

The Role of ECOWAS in Promoting Peace and Development in West Africa 1990 - 2024

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ABSTRACT

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as a central regional institution in addressing peace, security, and development challenges in West Africa. Although established in 1975 primarily to promote economic integration, ECOWAS has progressively expanded its mandate to include conflict prevention, peacekeeping, democratic governance, and post-conflict reconstruction. This study examined the role of ECOWAS in promoting peace and sustainable development in West Africa, with the objective of assessing how regional cooperation contributes to stability and socio-economic transformation in the sub-region. The study adopts a qualitative research design and relies on secondary data obtained from ECOWAS treaties, protocols, policy documents, and reports, as well as publications from international and regional organizations and peer-reviewed academic literature. The analysis covers the period from the early 1990s to 2024, capturing ECOWAS' institutional evolution in response to recurrent conflicts, democratic transitions, and emerging security threats. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, guided by the theories of regionalism and neo-functionalism. Findings indicate that ECOWAS has made significant contributions to regional peace and development through peacekeeping operations, early warning mechanisms, mediation efforts, and the promotion of democratic norms. The study also reveals that ECOWAS' economic integration and development initiatives are closely intertwined with its security agenda, reflecting the mutual dependence between peace and development. However, persistent challenges such as terrorism, political instability, weak institutional capacity, and limited compliance by member states continue to constrain the organization's effectiveness. The study concludes that while ECOWAS has played a vital role in advancing peace and development in West Africa, strengthening institutional capacity, political commitment, and policy coordination among member states is essential for achieving sustainable peace and long-term development in the region.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Regional Integration, Peace and Security, Sustainable Development, West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

It's a stated fact that the quest for peace and sustainable development remains one of the most pressing challenges facing the African continent. Frequent outbreaks of violent conflict, political instability, and economic stagnation have severely hindered the growth trajectories of many African states. In response to these recurring crises, regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have emerged as critical actors in promoting peace, stability, and economic cooperation across the sub-region. Established in 1975, ECOWAS has progressively expanded its mandate beyond economic integration to include security and political stability, recognizing that sustainable development cannot be achieved in the absence of peace and good governance (Adebajo, 2002; Bach, 2007).

The importance of ECOWAS in West Africa is underscored by its active interventions in conflict-ridden states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and The Gambia. These efforts reflect a broader shift toward regionalism in Africa's security and development discourse, driven by the limitations of external interventions and the need for African-led solutions (Murithi, 2009). At the same time, ECOWAS has pursued ambitious economic development programs aimed at enhancing trade, regional infrastructure, and poverty reduction among its 15 member states (Olayode, 2006).

This study examines the evolving role of ECOWAS in promoting peace and development in Africa, with particular focus on its conflict resolution mechanisms and economic integration initiatives. The study assessed the impact of these interventions, highlights existing challenges, and proposes recommendations to strengthen ECOWAS's effectiveness as a regional actor.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Several empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of ECOWAS in conflict resolution and peacekeeping and also in promoting regional economic integration:

ECOWAS and Peace Interventions

Sesay (2000) conducted a qualitative review of ECOWAS interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, concluding that regional peace enforcement was effective in halting state collapse despite limited logistics and funding. While, Omotola and Saliu (2010) analyzed ECOWAS's role in democratic consolidation through its election observation missions and mediation efforts. Using case studies from Nigeria and Guinea, they argued that ECOWAS has emerged as a normative force for constitutional order. Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016) used a mixed-methods approach (elite interviews and content analysis) to assess ECOWAS's mediation in Mali and The Gambia. Their findings indicated that political will and international partnerships significantly influence ECOWAS's success rate. More so, Bah (2013) evaluated the ECOWARN system and found that although it improves early warning, its connection to timely decision-making remains weak due to political sensitivities among member states. And Adetula, Bereketeab & Florquin (2021) provided a regional comparative study of African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), showing that ECOWAS outperforms other RECs in terms of operational readiness and responsiveness.

ECOWAS and Economic Integration

Ogunkola (2005), using trade flow data, assessed the impact of ETLs and found limited but positive effects on intra-regional trade due to tariff removal, but highlighted barriers like poor infrastructure and NTBs. While, Bouët et al. (2021) used a general equilibrium model to analyze the impact of the ECOWAS CET. Their findings suggest that while CET may reduce consumer prices, it needs stronger industrial support policies to boost competitiveness. In the same vein, Ukaoha (2019) applied a qualitative policy analysis approach to evaluate the effectiveness of ECOWAP. The study concluded that despite strong frameworks, implementation remains weak due to poor funding and lack of national policy alignment. Whereas, Yabi (2020) examined regional infrastructure investments and found that ECOWAS-led projects contributed to reduced transaction costs and modest GDP growth in member states, particularly Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. Ihonvbere and Shaw (2021), in a comparative development study, highlighted the positive correlation between ECOWAS trade liberalization and poverty reduction, especially when complemented by private-sector engagement.

These studies affirm that while ECOWAS faces logistical and sovereignty related limitations, it remains a critical player in peace promotion and regional economic development in West Africa. Its proactive interventions have, in many cases, prevented deeper humanitarian crises and safeguarded democratic transitions.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in promoting peace and development requires a conceptual lens that integrates both political and economic dimensions. This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework anchored in regionalism theory and neo-functionalism.

Regionalism Theory

Regionalism theory explains the formation and behaviour of regional organizations as a response to shared challenges and collective aspirations. In the African context, regionalism is often driven by the need for economic interdependence, peace, and political stability (Fawcett, 2004). ECOWAS reflects what is termed "new regionalism," where cooperation extends beyond economic goals to encompass security, governance, and

social development (Söderbaum, 2004). The organization's evolution from a purely economic bloc to a peace and security actor demonstrates the practical application of this theory.

Neo-functionalism Theory

Originally developed by Ernst Haas to explain European integration, neo-functionalism emphasizes the concept of spill over the idea that cooperation in one sector (e.g., economics) will naturally lead to integration in others (e.g., security or politics) (Haas, 1958). ECOWAS exemplifies this logic: its founding as an economic union eventually gave rise to peacekeeping mandates, election monitoring, and conflict prevention initiatives. This theoretical perspective helps explain how ECOWAS's economic integration efforts have spilled over into broader governance and peace building functions.

Theory Application:

Applying Regionalism Theory to ECOWAS:

ECOWAS embodies regionalism by pooling sovereignty among West African states to address challenges that transcend national borders. Peacekeeping interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and The Gambia illustrate how regionalism enables ECOWAS to act collectively where individual states would lack capacity. Moreover, frameworks such as the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) and Vision 2050 reflect the institutionalization of regional norms that align security with long-term development. Thus, regionalism theory helps explain why ECOWAS is both a security community and a development-oriented bloc.

Applying Neo-functionalism to ECOWAS:

Initially founded in 1975 as an economic union, ECOWAS quickly evolved beyond trade into peace and security governance. The conflicts of the 1990s showed that without stability, economic integration was unattainable. This functional spill over led to the establishment of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and later, the ECOWAS Standby Force. Similarly, economic projects like regional infrastructure and the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) are interlinked with political stability, since peace is necessary for market integration. Neo-functionalism thus explains ECOWAS' shift from a purely economic bloc to a multidimensional organization, linking peace, security, and development.

Collectively, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing ECOWAS's dual mandate. They highlight the interconnectedness of regional integration, conflict resolution, and sustainable development a linkage that is particularly relevant in the complex political economy of West Africa.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in promoting peace, security, and sustainable development in West Africa. The analysis covers the period from the early 1990s to 2024, a timeframe that captures ECOWAS' transformation from a predominantly economic organization into a key regional actor in peace and security governance. This period includes major peacekeeping interventions, the institutionalization of conflict prevention mechanisms, democratic governance protocols, and contemporary security and development challenges in the sub-region. Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources. These include ECOWAS treaties, protocols, communiqués, and strategic policy documents, as well as reports from international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, World Bank, UNDP, and African Development Bank. Peer-reviewed academic journals, textbooks, and policy briefs on regional integration, peace buildings, and development in Africa were also consulted. Data collected were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which was guided by regionalism and neo-functionalism for interpretation.

Historical Overview of Ecowas

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on 28 May 1975 through the signing of the Treaty of Lagos by fifteen West African countries. Its foundational goal was to promote economic integration and collective self-sufficiency through the creation of a common market and the harmonization of

economic and monetary policies (ECOWAS, 1975). The founding members envisioned the organization as a mechanism to enhance intra-regional trade, promote industrial development, and reduce dependency on external actors (Asante, 1997).

Initially conceived as a purely economic union, ECOWAS's scope broadened in response to the recurring political instability and armed conflicts in the region during the 1980s and 1990s. The outbreak of civil wars in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991) prompted ECOWAS to take on a peace and security role through the creation of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a sub – regional peacekeeping force (Adebajo, 2002). This marked a significant evolution in its institutional mandate. However, in 1993 the Revised ECOWAS Treaty was adopted to reflect this expanded mission. The revised treaty incorporated provisions for conflict prevention, political stability, human rights, and good governance, alongside economic development. The 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security further institutionalized the organization's role in regional security (ECOWAS, 1999).

Over the years, ECOWAS has grown into a multifaceted institution with specialized agencies and directorates responsible for areas such as trade liberalization, infrastructure development, election monitoring, migration, and humanitarian affairs. Its strategic frameworks such as the ECOWAS Vision 2020 and the new Vision 2050 highlight its long-term commitment to building “an inclusive and integrated community” rooted in peace, democracy, and economic prosperity (ECOWAS Commission, 2021).

ECOWAS’s historical evolution underscores a dynamic shift from economic integration to a more holistic approach that incorporates peace building and sustainable development. This trajectory illustrates its growing recognition that economic growth cannot be sustained without regional peace, political stability, and good governance.

Table 1: Timeline of Key ECOWAS Milestones

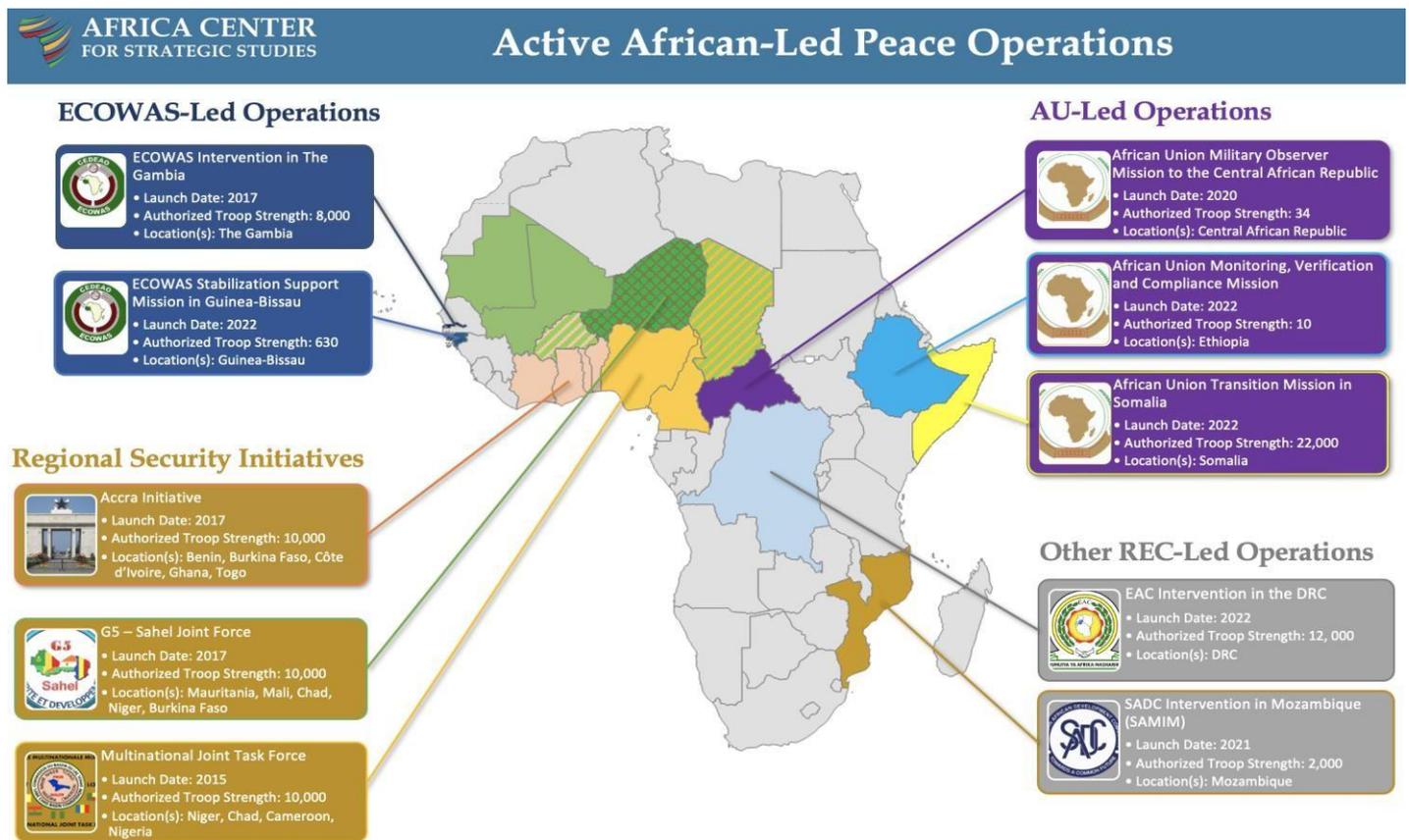
S/N	YEAR	MILESTONES/EVENTS
	1975	Establishment of ECOWAS via the Treaty of Lagos, focusing on regional economic integration.
	1980	Launch of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) to promote intra-regional trade.
	1990	Creation of ECOMOG and first military intervention in Liberia — ECOWAS’s first peacekeeping mission.
	1993	Revised ECOWAS Treaty adopted, expanding mandate to include peace, security, and governance.
	1999	Adoption of the Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.
	2001	Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance signed to promote rule of law, constitutional order, and human rights.
	2004	Launch of ECOWAS Vision 2020 focusing on a “people-centered ECOWAS” for regional integration and peace.
	2017	ECOWAS military-diplomatic intervention leads to peaceful transfer of power in The Gambia (end of Yahya Jammeh’s rule).
	2021	Adoption of ECOWAS Vision 2050 — long-term plan for inclusive, peaceful, and economically integrated West Africa.

Source: ECOWAS Commission (2021); Adebajo (2002); ECOWAS Protocols (1993, 1999, 2001)

ECOWAS and Peace Promotion

Peace and security are foundational pillars of regional integration, particularly in conflict-prone areas like West Africa. ECOWAS has increasingly assumed a proactive role in conflict prevention, management, and peace building across its member states. This commitment is institutionalized through frameworks such as the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which empower ECOWAS to act decisively in times of political instability and armed conflict (ECOWAS, 1999; 2001).

Figure 1: Map of ECOWAS-led Peacekeeping Operations and Locations



Source: Adapted from Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023).

Note: The map highlights ECOWAS’s operational areas, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and The Gambia.

Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy

The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), established in 2004, operates through zonal bureaus in member states to detect and analyze potential threats to peace and stability (Bah, 2005). The system collects data and produces policy alerts to facilitate timely diplomatic responses, including the dispatch of special envoys or mediation teams.

Peacekeeping and Military Interventions

Perhaps the most defining aspect of ECOWAS’s peace architecture is its deployment of peacekeeping troops through the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and, more recently, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). ECOWAS has led several interventions:

- a. Liberia (1990–1997): ECOWAS deployed ECOMOG to end the civil war, marking Africa's first sub – regional peacekeeping initiative (Adebajo, 2002).

- b. Sierra Leone (1997–1999): ECOMOG restored the ousted government after a military coup.
- c. Côte d'Ivoire (2003): ECOWAS troops provided stabilization support under the UN mission.
- d. Mali (2012, 2020): ECOWAS mediated political transitions and imposed sanctions in response to military coups.
- e. The Gambia (2017): ECOWAS troops, under “Operation Restore Democracy,” compelled Yahya Jammeh to relinquish power following his electoral defeat.

These interventions are backed by a legal and normative framework that permits action in cases of “grave human rights violations” or “threats to constitutional order” (ECOWAS, 2001).

ECOWAS and Development Promotion

While ECOWAS is widely known for its peacekeeping efforts, its original and continuing mandate remains economic integration and sustainable development. The organization has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing intra-regional trade, infrastructure development, and economic policy coordination. These efforts reflect ECOWAS’s commitment to regional economic transformation as a foundation for lasting peace.

Trade Integration and Economic Cooperation

One of ECOWAS’s flagship development programs is the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), launched in 1979. It aims to eliminate customs duties and tariffs on goods originating within the region. This has contributed to a modest but steady increase in intra-regional trade (Ogunkola, 2005). In 2015, the bloc adopted the Common External Tariff (CET) to harmonize tariffs with the wider customs union a move expected to enhance competitiveness and promote industrial growth (Bouët et al., 2021).

Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects: ECOWAS also invests in transnational infrastructure to support regional integration. Key projects include:

- I. The Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway Project, aimed at enhancing road connectivity among five coastal states.
- II. The West African Power Pool (WAPP), which seeks to connect national electricity grids and facilitate cross-border energy trade.
- III. The ECOWAS Payments and Settlement System (EPSS), designed to ease regional transactions and currency conversions.
- IV. These projects are supported by collaboration with development partners such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), European Union, and World Bank.

Agriculture, Youth, and Gender Initiatives: To address socio-economic inequality and rural poverty, ECOWAS has implemented agricultural and gender-related frameworks:

- i. The ECOWAS Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP) promotes food security and agribusiness.
- ii. The Youth Employment Action Plan (2021–2025) targets entrepreneurship and vocational training for young people.
- iii. The ECOWAS Gender Strategy seeks to mainstream gender equity in development planning.
- iv. These reflect a shift toward inclusive development as a conflict-prevention strategy.

Challenges Facing Ecowas

Challenges Facing ECOWAS in Promoting Peace and Development

Despite its institutional evolution and achievements, ECOWAS continues to face numerous challenges that undermine its effectiveness in promoting peace and sustainable development across West Africa. These challenges are multifaceted, cutting across governance deficits, funding limitations, political instability, and weak enforcement mechanisms.

1. Political Instability and Military Coups

Frequent military takeovers and unconstitutional changes of government in member states have posed significant setbacks to ECOWAS’s peace and governance agenda. Between 2020 and 2023, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger experienced military coups, leading to suspensions from ECOWAS and breakdowns in regional diplomacy (Al Jazeera, 2023). These developments not only erode democratic norms but also undermine ECOWAS’s credibility and unity, especially when member states reject sanctions or fail to comply with political transition timelines.

Figure 2: ECOWAS Intervention Status Map (CFR)

The Members of ECOWAS

Membership as of February 2024



Source: Al Jazeera. (2023).

Note: This map shows ECOWAS member states under democratic rule and those under military regimes with plans to withdraw their ECOWAS membership.

2. Sovereignty Concerns and Enforcement Limitations

ECOWAS often struggles to enforce decisions due to its dependence on the political will of member states. While it has protocols allowing interventions in cases of serious crises (e.g., ECOWAS, 2001), implementation is often constrained by the principle of non-interference, fears of external domination, and divergent national interests (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2016). For example, enforcement of court rulings from the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice remains weak due to limited national enforcement mechanisms.

3. Financial and Logistical Constraints

Many ECOWAS interventions and development programs suffer from underfunding. The organization relies heavily on external partners such as the EU, UN, and World Bank for peacekeeping, infrastructure, and capacity-building support (Ukeje & Saidou, 2015). This dependency limits ECOWAS's autonomy and slows the implementation of regional development projects and security responses.

4. Limited Infrastructure and Trade Barriers

Despite the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and the adoption of the Common External Tariff, intra-regional trade remains below 15% (UNCTAD, 2022). Challenges include poor road networks, multiple checkpoints, corruption, and non-tariff barriers that restrict the movement of goods and services. These hinder efforts toward economic integration and industrial growth.

5. Institutional Overlap and Lack of Coordination

There are instances of institutional duplication and lack of synergy between ECOWAS and other regional actors such as the African Union (AU), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), and bilateral partners. This creates confusion, weakens regional coherence, and dilutes policy impact (Bach, 2007).

6. Growing Insecurity and Violent Extremism

The spread of terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel region, especially in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, poses a significant threat to peace and development. ECOWAS's current security architecture, including the Standby Force and early warning system, is overstretched and under-resourced to deal with asymmetric threats (Adetula, 2021). The withdrawal of some member states from ECOWAS (e.g., Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in 2024) further complicates the region's security coordination.

CONCLUSION

The evolving landscape of West Africa underscores the inseparable link between peace, security, and sustainable development. As this study has shown, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has transitioned from a purely economic bloc into a critical peace and development actor on the African continent. Through its peacekeeping operations, mediation efforts, institutional reforms, and development programs, ECOWAS has made meaningful contributions to regional stability and economic cooperation. However, the organization is not without its limitations. Political instability, weak enforcement mechanisms, financial constraints, and infrastructural challenges continue to hinder its performance. The resurgence of military coups and violent extremism further test the resilience of ECOWAS's normative frameworks and conflict prevention mechanisms. More so, this study made recommendations to address these challenges.

In a region fraught with overlapping crises but also enormous potential, ECOWAS remains a pivotal instrument for actualizing the vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and integrated West Africa and by extension, a more stable and developed Africa.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In light of the challenges identified in the preceding section, it is essential that ECOWAS recalibrate its strategic approach to peace building and sustainable development. The following policy recommendations offer pragmatic steps to strengthen the institution's role and impact across West Africa:

1. Strengthen Institutional Autonomy and Compliance Mechanisms

ECOWAS must reinforce the legally binding nature of its protocols, particularly regarding unconstitutional changes of government and human rights violations. To reduce selective compliance, the ECOWAS Commission

should be empowered with stronger enforcement instruments, including automatic sanctions and peer review mechanisms. Member states should also be compelled to domesticate regional protocols into national law.

2. Enhance the Capacity and Readiness of the ECOWAS Standby Force

Given the rising threat of terrorism, insurgency, and unconstitutional regimes, ECOWAS must enhance the operational capabilities of the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). This includes:

- a. Establishing dedicated regional logistics hubs
- b. Conducting regular joint military training
- c. Creating a rapid deployment mechanism

These upgrades would improve readiness and reduce dependence on external forces.

3. Diversify and Secure Sustainable Funding Sources

To reduce over-reliance on foreign donors, ECOWAS should expand the Community Levy system and explore additional revenue-generating strategies such as regional development bonds and public private partnerships (PPPs). Transparent financial management would also boost donor confidence and accountability.

4. Deepen Regional Integration Through Infrastructure and Trade Reform

ECOWAS must have to accelerate implementation of key regional infrastructure projects, such as the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor, rail connectivity, and energy interconnection through the West African Power Pool. Simultaneously, it should; reduce non-tariff barriers (NTBs), harmonize customs documentation, promote digital trade platforms. These when done will boost intra-regional trade and create economic resilience.

5. Promote Inclusive Development and Youth Empowerment

Given that over 60% of the West African population is under 25 years old, ECOWAS must scale up investment in youth employment, skills training, and agricultural value chains through the Youth Employment Action Plan (2021–2025) and ECOWAP. Gender-sensitive development programs must also be mainstreamed to reduce inequality and social exclusion.

6. Foster Synergy with the African Union and Other Regional Blocs

To minimize duplication and competition, ECOWAS should improve strategic alignment with the African Union, UEMOA, and continental initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). A harmonized framework for peace operations, electoral assistance, and policy coordination would enhance regional coherence.

7. Modernize the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism

The ECOWARN system should be upgraded to integrate real-time data analytics, artificial intelligence, and civilian conflict monitoring networks. More importantly, ECOWAS must establish clear protocols for converting early warning into early action, ensuring swift responses to emerging threats.

8. Prioritize Good Governance and Democratic Norms

Finally, ECOWAS should continue to support electoral integrity, civic engagement, and media freedom in the region. This includes; Expanding long-term election observation missions, Supporting electoral commissions and Imposing penalties for constitutional manipulation. Such measures will strengthen democratic resilience and prevent backsliding.

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