

**ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
(ECPF)¹**

A new approach to an old challenge

By

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¹ The ECPF was enacted by Regulation MSC/REG.1/01/08 of the Mediation and Security Council of ECOWAS on the 16th of January 2008

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WACSI Op-Eds are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

Objectives of WACSI's Op-Ed

The objectives of the Op-Ed are:

To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;

To generate debates and discussion on these issues;

To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy related to these issues;

To provide recommendations to policy makers.

**The opinions and ideas expressed in the Op-Eds are the views of the authors and not necessarily shared by WACSI.*

Introduction:

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has recently completed a lengthy process of developing a regional conflict prevention framework to guide the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of conflict prevention initiatives in the Commission and Member States. This framework signifies the actualisation that preventing conflicts is an integral foundation for regional integration and development.

This article examines various aspects of the framework and identifies entry points for civil society's involvement in the implementation process.

Background

The last two decades in West Africa were characterised by intrastate armed conflicts and civil unrest leading to deaths, injuries, and large scale displacement of persons. These conflicts and wars are interconnected to challenges of poverty, bad governance and weak states in the region. With Liberia, Sierra Leone evolving into democratic states and semblances of stability coming to Cote d'Ivoire, there is the hope that West Africa's dark days of open conflicts are over and the region is on the trajectory to building strong viable peaceful and democratic states.

The role of ECOWAS in the region's transition cannot be overstated. Since its establishment, ECOWAS has been at the forefront of promoting a regional approach to addressing issues of peace and security.

The eruptions of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone necessitated the regional institution to prioritise the promotion of peace and security as prerequisites for regional integration; the main justification for its foundation.

ECOWAS is recognised for possessing the leading peace and security architecture on the continent. The spate of violent civil wars in the nineties in West Africa provided the impetus for

the regional institution to develop a viable structure for deterring, mitigating and preventing a resurgence of violence.

While the intervening role of ECOWAS through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia and Sierra Leone pointed to the willingness of West African governments to expeditiously intervene in volatile situations in the region, hitherto, the approaches to conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding has been uncoordinated. Therefore, it is appropriate that a framework to guide the prevention of conflicts in the region has been adopted by the Heads of States and Governments.

Mandate for Conflict Prevention

ECOWAS draws its mandate and legitimacy to shape conflict prevention policy and practice in West Africa from diverse but related regional and international normative sources such as the Africa Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the United Nations (UN).

Some of the protocols and instruments informing the ECPF include ECOWAS instruments and protocols, e.g. the 1977 Accord on Non-Aggression and Defence (ANAD)², the 1978, Protocol Relating to Non Aggression; this was later enhanced in 1981 to become the Protocol on Mutual Assistance and Defence (PMAD). However since 1981, this protocol has not been institutionalised or operationalised, the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment (1979), 1981, 1991 Declaration of Political Principles , Paragraph 2 of Article 58 of the 1993 Revised Treaty of ECOWAS which 'commits Member States to cooperate with the Community for the purposes of reinforcing the appropriate mechanisms to ensure the timely prevention and resolution of inter and intra-state conflicts; The Declaration of the Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons (31st October, 1998), the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention,

² Joses Gani Yoroms. "Mechanisms for Conflict Management in ECOWAS", (1999) Occasional Paper, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes.

Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security (known as The Mechanism); and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

At the continental level, ECPF has been informed by the 2000 Constitutive Act of the African Union, the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (July 2002).

Internationally, the ECPF draws from Article 52 of the UN Charter, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (October 2000), Recommendations of the UN High-Level Meetings (1994 – 2004) and key recommendations from UN panels e.g. the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (December 2004): “In Larger Freedom” – Implementation Report of the UN Secretary-General on the findings of the UN High-Panel (March 2005).

These diverse sources for the development of the ECPF highlight the multidimensional and global nature of prevention. The ECOWAS conflict prevention approach and framework cannot be isolated from wider continental and international approaches.

Developments in global peace and security will affect ECOWAS’ implementation of the ECPF, and conversely, the lessons learned from ECOWAS’ experiences in implementing the framework will influence the adoption of similar frameworks, particularly on the African continent.

A review of the ECPF:

The ECPF boldly attempts to address structural and operational prevention and peacebuilding by providing guidelines and entry points for actors to engage in prevention initiatives. The document provides a conceptual understanding for conflict prevention. This is a critical foundation for implementing the framework. As the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding evolves, there are normative and definitional challenges associated with the concepts. A plethora of definitions on these concepts introduce confusion for actors working on

preventive activities. By providing a conceptual framework for prevention, the ECPF clarifies ECOWAS' approach and the *raison d'être* for prevention.

The ECPF defines conflict prevention as *activities designed to reduce tensions and prevent the outbreak, escalation, spread or recurrence of violence. Conflict prevention strategies may distinguish between **operational prevention** (measures applicable in the face of imminent crisis) and **structural prevention** (measures to ensure that crises do not arise in the first place or, if they do, that they do not re-occur). The emphasis is not on preventing conflict per se (conflict being a natural consequence of change) but in halting its descent into violence*³.

This definition covers the entire spectrum of conflict and elucidates that the ECPF will focus on preventing the eruption, escalation and resurgence of violent conflicts.

The key objectives of ECPF are:

- a. Enhancing the conceptual basis for conflict prevention;
- b. Mainstreaming conflict prevention into ECOWAS' policies and programmes as an operational mechanism;
- c. Strengthening capacity within ECOWAS to pursue concrete and integrated conflict prevention and peace-building initiatives using existing resources, such as the departments of the Commission; the Early Warning System; organs of the Commission, including the Council of the Wise and Special Mediators; and other ECOWAS institutions.
- d. Strengthening awareness, capacity and anticipation within Member- States and civil society as principal constituencies and actors in conflict prevention and peace-building;
- e. Increasing understanding of opportunities, tools and resources related to conflict prevention and peace-building at technical and political levels;

³ See paragraph 18, ECPF, 2008

- f. Extending opportunities for conflict prevention to post-conflict environments by means of targeted restructuring of political governance, conflict-sensitive reconstruction, development and other peace-building initiatives;
- g. Enhancing ECOWAS' anticipation and planning capabilities in relation to regional tensions;
- h. Generating a more pro-active and operational conflict prevention posture from Member-States and the ECOWAS system;
- i. Increasing awareness and preparedness for collaborative ventures between ECOWAS, Member-States, civil society and external constituencies (RECs, AU, EU, UN, IFIs and Development/Humanitarian Agencies) in pursuit of conflict prevention and peace-building.

The ECPF objectives will be achieved through fourteen components which include:

1. *Early Warning;*
2. *Preventive Diplomacy;*
3. *Democracy and Political Governance;*
4. *Human Rights and the Role of Law;*
5. *Media,*
6. *Natural Resource Governance;*
7. *Cross-Border Initiatives;*
8. *Security Governance;*
9. *Practical Disarmament;*
10. *Women, Peace and Security;*
11. *Youth Empowerment;*
12. *ECOWAS Standby Force;*
13. *Humanitarian Assistance; and*
14. *Peace Education (The Culture of Peace).⁴*

⁴ See paragraph 42 of the ECPF dealing with the Components, Activities and Benchmarks of the ECPF

These wide ranging objectives and components convey two fundamental shifts in ECOWAS' approach to conflict prevention and peacebuilding:

- 1) ***There will be more coordination among ECOWAS institutions and agencies on conflict prevention:*** To date, proper coordination and consolidation among ECOWAS institutions working on conflict prevention related initiatives have been weak. For example, hitherto, initiatives such as ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism (ECOWARN), initiatives that promote good governance, democracy, gender equality and youth empowerment, have operated in isolation, causing overlap and inefficient use of resources. Therefore, it is significant that the ECPF aims to coordinate these initiatives to avoid duplication of efforts across the region.

- 2) ***Successful implementation of the framework hinges on collaboration between multi sectors and actors:*** Effective collaboration among civil society, ECOWAS states and external actors on conflict prevention has been limited. While there are isolated examples of civil society working with governments and external agencies such as the United Nations to intervene in conflict situations in the region, the need for a systematised approach that prioritises collaboration among these actors for wider impact is pivotal. It is therefore important that the ECPF recognises this existing gap and aspires to address it.

The ECPF and Civil Society

Globally, the role of civil society or non state actors in conflict prevention has gained recognition. Civil society has increasingly been at the centre of significant processes to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflicts. Specifically, CSOs bring unique skills of mediation and reconciliation, and the defence of human rights. CSOs have an extraordinary capacity to mobilise communities and provide services in situations where others cannot. Across Africa,

civil society's role in addressing conflicts is being institutionalised at the continental level by the African Union and sub regionally by the Regional Economic Communities.

ECOWAS has pioneered engaging civil society in West Africa. The formation of the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF) in 2003⁵ as an institutionalised platform for civil society to interact and contribute to policy processes was visionary and pointed to a desire to develop a more collaborative relationship with civil society.

In the area of conflict prevention, the ECOWAS Commission has progressively involved civil society in a variety of initiatives to promote regional peace, security and democratic governance. There are notable examples of organisations such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Foundation for Security and Development of Africa (FOSDA), and the West Africa Women's Association (WAWA), working with ECOWAS on issues of governance, early warning, small arms proliferation and gender respectively. These experiences no doubt have informed the strong focus on civil society in the ECPF.

It is also noteworthy that the conceptualisation processes leading to the adoption of the ECPF was inclusive of civil society and illustrates the important role ECOWAS envisages for civil society in the implementation of the framework.

Specifically, paragraph 114 of the ECPF provides an avenue for ECOWAS - civil society engagement. Civil society within member states working at regional, national and community levels are called upon as bona fide partners to bear principal responsibility in ensuring effective implementation and monitoring of the ECPF⁶.

⁵ WACSOFF was established by CDD and International Alert in partnership with ECOWAS

⁶ See paragraph 114 (a-c) of the ECPF

It is significant that the adoption of the ECPF coincides with the new vision of ECOWAS - *from an ECOWAS of States to an ECOWAS of Peoples*. This new vision centralises the participation or at least the representation of the region's citizens in its actualisation.

Therefore, civil society by its very ideology should be involved in the process of realising vision 20/20 and implementing the ECPF.

However, there are a number of factors ECOWAS has to be cognisant of in its engagement with civil society:

- ***The ECPF has to serve as an avenue for fostering increased collaboration among CSOs rather than competition;*** The past tendency has been for ECOWAS to work with selected organisations; often these are organisations with the capacity to access the ECOWAS Commission. The ECPF implementation process should adopt a different approach which will strategically ensure that the diverse talents and expertise of CSOs working at different levels in the region are brought into the implementation of the ECPF. ECOWAS should conduct an audit of CSOs in the region with the aim of identifying the potential contributions they can bring to the implementation of the ECPF.
- ***There is a dearth of skills in conflict prevention among CSO;*** Though there has been a remarkable increase in the number of actors trained in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and related fields, many CSOs lack the requisite expertise to engage in formal prevention. The key components of the ECPF provide an opportunity for skills to be developed in these areas.
- ***The eventual successful implementation of the ECPF will lie in the extent of interaction between policy makers and civil society;*** The implementation of the ECPF should emphasise the collaboration of different sectors such as ECOWAS parliamentarians and civil society. While cross sectoral collaboration have the potential to greatly increase the impact of conflict prevention, they can be complex relationships to manage. Building

trust between sectors that are traditionally governed by different values and ideologies will be integral to implementing the framework.

Potential Challenges for the ECPF

Generating Political Will: With the adoption of the ECPF, the challenge for ECOWAS and the region is no longer the absence of a strategy for engaging in comprehensive conflict prevention but the political will to apply and implement the framework. Linking rhetoric about the importance and necessity of prevention to States taking preventive action is difficult. This has been one of the key impediments in achieving traction in implementing previous initiatives such as the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism ECOWARN. Member States have to be committed to implementing the framework. The ECPF points to engaging parliaments in the implementation process, this is critical to the success of its implementation at the national level. The process of presenting the framework to parliaments has commenced and this should continue across the region. However, this should be accompanied by a rigorous decentralised approach to generating political will which should involve working with local government authorities and traditional rulers.

Raising awareness of the ECPF: The ECPF should serve as one of the expressions of an “ECOWAS of the Peoples”. There should be a creative strategy for raising awareness of the framework among the region’s peoples. The implementation strategy should involve working with community based organisations and actors to ensure that the objectives of the framework is owned by communities across the region. The ECPF document acknowledges that in the past ECOWAS has not adequately conveyed its successes or achievements. This communication gap extends to its past inability to inform the region’s citizens on its policies and initiatives. The ECPF calls for a communication strategy that will assist in localising the framework. This strategy should incorporate components of educating the public on the purpose and the relevance of the framework to the lives of West Africans.

Coherence and coordination: Theoretically, the ECPF proposes to consolidate ECOWAS' policies and initiatives on conflict prevention⁷. However, "old habits die hard". Implementing the ECPF will have to involve various departments in ECOWAS ceding their turfs and consciously including other related departments in programmes' design and implementation to yield better results . For example, the ECOWARN, ECOWAS Gender and Development Centre and the ECOWAS Youth and Sports department should work together in generating women and youths participation in local level early warning and response. The restructuring of the ECOWAS secretariat to a Commission has started the process of enhancing collaboration among various departments. This principle of collaboration should be extended to initiatives implemented by ECOWAS at the country levels. Efforts should be made to promote similar cohesion among actors working with ECOWAS on prevention initiatives to avoid overlap (which usually triggers competition) and maximise efforts.

Cost of Prevention: Though it is widely acknowledged that prevention is cheaper than reaction; prevention is still very expensive. For the ECPF to be effectively implemented there needs to be adequate investment in the implementation process. This investment should not be limited to ECOWAS as an institution, but to the organisations and actors working on the ground that are often in close proximity to the conflicts and suffer directly from its consequences.

Thus, the proposal to set up a Fund for Conflict Prevention (FCP) to support "planned and unforeseen" interventions in conflict prevention is welcome. However, past attempts at raising financial resources at the regional level, through the Community Levy or the Peace Fund have been challenging and provide valuable lessons for the proposed FCP.

Prevention is a process, not an event: The ECPF is the first step in implementing a long term conflict prevention strategy in West Africa. The framework has simply provided the landscape for the tasking job of prevention to commence.

⁷ See paragraph 26 of the ECPF

Generally, conflict prevention in practice faces problems as it is extremely difficult to evaluate if specific prevention initiatives have been responsible for deterring conflict. In particular, the evidence of structural prevention of conflict is often intangible and is usually the product of multiple intervening factors.

Therefore it is important that all stakeholders involved in implementing the ECPF commit to long term impact rather than short term results which have typified the assessment of previous conflict prevention initiatives.

Conclusion

Conflict prevention is an arduous task. ECOWAS is to be commended for attempting to address the challenges of prevention through the adoption of the ECPF. However, the real test will be in the implementation of the framework. Thus far, the consultative approach applied in the conceptualisation of the framework proves that ECOWAS would like its implementation to occur within the institution's new "people centred" vision. However, the old challenge of translating regional rhetoric and instruments into action at the national level is one proponents of the ECPF and ECOWAS should be prepared for.

In spite of the above mentioned challenges, the opportunities provided by the ECPF present an invigorated approach to conflict prevention. It represents new thinking on intervention, capacity building and collaboration on preventing violent conflicts in West Africa. It also reflects a recognition that states and its' citizens are the primary custodians of peace and security in the region. This recognition introduces another avenue for true regional integration to occur.