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## Creating the Political Space for Prevention: How ECOWAS Supports Nationally Led Strategies

### About the Authors

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In discussions on the prevention agenda at the United Nations, member states express reservations about potential infringement upon their sovereignty. Some are concerned about an approach to prevention that entails an assessment of their vulnerabilities and risks for violent conflict. This policy brief looks at how ECOWAS has addressed similar sensitivities with its member states in West Africa and is successfully accompanying them to build nationally led, upstream prevention strategies.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has become a symbol of successful conflict prevention owing to high-profile efforts in mediating conflict in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, as well as its contributions to the region's relatively peaceful transfers of power in member states like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and others. These are striking results for the regional economic community, which was founded in 1975 in order to foster economic integration and cooperation.

What is not always recognized is that ECOWAS also has a complementary approach that includes upstream (structural) prevention alongside higher-profile mediation (downstream) efforts. Its members adopted a Mechanism on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (the Mechanism) in 1999, followed by a supplementary protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to strengthen peaceful societies in 2001. Together, these agreements constitute a normative architecture for prevention. ECOWAS has also developed early warning and early response systems, and it produces country vulnerability assessments as a basis for structural prevention strategies.

ECOWAS' upstream prevention approaches support national sovereignty by putting the ownership of early response and structural prevention in the hands of national actors. The regional level still plays an important complementary role with preventive diplomacy, the ECOWAS Stand-by Force, and analysis of transboundary risks such as transhumance, trafficking, and violent extremism.

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The ECOWAS prevention approach combines both upstream and short-term preventive diplomacy initiatives

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## The ECOWAS model

The ECOWAS prevention approach combines both upstream (structural) and short-term (operational) preventive diplomacy and mediation initiatives.

### *ECOWAS prevention frameworks*

These efforts rely on regional frameworks, particularly the Mechanism, which was established in 1999 to take a more proactive (rather than reactive) approach to conflict after nearly a decade of conflicts in the region. The Mechanism called for the creation of a set of peace and security organs, including the Mediation and Security Council, the Authority of Heads of State, the Council of the Wise, the Chiefs of Defense Staff, and an early warning system.

In 2001, a Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance added to this prevention architecture, by taking a “zero tolerance” approach to the maintenance of political power through extra-constitutional methods.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), adopted in 2008, continued to build out this infrastructure. The ECPF has several overall aims, including strengthening human security and mainstreaming prevention across the Commission’s departments and activities.<sup>2</sup>

Together, these instruments provide a strong legal and political basis to support prevention efforts. ECOWAS also deploys operational tools, including fact-finding missions, quiet diplomacy, diplomatic pressure and mediation—particularly when risks appear high.

### *Beyond crisis response: structural prevention*

ECOWAS supports **universal prevention** through a human security approach and by also building member states’ capacities in terms of democracy and good governance. To this end, it fosters political dialogues at national and community levels to increase the society’s resilience to violence in the face of shocks or vulnerabilities.

In addition, ECOWAS empowers its members to develop **more targeted structural prevention strategies** by building specific capacity to resist violence around elections, and by carrying out a Country Risk and Vulnerability Assessment every two years. The analysis sheds light on the hot spots, key stakeholders, and root causes of prolonged tensions in order to help governments identify priorities to increase human security.

### *A unique role for early warning*

As is well known, ECOWAS has developed an **Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN)**, which constantly monitors human security

## ECOWARN

The system is composed of a set of human security indicators that are monitored weekly by field monitors through open data collection in each country. The field monitors are representatives from academia and civil society organizations (WANEP). On the basis of situation reports using predetermined indicators, as well as event reports, ECOWARN produces reports and alerts. It then briefs the president and vice president of the ECOWAS Commission and all the commissioners—who are heads of the various departments—on the situation. Such briefings help these departments in the identification of programs and activities to address key challenges.

When there is an alert, ECOWAS can deploy a solidarity (or fact-finding) mission in the relevant country to gather additional information. This, in turn, is used to inform the president of the commission, who can escalate the information to the Mediation and Security Council or suggest a summit meeting, depending on the gravity of the situation. Heads of state and government at the summit often decide on a mediator or a facilitator. ECOWAS has also developed a Council of the Wise (with its members still to be appointed) for use in similar situations.

indicators in each of the 15 countries in the region. ECOWARN acts as a bridge between structural and operational prevention.

ECOWAS adopts a **human security approach** by considering indicators that cut across all areas of society, and are organized by five thematic areas: security, crime and criminality, environment, governance and human rights, and health. ECOWARN has recently been positioned in the office of the Vice President of the Commission in order to facilitate a crosscutting approach that can move more easily beyond political and security lenses. (Previously, it had been located in the Department of Political Affairs, Peace, and Security.)

The early warning system enables a **convergence and a complementarity between upstream prevention and short-term preventive diplomacy**. During periods of limited security incidents, the system monitors trends and channels information to member states so that they might address low-level tensions before they develop into violent conflicts. When the tensions raise to the point that ECOWARN issues an alert, ECOWAS can combine its early warning system with a preventive diplomacy approach or mediation/facilitation. For instance, when the crisis in the Gambia was looming in 2017, ECOWAS drew on ECOWARN's data as it deployed three regional heads of state as co-mediators.

### Encouraging early action: the national center system

In 2013, an evaluation implemented by the German Agency for International Cooperation identified a gap between ECOWAS' early warning capability and effective mechanisms to respond to warnings. To close the gap, ECOWAS decided to work with member states to establish National Coordination Centers for the Early Warning and Response Mechanism, in order to implement and coordinate prevention approaches at national level. Starting in five countries (Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire), the objective is to implement this model in all 15 member states by 2020.

These centers are strategically placed within national institutions in order to facilitate response to a wide variety of threats to human security. For instance, in Côte d'Ivoire, it falls under the office of the prime minister, therefore cutting across all ministries and ensuring that the response can be both targeted and crosscutting (in some countries, it sits in the vice president's office). The centers also have a Crisis Statutory Board, which is led by the prime minister and

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Babatunde Afolabi, "The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF): Evolution, Challenges, and Prospects," *West Africa Insight* 4, no. 7 (Centre for Democracy and Development 2015): 14–18; available at [www.osiwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ECOWAS-at-40-Full-Report.pdf](http://www.osiwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ECOWAS-at-40-Full-Report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, ECOWAS' member states have adopted a Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (June 14, 2006, Abuja, Nigeria).

## Using the word “prevention”?

While there is an important discussion worldwide around the sensitivity of using the term “conflict prevention” with national governments, ECOWAS has decided to conserve and use the term. This decision is based on the idea that member states’ concerns about prevention are less about the name than they are about the methods. ECOWAS has taken the approach that the best way to address potential sensitivities around preventive methods is to be transparent with member states, use quiet diplomacy when necessary, and also to encourage them by noting the positive recognition they will receive from their people and internationally for addressing risks before they escalate.

This said, through the concept of **human security**, ECOWAS orients its prevention approach around a set of issues that are larger than just conflict, to include prevention of natural disasters and health emergencies. ECOWAS actively recognizes how prevention of different types of phenomena are often deeply interlinked.

composed of key ministers and an ECOWAS representative, to whom it transmits reports with recommendations on a monthly basis.

The objectives of the centers are to centralize information from different sources<sup>3</sup>, provide in-depth analysis, inform and alert decision-makers, coordinate the response, and follow up on its implementation. A particularly important role that the centers can play is to identify and strengthen prevention measures and resilience factors that are already in place. While ECOWAS at regional level monitors the security situation for the country in general, the center can do more to analyze local dynamics. The effort to involve local communities in response is in line with the objective to move from an ECOWAS of States to an ECOWAS of Peoples. The center also monitors the response from the government; the director ought to meet regularly with Ministers through the Statutory Board<sup>4</sup> to understand the efforts that have been implemented and to assess their effectiveness with them and with ECOWAS—which has developed new indicators on this matter.

The center is independent from ECOWAS—national governments appoint the centers’ staff—but they work closely together. The field monitors who collect the data for ECOWAS are not staff of the center, they collaborate with it but are part of research and educational establishments such as universities. The center uses ECOWAS’ database and Country Risk and Vulnerability Assessment to develop their response, and may also use data sources from other government structures. Finally, ECOWAS is also a member of the Crisis Statutory Board and hence is updated on the risks and prevention efforts.

Another key component in the approach is inclusion of civil society. One of the monitors is a civil society representative of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). But in addition to contributing to the data collection, WANEP is also positioned to use its networks to assist in effective response and to provide an independent lens on the process.

## Building trust with member states

Since the adoption of the Mechanism in 1999, ECOWAS has built trust among its member states on the issue of prevention. Over time, the organization has been able to collect national data with the support of the governments and the collaboration of civil society. Getting unhindered access to this information periodically is an important achievement, in and of itself. Based on the data collected, ECOWAS regularly briefs its members and raises the alert when

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<sup>3</sup> The centers rely on information from ECOWARN, the government institutions, civil society organizations and other sources to provide in depth analysis for informed decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> At the technical level, the director may interact with various stakeholders in the ministries.

needed, and member states reportedly often seek advice on internal security matters to the organization.

When discussing the prevention agenda at the UN, member states often raise concerns that it might infringe upon their sovereignty. In addition, many of them feel uncomfortable discussing at the international level some of their structural vulnerabilities and—even more so—admitting that these might be risk factors for different forms of violence. These concerns are less evident within ECOWAS. The sections below highlight some ways that the organization has built trust with its members.

#### ***Prevention recognized as a universal good for ECOWAS member states***

ECOWAS' first and foremost objective is to implement economic integration in the region and ultimately to foster growth and prosperity. Addressing security issues was not in its initial mandate, but with armed conflicts escalating in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, the organization realized that there could be no economic growth without peace, which led to its adoption of the Mechanism.

ECOWAS has 15 member states that are in close proximity to one another and that share ethnic groups. Consequently, there are important geographical and cultural interlinkages that generate a feeling of solidarity and of “regional” success or failure. In addition, many threats to peace are regional in nature, and ECOWAS provides the opportunity to address them in a coordinated way. Under the banner of Pan African pride, peace is recognized as a common good for ECOWAS member states.

Hence, when the early warning system was adopted, ECOWAS faced little resistance from member states, and, indeed, it had particularly strong support from those that had experienced war in the recent past. In the ECOWAS prevention architecture, the idea is that all member states should adopt a preventive approach to conflict; even countries that have not experienced armed conflicts for decades are monitoring their risks internally. This **universality helps to desensitize and normalize prevention approaches**; prevention becomes a healthy, long-term routine with less stigma attached.

Also helpful in this regard is the fact that prevention is framed around threats to **human security**—which includes violent conflict, but also other kinds of events (such as natural disasters) that often have critical resonances with conflict.

#### ***Transparent approach with member states***

Upstream prevention approaches look at fault lines within a society to address them before they give rise to violence. For prevention to be effective, governments need to assess their vulnerabilities. This is a sensitive process,

## Civil society partnership with ECOWAS

Civil society organizations are a key part of ECOWAS's prevention approach. In 2003, ECOWAS created the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF)—an umbrella network for civil society organizations in the 15 ECOWAS countries—to channel discussion with civil society. Along the way, ECOWAS and WACSOF have raised member states' awareness about the added value brought by civil society organizations and have demystified their role. ECOWAS has also helped civil society organizations structure themselves to influence in a constructive fashion. A practical example is the partnership between ECOWAS and WANEP, guided by a memorandum of understanding since 2004. Through the ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate, WANEP is the civil society implementing partner in the operationalization and de-centralization of the early warning system in the region.

particularly when it is undertaken by an external actor. In conversations held with UN member states, in several instances they reported that early warning mechanisms provoked in them a feeling of surveillance.

To address this sensitivity, ECOWAS has chosen to adopt a transparent approach to ensure buy-in from member states, including commitment to use the early warning system and to implement early responses. In the early stages of the initiative, ECOWAS adopted a participatory approach in selecting indicators to monitor rising tensions. In each member state, experts were invited to discuss the proposed ECOWAS indicators and to decide which ones to validate, as well as suggest additions and subtractions. This transparent process helped member states in developing a **sense of ownership** over the early warning system.

To further strengthen member states' engagement, ECOWAS relies on field monitors that are students and/or researchers from the academia as well as civil society representatives, and they only use open data sources. When ECOWAS staff carry out fact-finding missions in a country, government representatives are invited to participate in the mission to **ensure transparency of the process**.

Finally, all reports produced by the early warning system are shared with member states and partners<sup>5</sup> to help them to address rising tensions or structural issues within their country. All early response approaches to internal (endogenous) factors will be **decided and implemented nationally**. The establishment of national centers also ensures a sovereignty-supporting and nationally driven prevention strategy. So far, those centers have been welcomed by member states, with and heads of state specifically requesting their implementation.

### *Thoughtful approaches to addressing political sensitivities*

A cornerstone of regional collaboration on prevention is the existence of trust between member states and a thoughtful management of political sensitivities.

The mere existence of ECOWAS' prevention organs has proven a success story. Member states brought together in these fora build stronger ties and **maintain a constant and frank dialogue**. Most important, the driving force of ECOWAS lies in a decision-making process based on consensus. Reportedly, a former feeling of surveillance between member states has decreased; regular meetings now take place to discuss cross-border issues. This will be further strengthened when all national centers will be implemented by ensuring a

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<sup>5</sup> Partners include the UN, African Union, other regional economic communities, civil society, and research centers.

consistent dialogue among themselves to foster understanding of broader dynamics and collaboration.

ECOWAS has also adopted an approach that **avoids shaming**; it rather reinforces capacities, uses positive reinforcement,<sup>6</sup> and relies on quiet diplomacy. As a regional organization, ECOWAS has a fundamental advantage in terms of preventive diplomacy: it possesses a deep understanding of societal structures and dynamics and is able to identify more easily what actor would be best placed to convey specific messages. The difficulty in showcasing good practices is that because of their confidential and sensitive nature, these quiet diplomacy efforts often cannot be documented.

Another aspect of this trust building between ECOWAS and its constituents has been ECOWAS' capacity to demonstrate the **added value of having a clear reading of the security situation** on the ground. When an attack took place in a hotel in Bamako in 2015, ECOWAS (using ECOWARN analysis) was able to suggest that it would be followed by a similar attack in Burkina Faso. In the Gambia, ECOWAS (again using ECOWARN) was also able to sound the alarm to indicate rising tensions. Similar examples have convinced member states of the benefits of having such an early warning system and taking evidence-based decisions.

#### ***Focus on building national capacities***

Based on the premise that member states are primarily responsible for implementing prevention approaches within their territories, ECOWAS has adopted a strong capacity-building approach.

The approach consists in identifying early signs of conflicts as well as structural vulnerabilities and **supporting member states in dealing with these risks before they escalate**. For instance, ECOWAS has developed new indicators to monitor risks of violence around elections, and follows possible breaches of trust during an electoral year. Typically, six months before an election, ECOWAS undertakes an exploratory mission to assess the risks and the state of existing mechanisms to address those risks; it then makes concrete recommendations such as implementing agreements of understanding between political parties. Five weeks before the election, a subsequent mission takes place to look at how the different risks have been addressed by the government and to make further recommendations. In addition, the Directorate of Political Affairs' Electoral Management Division coordinates election related activities with member states including capacity building.

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<sup>6</sup> ECOWAS communiqués may congratulate governments for specific efforts, as was the case for instance when the government of Senegal made the commitment to address child homelessness.

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## Conclusions for multilateralism

The ECOWAS approach to prevention has a number of innovative features that can inspire the broader discussion around multilateral efforts for prevention. For instance, the organization possesses an **internal mechanism and framework on prevention to guide its preventive approach**. It has also created an internal steering committee to assist in the coordination of the ECPF implementation process and ensure ownership and maximum utilization of synergies among ECOWAS Focal Point Directorates.

Another strong aspect of ECOWAS' efforts in preventing conflicts in the region is its deep-seated foundation in **trust and commitment from member states**. The mechanisms were initially created because member states understood that peace is a precondition to economic growth. This awareness and commitment have been further strengthened by ECOWAS' constant engagement with member states to highlight the positive impact that evidence-based approach can have on preventing violence. These efforts have contributed—over time—to normalizing prevention approaches. In addition, the existence of an ongoing dialogue between this small group of member states has enhanced trust between them, as well as towards the organization—which in turn can lead to more coordinated approaches to both endogenous and regional risks. Particularly, the conduct of statutory meetings especially the mediation and security council at ambassadorial and ministerial levels provide an opportunity to discuss the peace and security situation of the region. These open interactions provide an opportunity to come up with recommendations to address the human security challenges in the ECOWAS region.

Finally, ECOWAS has been particularly effective at implementing an **integrated and inclusive approach to nationally led prevention**. Through the national centers, governments are empowered to implement structural prevention approaches to address the root causes for potential conflicts, while the regional level ensures a certain level of independence of the information, as well as preventive diplomacy approaches. National governments as well as broad civil society networks are included. ECOWAS has thus developed a unique model implementing a preventive approach that attends both to long-term root causes and to short-term political concerns.

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