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## Postcoloniality, Conflict Intervention and Peacebuilding in West Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

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### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the crises of postcoloniality in west Africa and its links with state failure and conflict in the sub-region. It also analyses the conflict response and peacebuilding intervention of the sub-regional economic grouping, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and examines the contemporary opportunities and challenges to peace and security in the sub-region. A number of commentators and writers on postcoloniality and conflict in Africa have focused on the role played by indigenous political elites and the impact of neo-patrimonial and clientelistic politics in producing weak and failing states (Bayart 1993; Reno 1998). Whilst recognizing the destabilizing impact of these factors on the African state, however, this chapter argues that analysis of postcoloniality and conflicts in west Africa should be eclectic and take on board various other factors, such as the sub-region's colonial legacy, its Cold War past, and peripheral status in the world economy. Limiting the analysis of the crises of postcoloniality to the excesses of African political elites ignores the myriad of actors and factors involved, and certainly distorts the understanding of wider political and socio-economic forces at play.

To understand the crises of postcoloniality in west Africa, this chapter starts by examining the impact of colonialism on the sub-region and how it laid the foundations of authoritarianism, state collapse and conflicts. As historical legacies are not enough to explain the sub-region's widespread instability, the nature of the postcolonial state and the challenges it faces will be analysed to highlight the

devastating effects of neo-patrimonial and clientelistic politics and how these have produced failed states and complex political emergencies across west Africa. Next, we look at the conflict response and humanitarian intervention of ECOWAS and its attempt at institutionalizing conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms. Finally, we assess the opportunities and challenges facing peace and security in West Africa.

### **Colonialism in West Africa: Legacy and Impact on State Formation**

Understanding the crises of postcoloniality in west Africa and the problems of state failure and collapse require an analysis of how these states were formed. Such an analysis reveals the deep-rooted causes of west African conflicts and the impact of colonialism on state formation. With the exception of Liberia that was founded as a settlement for freed slaves by an American charity, the American Colonization Society, all the states in the sub-region share a colonial past. However, even Liberia shares some of the legacies of colonialism as descendants of freed slaves resettled in Monrovia behaved like ‘colonial masters’ over the indigenous population.

Prior to colonialism, west Africa was home to some of Africa’s earliest thriving political entities. This goes back to the era of the great empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Contacts with outsiders go back centuries when Arab merchants started the lucrative Trans-Saharan trade. This involved exchange of north African salt, cloth and cowries for West African gold. European contact started with naval explorations by Portuguese sailors. This was later followed by trade in gold and slaves. Although parts of west Africa, and indeed Africa at large, were already under colonial rule by the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1884 that the process of acquiring colonies began in earnest. Upon the invitation of Von Bismarck, European powers assembled in Berlin in 1884 to ‘carve-up’ Africa into colonial territories. This arbitrary partition never took into account the existing ethnic and natural borders in Africa. This resulted in the creation of countries with many different ethnic groups. Nigeria, for instance, has more than 250 ethnic groups with very diverse cultural and linguistic background. In some other cases, some ethnic groups straddle several countries. This contributes to the regional spread of conflicts as members of the same ethnic group in neighbouring countries come to the aid of their kin.

The dominant colonial powers in west Africa were France and Great Britain. The Portuguese were also involved but to a minimal level. Although there are variations in the policies of the different colonial masters, the common underlying motive of all of them was the subjugation and exploitation of the African continent. The French considered their territories as overseas provinces of France. To this end, they sought to integrate their territories closer to the metropole. This resulted in the weakening of local authority structures through their policy of ‘assimilation’.

The British on the other hand opted for the cheaper option of governing their colonies through indirect rule. This involves delegating greater powers to local authorities. The Portuguese implemented the most draconian policies in their territories. These include forced labour and a rule requiring locals to carry ID cards. Forced labour was also widespread in French west African colonies. However, unlike the settler-dominated colonies of east and southern Africa, decolonization in west Africa was relatively peaceful except for the former Portuguese colonies, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, who had to wage a bitter war of independence. Nationalist agitation surfaced in west Africa following the end of World War I and the creation of the League of Nations. The League's principle of self-determination provided the impetus for the activities of the early nationalist leaders. The involvement of many west African soldiers in the liberation of Europe during World War II also galvanised support amongst west Africans for decolonization. Furthermore, most of the elites from these colonies had been educated in Europe and could now articulate their demands using the political language of the West. The creation of the United Nations also acted as a major catalyst towards independence. Founded on ideals of equality and self-determination, the UN accelerated the move towards independence. In west Africa, Ghana led the way to independence in 1957, followed by Guinea in 1958. Most countries had independence between 1960 and 1961, with Cape Verde being the last to be free from foreign rule in 1975.

Although nationalist agitation started about 50 years earlier, little was done by colonial powers to prepare the colonies politically and economically for independence. In fact most of the colonialists were caught off guard with the speed of events after World War II. The French, for instance, were still thinking of creating a grand Franco-African Confederation in 1958. This lack of preparation meant that at independence, most west African and indeed African states had few educated personnel to take over the administration of these countries. Guinea Bissau, for instance, only had 14 graduates at independence and an illiteracy rate of 97 per cent (Lamb 1984). It was not surprising therefore that 'the skills of the new civil servants were too few and their experience all too limited to master the many tasks of governance' (Chazan *et al.* 1999:43).

Not only were the new civil servants unprepared for the tasks they faced, the new political leaders also lacked the necessary skills and experience to govern. Most of these leaders gained their positions through their ability to organize anti-colonial protests and campaigns. Whereas 'the bulk of their own political understanding had been modelled in a centralized and authoritarian colonial context' (*ibid*:45), at independence they were faced with pluralist political institutions of alien origins. Kasfir rightly noted that 'the political culture bequeathed by colonialism contained the notions that authoritarianism was an appropriate mode of rule and that political activity was merely a disguised form of self-interest, subversive of

the public welfare' (Kasfir, quoted in Chazan *et al.* 1999:43). In fact, in most of these colonies, pluralist politics and universal adult suffrage was only introduced about a decade before independence. As will be discussed later, this legacy of authoritarianism would resurface in the post-colonial era.

Besides failing to prepare the colonies politically, the colonizers also failed to bring meaningful economic and industrial development. No serious attempt was made at industrialization. The few industries that were established were mainly focused on the primary sector. Infrastructural and development projects started late in the process. In keeping with their underlying economic motives, the few infrastructural projects implemented were geared towards facilitating the exploitation of the colonies' raw materials. Evidence of this incoherent and lopsided development policy can be seen in the way roads and railways were built to link only the major producing areas with the seaport (Thomson 2004). Consequently, young men were lured from rural areas lacking in amenities to coastal urban cities. Unfortunately, this trend has not been reversed by post-colonial governments. In search of livelihood and a better life, the majority of these youths have remained unemployed in the urban areas, thus providing a fertile recruiting ground for would-be dissidents.

### **A False Dawn: The Crises of Postcoloniality in West Africa**

The euphoria that greeted independence in the 1960s was short-lived as post-colonial regimes failed to deliver on their promises of economic development and political emancipation for the masses. A combination of internal and external factors account for this dismal performance, including the widespread practice of neo-patrimonial and clientelistic politics, the impact of Cold War politics, the peripheral status of African countries in the world economy and the debilitating debt burden.

Patrimonialism and clientelism are key concepts in trying to understand the crises of legitimacy and governance that rocked several west African and indeed African countries. Thomson (2004:115) aptly defines patrimonialism as 'a form of political order where power is concentrated in the personal authority of one individual ruler ... The state is their private property, and the act of ruling is consequently arbitrary'. In west Africa, the politics of patrimonialism led to growing tendencies towards authoritarian rule. But as mentioned in the previous section, this is not a new phenomenon as post-independence leaders inherited from colonial rule a highly centralized, undemocratic and authoritarian system of government. This has led some analysts to argue that the authoritarian rule of postcolonial rulers was merely a continuation of what existed during colonialism. Most postcolonial leaders regarded their positions as rewards for their struggle for independence. Any opposition was branded unpatriotic and considered ungrateful to the efforts of nationalists. Members of the opposition were suppressed, intimidated and jailed. In several countries, such as Ghana and Guinea, crude

sedition laws were formulated to suppress the activities of the opposition. The press was heavily censored and freedom of expression was curtailed. And as Chazan *et al.* (1999:49) observe, 'opposition itself was considered to be immoral. Unity was equated with uniformity, disagreement with treason'. Complete concentration of power on leaders was achieved with the adoption of the one-party system, for example in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Even in countries where the system was not institutionalized, one-party rule became *de facto* as opportunities for fair competition were absent. Senegal and Liberia can be classed under this category. Various reasons were used by leaders to justify one-party rule (see Jordan 1969; Thomson 2004). Kwame Nkrumah considered multi-party politics to be divisive and a distraction from the goal of national development. Felix Houphouet-Boigny regarded one-party rule as a manifestation of the unity that already existed whilst Sekou Toure saw opposition parties as undermining the national development goals. Siaka Stevens borrowed from Julius Nyerere of Tanzania when he opined that one-party rule is in line with the traditional democratic African principles of unity and consensus. Notwithstanding the different justifications for adopting the system, the methods and strategies employed were similar. It resulted in the total concentration of power in the hands of the president and his closest allies. The role of national legislatures was reduced to rubber-stamping the decrees and wishes of presidents. In these circumstances, there was no basis for the establishment of Max Weber's legal-rational source of legitimacy as the state was personalized and the divide between the private and public became blurred. Leaders were immortalized; for instance, it was common to see leaders having titles like 'father of the nation'. In addition, important places were named after leaders like the Siaka Stevens Stadium, Kwame Nkrumah Institute, etc. Some leaders went as far as declaring themselves 'rulers for life'. Nkrumah of Ghana is a notable example.

Closely linked to the politics of patrimonialism is clientelism. In the absence of political legitimacy based on legal-rational governance, support for patrimonial rulers is based on clientelistic networks aimed at buying off opposition and rewarding followers. Christopher Clapham describes clientelism as 'a relation of exchange between unequals' (Clapham 1982:4). It is a mutually beneficial relationship between the patron and client. Thomson refers to this relationship as a form of political contract: whilst the patron rewards the client with public office, security and resources, the client reciprocates with support that helps to legitimise the patron's position (Thomson 2004). Clientelism in west Africa resulted in a seriously flawed process of distributing the state's scarce resources. Most leaders succeeded in building strong patron-client relationships that meant only supporters of the regime benefited from state resources. This guaranteed the support and loyalty of key institutions like the army and police on whose loyalty the regimes relied for survival. But it also led to inefficiency and massive corruption in the running of the state. Inefficiency permeated the entire state structure as

appointment to public office was not based on qualifications or merit but on association with the ruling elites. The meagre resources available for nation building were diverted to sustaining the patron-client networks. Corruption became rife as clients used their positions for rent-seeking. This involves taking bribes for performing their 'official' duties, kick backs on contracts, fraudulently selling off government property for private gain or diverting large sums of money to private Swiss accounts. The consequence for the masses was a state of declining social services, dilapidated infrastructure, weak and collapsing economy and widespread poverty. But in the midst of this growing impoverishment, patrimonialism and clientelism ensured some sense of stability and legitimacy for the ruling elites. However, around the 1980s and 1990s, patrimonial-clientelistic politics suffered a major crisis of legitimacy. The economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s including the negative effects of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and global economic recession on African economies, and the drying up of aid money following the end of the Cold War all resulted in the decline of resources available to ruling elites to sustain their patron-client networks. This in turn led to loss of legitimacy and widespread economic difficulties for patrons and clients alike. The resulting hardship brought about a spate of angry demonstrations across west Africa that were crushed with massive brutality by the authorities. In the middle of this chaos and instability, and with no established means of peaceful political change, the military emerged as the only challenger to the dictators and as Lewis observes, 'where opposition is illegal, governments can be changed only by *coup d'État*' (Lewis, quoted in Jordan 1969:105).

The first military coup in west Africa took place in Togo in 1963 when Eyadema overthrew President Olympio in a bloody coup. Since then, west Africa has been the most coup-prone sub-region in Africa. Cote d'Ivoire, once a bastion of peace and prosperity in the sub-region was itself engulfed in a coup in December 1999. Out of 16 countries in the sub-region, Senegal is the only one to have escaped the scourge of military rule. From Sierra Leone to Ghana, the justifications given by the military for seizing power are similar: to stop the misrule and massive corruption and human rights abuses of civilian dictators and return the country to a sound socio-economic and political footing. But despite the rhetoric, the record of military leaders in west Africa is far more appalling than their civilian counterparts. Human rights abuses reach unprecedented proportions during military rule as the cases of Sani Abacha, J.J. Rawlings and Samuel Doe indicate. Opponents of the regime are intimidated or brutally murdered whilst freedom of the press is severely restricted. Corruption is rife. Most of these leaders end up transforming themselves into civilians, allowing them to contest and rig the elections that follow. This spate of military coups has retarded economic development in the sub-region and created a climate of deep instability.

However, in the midst of this crisis of legitimacy, the Cold War superpowers actively and consciously tolerated and supported the dictators, both military and

civilians. This support for authoritarian regimes was meant to promote their political and strategic interests. Former US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, James K. Bishop acknowledged the fact that during the Cold War, 'Africa was viewed as yet another playing field on which the struggle between the Soviets and ourselves was to be waged' (quoted in Diamond 1995:150). Brutal and corrupt as Doe was, the US made him a key ally and effectively turned a blind eye to his excesses. In other west African states, the US intervention was limited as long as British and French influence was enough to thwart Communism. Soviet role in west Africa was limited and only acted as a response to US and Chinese influence in the sub-region (Chazan et al. 1999). Nevertheless, with its anti-colonial and radical stance, the Soviet Union was able to win over a few revolutionary leaders like Guinea's Sekou Toure and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.

### **West Africa in the Post-Cold War Era: Between Democratization and Marginalization**

At the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and the subsequent withdrawal of superpower support, west African regimes faced increasing internal and external pressures for reform. The internal pressures came in two forms. The first type was a peaceful, civil society-based campaign for democratic reforms whilst the second form was violent and aimed at taking over the state. Having been suppressed for a long time during the Cold War politics, these dissident groups suddenly realized that there was no longer any backing for dictators; the lid was then opened for everyone to express their dissent. Without support from their erstwhile allies, states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau all degenerated into a vicious circle of violence and instability.

The external pressures came from the Bretton Woods institutions, the UN and major bilateral donors like the US, UK and France who tied the granting of aid to economic structural adjustment and democratisation. In its 1989 study, *Sub-Saharan Africa: from Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, the World Bank linked the problem of governance to the poor economic performance of the continent. Major bilateral donors were blunt in warning African leaders that economic aid will be conditioned on satisfactory transition to democracy and the adoption of Western models of liberalized economy (see Diamond 1995). But as discussed above, these were the same institutions and governments turning a blind eye to, or supporting, repressive regimes in Africa during the Cold War. Hoogvelt (1997) also noted the contradiction in the new democratic conditionalities and the way in which strong and authoritarian regimes in Asia have been credited for the region's economic success. What then is responsible for this sudden change of policy? Some analysts have argued that these new conditionalities are geared towards 'focusing responsibility on governments of developing countries, both for past ills and for implementation of reform packages' (see Hoogvelt 1997:174). Another

plausible explanation for this sudden shift can be found in the fact that, after the end of the Cold War and the demise of communism, the West no longer needed the services of African dictators to help fend off soviet influence. With the battle of ideologies won, the US and its Western allies can now shift to promoting 'democracy' in the developing world. Hoogvelt considers this as 'new ways to serving the interests of international capital' (ibid).

With increasing internal and external pressure, governments across the sub-region were forced to accept reforms and a gradual move towards democracy. New political parties, human rights groups, pro-democracy movements, students, workers, market women, professionals and the unemployed all joined in the campaign for reforms. National conferences were held in several states in the sub-region to discuss the new democratic constitutions. Multi-party systems were adopted across the sub-region and freedom of the press and independence of the judiciary were enshrined in the constitutions. Elections were organised in Senegal, Mali, Benin, Cape Verde, Niger, Togo, Ghana, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. But the optimism that followed these events soon dissipated. In countries such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Gambia, military coups reversed all the gains that were achieved by pro-democracy campaigners. Even in those countries where elections were held, their conduct and aftermath cast a big shadow of doubt on the sustainability and effectiveness of democracy. In Guinea, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, a large section of the opposition boycotted the elections, citing the absence of a level playing field. In Togo, intimidation and targeted killings of members of the opposition effectively killed any meaningful challenge to the authority of President Eyadema. Niger slumped back to military dictatorship in 1999.

The above bleak picture of the state of governance in west Africa and indeed the entire continent has been the subject of several scholarly debates, analysis and commentaries. Sola Akinrinade (1998:79) calls it 'democracy without democratization.' He criticizes the democratization process in the entire continent for reducing democracy to the symbolic holding of elections rather than transforming the inherently undemocratic structure of the post-colonial state. This failure reduces elections to a mere exercise of choosing between two oppressors. It was only in Mali, Niger, Benin and Cape Verde that elections resulted in the ousting of incumbents. The failure to address the social and economic needs of the people is also a significant drawback for the democratisation process in west Africa. As Akinrinade succinctly puts it, 'when democracy is indifferent to the grinding poverty of the masses, giving the vote to the poor is virtually meaningless' (ibid:81). In short, democracy should not only bring about political liberalization but also, and most importantly, economic and social welfare for the masses.

The inability of the pro-democracy movements in these countries to present a united front against dictators is also partly responsible for the difficulties in

sustaining democracy. In most of these countries, pro-democracy campaigners ironically include former members of ruling parties and professionals who have fallen out of favour with leaders. These are the same people who have contributed to the subversion of democracy in their respective countries. Democracy for this group of people is purely about gaining power. This obsession with power has divided and seriously weakened the opposition. In Senegal, 7 presidential candidates stood against President Diouf in 1993. In Cote d'Ivoire 19 political parties contested the 1990 elections. In Nigeria, prior to the annulment of the June 1993 elections, 120 people aspired to be presidential candidates! (Akinrinade 1998). This apparent friction within the opposition is a big boost to incumbents. In addition to the friction within the opposition is its inability to present a credible and feasible alternative programme. This is not surprising as politics in west Africa revolves more around personalities than issues. However, the above shortcomings of the pro-democracy movement should not deny it the credit it deserves. Besides the small group of self-serving recycled politicians, there is an active and committed majority of activists, most of them ordinary people who have borne the brunt of bad governance in the sub-region. The sacrifices of these people in forcing political reforms and bringing a semblance of democracy should not go unnoticed.

The actions and policies of external actors (International Financial Institutions [IFIs], private investors and foreign governments) should also be considered when analysing the democratization process in west Africa. Foreign direct investment remains substantially low. The cynicism expressed by this Western business executive sums up the view of business leaders towards Africa: 'Who cares about Africa; it is not important to us; leave it to the IMF and the World Bank' (quoted in Callaghy 2000). Despite the promises of aid and economic assistance tied to democratization, IFIs and Western donor countries have not matched their words with deeds. For instance, the US scaled down its development aid to the entire sub-Saharan Africa from \$2 billion in 1985 to \$1 billion in 1997 (Mburu 2003). The debt burden continues to take a heavy toll on already fragile economies. By 1992, African debt was over \$180 billion, which amounts to over 100 per cent of Africa's total GNP (Callaghy 2000). The continent remains politically and economically marginalized. Democracy does not thrive in a situation of abject poverty as is the case in Africa. There also appears to be a contradiction between democratization and the economic conditionalities imposed on Africa by the IFIs. Both new and old regimes alike have faced serious difficulties in implementing these directives. Because of their unpopular nature, elected governments have been forced to resort to draconian measures in implementing Structural Adjustment Programmes. In implementing such top-down directives, governments were required to ignore the views and opinions of the masses. This caused deep-seated resentment in many countries across the region and led to a series of violent demonstrations and riots. Harbeson (1995:15) shares this view when he noted that 'the multi-

donor campaigns for simultaneous economic and political liberalization risk becoming counterproductive, self-defeating, and accessories to the troubled political and economic circumstances of African countries in the early 1990s'. Former Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, Adebayo Adedeji, puts it more bluntly: 'the donor countries that are encouraging Africans to take the democratic path are also the countries that are encouraging Africans to adopt economic policies that alienate the people' (quoted in Callaghy 2000:46). In his study on Sierra Leone, William Reno (1998) also established a link between neo-liberal reforms and the outbreak of violent conflict. He argues that these economic reforms attack the patrimonial state and undermine the basis of legitimacy of most leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a rekindling of the spirit and determination of west African civil society to put democratization back on track. ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) have also shed their state-centric image to start engaging with civil society and putting democracy and good governance at the centre of their programmes. Notwithstanding these steps, the sub-region is still suffering from the problem of bad governance and the failure of leadership. These twin problems are at the heart of most of the political upheavals devastating the sub-region.

### **State Failure, Armed Conflict and Peacekeeping in West Africa: From ECOMOG to ECOMIL**

The crises of postcoloniality have contributed to the incidents of state failure and state collapse in west Africa, including cases of brutal civil wars in the 1990s and 2000s. A failed state as defined by Carment (2001:10) is one that 'does not fulfil the obligations of statehood. The leadership does not have the means and credibility to compel internal order or to deter or repel external aggression'. A failed state is characterized by its increased inability to provide security and basic services for its people, including health, education and food. The institutions of government are in a state of near-collapse and the capacity of the state to manage conflicts and tensions is drastically diminished. Different examples from sub-Saharan Africa reveal that state failure is often preceded by years of dictatorship characterized by patron-client networks, massive corruption, intimidation and suppression of the opposition. These factors erode the legitimacy of the state and set the stage for disaffected groups to challenge its authority. But whilst the crises of postcoloniality have created the underlying causes of state failure and conflicts in the sub-region, a mixture of triggering factors, most of them regional in nature, transformed these latent conflicts into violent and protracted wars. These include the reciprocal support given by states within the sub-region to various dissident groups, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, the spread of local mercenaries and civil militias, and the role of strategic natural resources in fuelling and prolonging

conflicts. Consequently 13 out of the 16 countries in the sub-region have been embroiled in varying levels of conflicts ranging from intermittent low-intensity conflicts in Nigeria and Guinea to devastating civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. In early 2012, Mali which until recently was seen as a positive example of the region's transformation from conflict was plunged into a complex crisis involving on the one part separatists Tuareg rebels and Islamists fighting for control of northern Mali, and on the other, a military coup in the south which undermined the country's growing democratic credentials. The widespread conflict and instability has led many in the West to brand Africa the 'hopeless' continent. In his article, 'The Coming Anarchy,' Kaplan (1994:3) painted a rather gloomy picture of west Africa:

West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide democratic, environmental and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger. Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international drug cartels are now most tellingly demonstrated through a west African prism.

But despite raising some of the security concerns facing west Africa, Kaplan's analysis appears to be grossly exaggerated. The conflict response and peacebuilding intervention of states in the sub-region paints a more optimistic picture of a region taking responsibility for addressing its security and political problems.

Faced with an unprecedented scale of human suffering and international disengagement from African conflicts, the sub-regional economic body, ECOWAS, was forced to devise *ad hoc* security mechanisms for keeping a lid on these conflicts. In the 1990s, ECOWAS deployed its peacekeeping force, ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. In 2003 following the outbreak of conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, ECOWAS launched the ECOWAS Mission in Cote d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) and in August 2003, the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL) was deployed following that country's relapse into violence. The dynamics and unpredictability of conflicts in the sub-region has posed significant challenges to the traditional conceptualization and practice of humanitarian intervention. State collapse, which can be both a cause and consequence of complex political emergencies, has expanded the remit of humanitarian interveners from the 'fire brigade' mentality to efforts aimed at rebuilding collapsed states. ECOWAS peacekeepers therefore have established safe havens, shared their limited military supplies with starving civilians and secured humanitarian relief corridors. To varying degrees of success, ECOMOG missions have also engaged in peacebuilding efforts, including implementing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, security sector reform and organizing elections. These interventions have also provided an opportunity for the UN to co-deploy with a regional organization in peacekeeping as was envisaged in the UN charter. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOMOG has co-deployed

with UN observer missions whilst ECOWAS Missions in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire has provided rapid deployment forces that were transformed into UN Missions. Despite the problems of co-ordination, logistics and differences in mandate and culture, the co-operation between the UN and ECOWAS has allowed each organization to maximise its comparative advantage whilst working together to resolve the conflicts. Lessons learned in these missions have provided a blueprint for how the UN and regional organisations can work together.

However, despite the achievements and successes outlined above, ECOWAS peacekeeping missions have faced serious challenges and setbacks in their attempts to restore peace to war-torn countries. These include the force's lack of capacity to effectively safeguard civilians under their control, poor human rights record of troops, lack of neutrality and complicity in exploiting the natural resources of the host countries. ECOWAS missions have also been hampered by financial, military and political difficulties. The endemic funding and logistical constraints suffered by ECOMOG has severely limited the capacity of the force. Another crucial factor that has adversely affected ECOMOG's operations is the rivalry and lack of political consensus between French and English-speaking west Africa. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, French-speaking countries have been less co-operative, with some even supporting rebel groups against ECOMOG. For example, in December 1989, Charles Taylor used Cote d'Ivoire as a staging ground for the invasion of Liberia. A UN Panel of Experts also implicated Burkina Faso in providing support to the RUF and NPFL in Sierra Leone and Liberia respectively (UN 2001). This lack of political consensus on the part of the mandating body complicated an already complex situation and further derailed efforts to resolve the conflicts. Even amongst troops on the ground, there were differences of approach and strategy. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, whilst Ghana favoured traditional peacekeeping strategies, Nigeria adopted more robust enforcement action. This difference in strategy has led to problems with inter-contingent co-ordination and chain of command. These tensions have been exacerbated by the lack of effective ECOWAS oversight of both forces and the sub-regional resentment of Nigeria's hegemonic position.

### **Institutionalizing Conflict Resolution in West Africa: The ECOWAS Security Mechanism**

The problems encountered and lessons learned in the various ECOWAS peacekeeping operations of the 1990s and early 2000s led to the initiation of a process meant to improve future interventions. In this respect, ECOWAS made moves to institutionalise conflict resolution, security and peacekeeping mechanisms. The revised ECOWAS treaty of 1993 represents the first serious attempt to establish such a permanent mechanism. Besides strengthening economic and fiscal ties to face the challenges of globalization, the treaty addressed issues pertaining to security, conflict resolution and management. In recognition of the nexus between human

rights, good governance and conflicts in the sub-region, ECOWAS in 1991 agreed on the Declaration of Political Principles which committed member states to respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This was followed in 2001 by the adoption of the Protocol on Good Governance, which addresses the root causes of conflict such as corruption and bad governance. To address the link between small arms proliferation and conflict, ECOWAS member states agreed on a Moratorium on Small Arms in October 1998. The Moratorium was transformed into a legally binding convention in June 2006 and a Small Arms Unit has since been established within the ECOWAS Commission to monitor its implementation.

However, the most important security protocol adopted so far is the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security signed in December 1999. As its name implies, this mechanism seeks to strengthen the sub-region's conflict prevention, management and resolution capacity, as well as build effective peacekeeping, humanitarian support and peacebuilding capabilities. The ECOWAS Security Mechanism formally established ECOMOG as the standby force of the community and, reflecting the changing nature of peacekeeping, its role was expanded to cover conflict prevention, humanitarian intervention, enforcement, peacebuilding and the control of organized crime. In June 2004, the ECOWAS Defence and Security Commission renamed ECOMOG as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). The force is made up of 6,500 highly trained soldiers drawn from national units. It includes a rapid reaction Task Force of 1,500 troops that have the capability to be deployed within 14 days (instead of the 30 days previously planned in line with African Union Standard), whilst the entire brigade can be deployed within 90 days. The ESF forms one of the components of the African Standby Force and is under the operational control of the African Union. To enhance the force's strategic, tactical and operational readiness, ECOWAS is in the process of implementing a 5-year training programme. This involves a series of specialised modules consistent with UN standards to be delivered in three designated Centres of Excellence: Nigerian War College in Abuja, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre in Accra, Ghana, and the Ecole du Maintien de la Paix in Bamako, Mali. ECOWAS also organises military exercises with the aim of enhancing the peacekeeping capacity of troops and harmonising strategies and equipment. To address the perennial problem of logistics, ECOWAS has designated two logistics depots – a coastal base just outside Freetown, Sierra Leone, and an inland base in Mali. In July 2010, the Government of Sierra Leone donated 18 acres of land to ECOWAS for the building of the logistics base and ECOWAS has already disbursed \$10 million dollars for the first phase of the project.

An Early Warning System (ECOWARN) has also been established with a regional observation network and observatories. These observatories undertake risk mapping, observation and analysis of social, economic and political situations

in the sub-region that have the potential of degenerating into conflict and present appropriate threat perception analysis. Critics have however accused ECOWARN of lacking an early response capacity. This is illustrated by the organization's failure to respond to the Cote d'Ivoire crises of 2010/11 and its delay in responding to the ongoing conflict in Mali. The system also suffers from a lack of integration and co-ordination with other agencies and initiatives within ECOWAS performing prevention and peacebuilding roles such as those responsible for youth and gender equality. The development of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (discussed below) aims to address this drawback.

### **The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework**

The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) was developed in January 2008 to inform and guide the organization's conflict prevention efforts. It aims to provide a strong conceptual understanding of conflict prevention, strengthen ECOWAS' conflict prevention capacity and integrate existing initiatives of ECOWAS institutions and mechanisms responsible for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These aims are to be achieved through a set of 14 components covering a broad spectrum of areas that enhance human security: Early Warning, Preventive Diplomacy, Democracy and Political Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Natural Resource Governance, Cross-Border Initiatives, Security Governance, Practical Disarmament, Women, Peace and Security, Youth Empowerment, ECOWAS Standby Force, Humanitarian Assistance and Peace Education (The Culture of Peace). To enable its implementation, the ECPF calls for increased advocacy and communication of the goals and activities of ECOWAS, resource mobilization to support peace and security efforts, cooperation with the AU, UN, member states and civil society, and participative monitoring and evaluation. The ECPF is a very comprehensive framework document that addresses a key limitation of earlier security mechanisms – the failure of coordination amongst various departments and institutions within ECOWAS and member states responsible for peace and security programming. For example, prior to the ECPF, various agencies responsible for conflict prevention and peacebuilding such as ECOWARN and initiatives to promote good governance, gender equality and youth empowerment operated in isolation leading to duplication of efforts and inefficient use of scarce resources. It also provides a strong conceptual understanding of conflict prevention that goes beyond the prevention of imminent outbreak of violence to addressing the fundamental causes of conflict and human insecurity in the region. However, whilst the document calls for better co-ordination and integration of peace and security initiatives, it fails to specify organs or institutions responsible for this task and neither does it clearly define roles and responsibilities for its implementation. Without clearly defined roles and action plans, the ECPF risks becoming one of many high sounding declarations and protocols of ECOWAS that are hardly implemented.

### **ECOWAS and Civil Society**

Another important feature of the emerging peace and security architecture of ECOWAS is its engagement with civil society groups. This reflects the new ECOWAS vision of moving from ‘an ECOWAS of states to an ECOWAS of peoples’. In this respect, ECOWAS with the help of local and international NGOs created the West African Civil Society Forum in 2003 to act as a platform for civil society interaction with ECOWAS policy makers. This new people-centred approach has already resulted in civil society playing an active role in matters of regional peace and security including helping to develop the region’s small arms control convention, the ECPF and working alongside ECOWARN to enhance ECOWAS early warning capacity. Organizations such as the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the West African Network on Small Arms (WANSA) are notable in this regard. However, critics have accused ECOWAS of only working with selected organizations that have the capacity to access the ECOWAS Commission (Ekiyor 2008). For ECOWAS to be considered serious with its people-centred approach, it must seek to work with a wider set of civil society actors and organizations and increase representation.

### **Opportunities and Challenges to Peace and Security in West Africa**

The ECOWAS peacekeeping and peacebuilding intervention in west Africa opened up new possibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security in Africa and challenged the stereotype of Africa as the ‘hopeless continent’. These interventions represent a significant shift in Africa’s international relations, previously characterized by the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and non-interventionism in the internal affairs of states. ECOWAS also deserves commendation for institutionalizing peacekeeping and incorporating conflict prevention and peacebuilding into its security mechanism. Humanitarian and peace support operations in today’s complex political emergencies call for a coherent and effective peacebuilding component to prevent a relapse into violence. The experiences in Liberia and Sierra Leone are indicative of the importance of incorporating peacebuilding into humanitarian intervention. The emerging policy shift within ECOWAS towards issues of human security and good governance is also encouraging. The Protocol on Good Governance, which is closely linked to the Security Mechanism, addresses the root causes of the sub-region’s security crisis and seeks to shift attention towards the wellbeing of the individual. Whilst there are still cases of bad governance and threats to democracy in a number of countries in the sub-region, on the whole, governance appears to be improving across west Africa. The focus on conflict prevention and early response is another step in the right direction. Civil society across the sub-region is also becoming stronger and playing an active role in campaigning for good governance and managing conflicts.

Despite the above positive outlook for peace in west Africa, a number of challenges remain. With regards to ECOWAS, the institutional and financial weakness of its secretariat poses an obstacle in realising the aims embodied in its emerging peace and security mechanism. The problem of funding is not new to the organisation. The organisation's financial crisis is characteristic of the weak economic status of its member states. The 'Community Levy', a 0.5 per cent tax on all imports into ECOWAS member states, is meant to help fill the gap between states' contributions and ECOWAS expenditure. However, due to competing national priorities, a number of states have so far failed to apply this levy. This means ECOWAS has to rely on external donor support to fund its peace and security mechanism. In 2003, it created the ECOWAS Peace Fund to mobilize resources to support peace and security interventions. A number of Western countries have contributed to the fund. To help with institutional capacity building, France, the US and UK are also collaborating with ECOWAS to implement a number of capacity building programs. Whilst this external support is needed to boost the capacity of ECOWAS, it risks eroding local ownership of security structures and encouraging a disproportionate dependence on outside prescriptions and funding.

Another major challenge towards realising the sub-region's peace and security aspirations is the gap between policy and implementation. ECOWAS leaders are known to be making high sounding declarations and policies that they are slow to implement or, in some cases, never implement. As noted above, the organisation's failure to timely respond to the crises in Cote d'Ivoire and Mali raises serious questions about its commitment to its peace and security mechanism. In both cases, the former colonial power, France had to intervene whilst ECOWAS played second fiddle.

Whilst ECOWAS is making moves to address human security issues and become a more people-centred organization, it still struggles to deal with endemic human security problems in the sub-region such as corruption, disease and growing poverty and economic hardship. Corruption in the sub-region continues to undermine economic recovery efforts and robs the population of the expected peace dividend. Eleven of the organization's 15 member states occupy the bottom 82 places of Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2011). Although macro-economic figures and growth forecasts for the sub-region are getting better, however, the pervasive poverty and poor social and economic indicators pose the biggest challenge to peace in West Africa. For example, thirteen of ECOWAS's fifteen member states fall within the Low Human Development category of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index Report of 2011 due to factors such as low life expectancy, high infant mortality rate, high levels of illiteracy, low per capita incomes and abject poverty.

Problems with reforming the security sector also pose a challenge to peace and security in many countries across the region. Renegade security forces have been part of the problem in most of the conflicts in the sub region. The failure of Security Sector Reform (SSR) after the first phase of the Liberian conflict in 1997 was partly responsible for the country's relapse into conflict. In Guinea Bissau, security forces continue to undermine the fragile peace in that country. The need to prioritise SSR cannot be overemphasised.

Whilst the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in Liberia and Sierra Leone have been relatively successful in disarming combatants in these countries, however, problems with reintegration of ex-combatants are posing major threats to peace. Half-hearted reintegration efforts and the prevailing high youth unemployment are causing discontent amongst former combatants and young people in both countries and threaten to unravel the major gains achieved so far. In March 2012, a UN assessment team found that in some areas of Liberia, command-and-control structures were still intact and Liberian ex-combatants were mobilised to fight in the Ivorian conflict of 2011 (UN 2012). In June 2012, seven UN peacekeepers and several civilians were killed in cross-border raids in Cote d'Ivoire involving suspected ex-combatants. Considering the interconnectedness of conflicts in west Africa, conflict in any one is bound to have far-reaching security implications for the others and any long-term peacebuilding programme should be cognisant of this.

### **Conclusion**

The high expectations that greeted independence in many west African countries were short-lived as successive post-colonial regimes failed to deliver on promises of economic development and political freedom for their people. Whilst several analyses of west African conflicts have focused on the clientelistic and neo-patrimonial politics of leaders in west Africa, other factors such as the flawed colonial policies, negative Cold War impact, misguided economic policies of IFIs and Western donor countries, and international political and economic marginalization have massively contributed to producing weak and failing states across the sub-region and have sowed the seeds of violent conflict. The consequence for people across west Africa is a state of declining social services, dilapidated infrastructure, weak and collapsing economies and widespread poverty. The increasing 'informalization' of the state has also led to a weakening of state institutions and in many cases state failure and collapse. The political and economic discontent generated by this collapse has provided the trigger for most of the conflicts in west Africa. Thus, in the 1990s and early 2000s several countries in the sub-region were plunged into brutal civil wars.

Nevertheless, despite the portrayal of west Africa and indeed the entire continent as hopeless, the conflict management and peacebuilding intervention of ECOWAS deserves commendation and is a manifestation that west Africans are taking ownership and responsibility for resolving their conflicts. The on-going efforts at institutionalizing peace and security response mechanisms, despite challenges, are steps in the right direction as are efforts to promote good governance and economic development in the sub-region.

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