkelsen, J. (1991). "Neo-functionalism: Obstinate or Obsolete? A Reappraisal in the Light of the New Dynamism of the EC." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20(1), 1–22.
- Ukeje, C. (2018). "ECOWAS and Regional Security: From Peacekeeping to Conflict Resolution." *African Security Review*, 27(4), 245-258.
- Ukeje, C., & Gona, A. (2011). "The ECOWAS Response to Terrorism in the Region." In A. Bryden & F. Olonisakin (Eds.), *Security Sector Transformation in Africa* (pp. 117–140). Geneva: DCAF.
- UNECA (2018). *Assessing Regional Integration in Africa VIII: Bringing the Continental Free Trade Area About*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- UNECA (2022). *Making the AfCFTA Work for Women and Youth*. Addis Ababa: UN.
- West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). (2023). *Assessment of ECOWAS Sanctions in the Sahel*. Policy Brief No. 6.
- Williams, P. D. (2016). *War and Conflict in Africa*. Polity Press.
- Zondi, S. (2020). "The Limits of Regionalism in West Africa: Reconsidering the Role of ECOWAS." *African Journal of International Affairs*, 22(1), 31–49.