

Is ECOWAS Eclipsing or Reinventing? State Fragility and the Fragmentation of Regional Integration in West Africa (2020-2025)

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Abstract: This research examines the persistent regional challenges troubling ECOWAS from 2020 to 2025. The primary emphasis is on the vulnerability and impending disintegration within this regional organisation. The research uses the Fragile States Theory and the Complex Interdependence Theory as guiding frameworks to examine how political instabilities, economic problems, and weak governance have undermined several attempts to achieve sustainable regional integration in West Africa. It corroborates this premise, which holds that state fragility is detrimental to regional stability and integration. Furthermore, it subscribes to the position that interdependencies can aggravate the vulnerabilities of regional organizations rather than foster cooperation. The study broadens the argument on the premise that regional integration can collapse due to internal and external pressures. This further creation of vulnerabilities destabilizing regional integration is a function of the continued fragility of member states and weak political strategies by ECOWAS, as evidenced in the discourses presented. Thus, it is concluded that, with these crises facing West Africa, there probably would not be a certain future for regional unity. Besides, the notion of a cohesive ECOWAS would always be at the mercy of threats from states' internal and regional dynamics.

Keywords: ECOWAS, State Fragility, Regional Integration, Economic Challenges, West African politics.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of regional integration as a sure route to economic growth, political stability, and social cohesion among its members has been long pursued in West Africa. The Economic Community of West African States was established in 1975 under a mandate that would seek an integration of regional economic cooperation through the combined efforts of the 15 West African states to raise the region's competitiveness vis-à-vis the rest of the world while simultaneously ensuring peace and security. Indeed, over these years, some commendable landmarks have been achieved by ECOWAS: a standard currency zone was established, and mediation in regional conflicts was successfully done (Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024). Yet, despite all these achievements, over the last few years, significant vulnerabilities within ECOWAS have emerged, thus threatening the very foundation of regional integration efforts.

This has seen ECOWAS face serious challenges that test its ability to sustain regional stability and doubt whether its integration agenda is feasible from 2020 to 2024. As with indications that more political turmoil is in the offing, a series of military coups, civil unrest, and contesting of elections witnessed in several of its member states, such as Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. These internal wars have had spillover effects, weakening the togetherness and cooperation of ECOWAS. This is against the collective security framework which the organization seeks to ensure. Besides, the region is in a period of economic recession, inflationary pressure, and a rise in debt balances, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and global downturns. These financial challenges have continued to strain relations among the member states, all fighting their domestic issues without the collective will necessary for an effective regional organization.

The state fragility issue is one of the most severe challenges that currently face ECOWAS: the condition in which the state is not able to effectively perform the essential functions that are so crucial in ensuring security, providing

public services, and upholding the rule of law (Zartman, 1995). Not only are fragile states unable to handle their internal affairs, but they are also potent causes of regional instability within ECOWAS. This leads from fragility to a natural cascading effect into more significant problems of the proliferation of non-state actors, terrorist groups, and criminal networks that further destabilize the region (Uzoehina, 2008). Unemployment in individual states compromises the organisation's collective strength and makes it vulnerable to internal and external pressures.

This work applies the Fragile States Theory to understand the depth of these regional stability and integration challenges. However, the theory believes that the fragility of the individual states weakens their contribution to regional organizations and subsequently weakens the collective effort they require for effective integration (Call, 2008). The Complex Interdependence Theory has also been used in this study, which, although mostly suggesting that interdependencies among states can bring cooperation, also often generates vulnerabilities that elevate the regional organisation's risks (Keohane & Nye, 1977). In the case of ECOWAS, interdependence among member states on issues such as economics and security, amongst others, has not been an enriching phenomenon that might naturally lead to better outcomes. These interdependencies sometimes deepen the region's fragility in that problems within one state quickly spill over to others, snowballing into a domino effect destabilising the whole area.

Current crises in ECOWAS highlight the salient fragility of West Africa's integration process. Political crises within its member states have resolved to date into mere weaknesses of this sub-regional entity concerning internal conflict management and collective security. This weakened capacity raises several questions about the future of the organization and its integration programs. Besides, the recession in the world economy further deteriorated the economic problems of the region and thus placed additional burdens on ECOWAS while further highlighting the ineffectiveness of its efforts towards economic integration. Indeed, this development has ensured that member states and their citizens are increasingly sceptical of the merit of regional integration amidst sustained instability and humanitarian suffering.

The experiences from the ongoing crises within ECOWAS from 2020 to 2024 do bring to light the fragility of regional integration in West Africa. The fragility of individual member states in the region has had cascading effects in undermining the essence of striving to seek collective security and economic cooperation. Furthermore, the numerous interdependencies within the member states not only fail to spur deeper regional ties but have also perpetuated, over time, the very vulnerabilities of this region. In this light, this paper posits that lingering fragility among the member states, aligned with regional political strategies that are too weak, might well threaten regional integration in West Africa beyond its future.

These results have the most profound implications for policymakers and scholars of African regionalism. Knowing what causes regional integration to become fragile, one can devise a strategy capable of strengthening ECOWAS and similar organizations. This research concludes that if the root cause of state fragility and the adverse effects caused by interdependence are not assuaged, a cohesive and stable West African region might continue to be an eluded dream.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fragile States Theory: Definition and Relevance to West African States

The general conceptualisation of a fragile state in political science and international relations defines the state as incapable of carrying out one or another of its core functions of sovereignty, delineated by maintaining security, enforcing laws, and providing essential services to its citizens. The fragile states are marked by weak institutions, poor governance, and lack of legitimacy, which make them vulnerable to internal and external pressures. This theory is highly contextual to West Africa as several countries in the subregion have passed through varying degrees of fragility propelled by historical, political, and socio-economic influences that are characteristic of the region (Clapham, 2003).

Classified within the context of its colonial heritage, the state fragility in West Africa is the relic of artificial boundaries imposed without regard for ethnic, cultural, and linguistic affiliations. This created states with severe internal divisions (Herbst, 2000). However, post-independence West African states have largely suffered from

creating a coherent national identity and, thus, a responsive governance structure that produced a series of civil wars, military coups, and chronic instability in the region. The rather exponential spates of state fragility that countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire have suffered, for instance, have had disastrous implications for their respective populations and regional stability in the twenty-first century (Francis, 2005).

Fragile states in contemporary West Africa are a function of potential political instability, economic underperformance, and social unrest. These states cannot guarantee basic services to their citizens or assure security or the upholding of the rule of law. This situation has turned out to be a vicious cycle leading to expanded poverty, human rights abuses, and proliferation of non-state actors throughout the region, including terrorist groups and militias (Bøås & Dunn, 2007). Moreover, state fragility in the region persists to pose a serious barrier to regional integration processes: "weak states are often unable or unwilling to bind themselves to collective goals and hence undermine the effectiveness of regional organisations, like the ECOWAS.

In West Africa, state fragility has a resounding impact on regional stability and integration. The fragile states are inherently unstable, and their weaknesses tend to spillover to the neighbouring countries, rippling throughout the region in waves of insecurity (Aning & Bah, 2009). For instance, the civil wars that tore through Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s laid these countries to waste but also destabilized the general West Africa region. These conflicts resulted in a number of people running into several millions under threat, arms proliferation, and even cross-border criminal networks (Reno, 1998).

The fragility of the West African states undermines regional integration efforts. Established in 1975, the ECOWAS was intended to be a means by which West Africa could solidify economic cooperation along with political stability in their subregion (Franco, 2021; Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). The number of fragile states within the organization often prevents the realization of that mandate. Typically, fragile states are preoccupied with domestic concerns and do not possess the capacity or the political will to carry out regional projects. This has ensured that incoherence and lack of commitment have always plagued the ECOWAS, with individual member states more often than not having national interests that they pursued at the expense of regional aspirations (Edozie, 2014).

State fragility generally disintegrates mutual trust among member states, negatively impinging on the process of regional integration at large. For one, fragile states are usually considered untrustworthy partners, and other states tend to raise eyebrows regarding their respect and fulfilment of collective agreements and common projects. Such a lack of faith could operationalize denial of intelligence or security cooperation that brings down the overall performance level (Francis, 2001). For instance, the continuing instability in Mali due to jihadist insurgencies and the political unrest in Burkina Faso has tried the relationships within ECOWAS, with neighbours engaging in a battle to contain spillover effects such crises have generated (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The economic implications also extend to the fact that fragile states are unable to meaningfully contribute to regional integration efforts. ECOWAS was established with the view to creating a common market and facilitating economic development across West Africa. Economic fragility in most of the member states halts progress toward the achievement of these objectives. In this respect, fragile states often struggle with low levels of industrialization, inadequate infrastructure, and access to very limited capital, which has locked most of them out of participating in regional trade and investment initiatives within the region (Edozie, 2014). Economic development is poorly distributed within ECOWAS, with more stable and prosperous countries benefiting disproportionately from regional integration efforts.

In all, the Fragile States Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the challenges facing the ECOWAS in its quest for regional integration. The preponderance of fragile states in West Africa has undermined efforts at regional stability and cooperation; this is because fragile states are often incapable or unwilling to engage fully with such collective initiatives. In effect, ECOWAS has struggled to realize its objectives, with state fragility as a major hindrance to regional integration.

Complex Interdependence Theory

The complex interdependence theory went against the realist assumptions. Keohane and Nye (1977) propounded that international relations involve several linkages between states in the forms of economic, political, and social ties. The theory postulates that in the world of complex interdependence, various cooperations and competitions link states together, thus simultaneously creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. In the context of regional organizations like ECOWAS, where complex interdependence would mean an entangled web of relationships among member states and the ways through which these will impact regional integration efforts.

Therefore, the complex interdependence in West Africa can be said to be manifested in the economic, political, and security links binding member states of the ECOWAS. Indeed, economic interdependence is very pronounced; many West African countries rely on trade with their neighbours to obtain vital goods and services. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) was established in 1990 to promote regional trade by eliminating tariffs and non-tariff barriers among its member states (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). However, significant economic disparities and protectionist policies among the member states have made full implementation of the ETLS difficult. These reflect challenges of managing complex interdependence in a region characterized by large economic inequalities (Edozie, 2014).

Another characteristic defining the ECOWAS organization is that of political interdependence, where the commission plays a leading role in the mediation of conflicts and the advancement of democratic governance in the region (Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024). The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance was signed by the ECOWAS in 2001, whose commitment member states are supposed to uphold the principles of democracy and respect the rule of law and human rights. But political interdependence within ECOWAS has equally been time and again blighted by tension, whereby fragile political system members may resist external pressure for democratic reforms (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). This tension eventually translated into a non-uniform implementation of the protocol and further called into question the credibility of ECOWAS as a regional organization in ensuring democratic governance on behalf of its member states (Edozie, 2014).

Perhaps the most crucial dimension of complex interdependence in West Africa is security interdependence, with the region repeatedly experiencing a raft of security threats-including terrorism, organized crime, and cross-border conflicts (Aning & Bah, 2009). ECOWAS has, against this background, crafted various mechanisms through which regional security threats have been pursued, such as the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) and the Early Warning System (EWS) (Mohammed-Bashar, 2020; and Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). However, commitment and capacity have varied among member states, while the nature of security threats within the region similarly has been complex and evolutionary. Thus, the effectiveness of such mechanisms has been limited (Francis, 2009).

Although complex interdependence may breed certain opportunities for cooperation and collective action, it equally allows the tendencies of vulnerabilities that mostly undermine regional integration efforts. Within the framework of ECOWAS, these vulnerabilities are more evident in aspects of economic, political, and security cooperation. Economic interdependence does indeed allow for regional trade and investment. Nonetheless, it also makes member states vulnerable to exogenous shocks, thereby further polarizing inequalities amongst nations. For instance, Nigeria is the largest economy in West Africa, and any economic crunch experienced within the country tends to have a spillover effect on trade flows, remittances, and investment across the region of West Africa (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). The few key economies that dominate ECOWAS have framed a situation in which the economic challenges of one or two member states can actually destabilize the entire region-a fact highlighting the vulnerabilities of economic interdependence (Edozie, 2014).

Moreover, political interdependence might present some form of vulnerabilities, particularly for countries with different political systems and various levels of governance within the sub-region. Precisely, the fragility of some West African states, as described above, has the tendency to undermine the collective political will of the ECOWAS in the inconsistent implementation of regional agreements and protocols (Francis, 2001). For example, the inability or unwillingness of some member states to comply with the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance has undermined the organization's efforts at enforcing the practice of democratic principles throughout the sub-region (Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024). This may create a degree of mistrust amongst member states and undermine the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional organization.

Security interdependence in ECOWAS is arguably the most intricate and daunting task in regional integration. Due to the regional security complex, most of the security threats in West Africa are usually transnational, with implications for the collective responses of member states to address them (Aning & Bah, 2009). Again, such security concerns have often been thwarted by the varied levels of commitment and capacity within the membership of the Commission. This overdependence on just a few key actors, such as Nigeria, for personnel and resource contributions in peacekeeping missions within ECOWAS has placed regional security at the mercy of stability and political will of such states to contribute (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). Indeed, dependence on just a few key actors can be a source of extreme vulnerability, especially when those states face internal challenges.

Complex interdependence theory thus forms an appropriate paradigm for analysing the issues of challenges and vulnerabilities in regional integration in West Africa. While the interdependencies among member states create avenues for co-operation and collective action, they equally generate a substantial risk threatening the stability and integration of the region. The no less important economic, political, and security interdependencies in ECOWAS are fraught with challenges that mirror the larger difficulties of managing complex interdependence in a region marked by significant disparities and vulnerabilities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ECOWAS: FORMATION AND EARLY SUCCESSES

ECOWAS came into being on May 28, 1975, due to the Treaty of Lagos signed by 15 West African countries. The original members included Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Togo (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). ECOWAS was conceived out of the desire for cooperation and regional economic integration, hence realizing that many developmental challenges have faced West Africa and were best dealt with collectively.

This is summarized as the main objective of the Treaty of Lagos: to promote economic integration in the region through a customs union, common market, and economic policy coordination by the member states (Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024). The founders of ECOWAS envisioned this organization as one that would act as an instrument for rapid economic development, utilize political stability, and raise the living standards of the people in West Africa (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023).

In its formative years, ECOWAS did a lot toward these ideals. Among the early successes was the adoption of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), in 1979. The ETLS was to encourage intra-regional trade by removing tariffs and non-tariff barriers among the member states (Asante, 1986; and Maman Adda, 2024). The scheme marked one of the important steps toward creating a West African common market and showed a commitment toward regional integration by the member states. The creation of the ECOWAS Fund for Cooperation, Compensation, and Development was another early success of the Community in 1975 (Asante, 1986; Annan, 2021). It was mainly for aiding development projects in member states, especially the underdeveloped ones, so that any benefit acquired through regional integration would be equitably distributed. The ECOWAS Fund also played a very important role in financing key regional infrastructure projects, such as roads and energy networks vital in facilitating trade and economic cooperation within the region (Asante, 1986).

In its early years, there were also some positive developments in respect of political cooperation through ECOWAS. In 1978, for example, the Protocol on Non-Aggression was adopted, in which members pledged not to resort to force against one another (Annan, 2021; Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). This was followed by the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defence, which established a framework of collective security and defense cooperation among member states of ECOWAS. These protocols reflected the recognition that political stability was sine qua non for economic integration and highlighted the commitment of ECOWAS to the maintenance of peace and security in the region (Bah, 2016; Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024).

Several key phases, priorities, and challenges mark the evolution of ECOWAS regional integration efforts. First, from its inception to the mid-1980s, it was an organization essentially oriented toward economic issues. For example, from its 1975 inception into the mid-1980s, the ECOWAS was concerned mainly with implementing the ETLS and other initiatives toward the goal of advancing intra-regional trade and economic cooperation (Asante, 1986). However, for various reasons, including the economic difficulties which most of the member states encountered, and the task of policy harmonization among such a wide array of countries, progress was slow. The

second phase, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, witnessed a gradual shift towards political and security cooperation. This no doubt was informed by the fact that economic integration was not possible in an environment devoid of political stability and security. At the time, there were, among others, civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, each posing certain threats to the security of West Africa as a whole (Francis, 2001). The reaction from ECOWAS was to start an active involvement in conflict resolution and peacekeeping—a big evolution in the mandate of the organization.

Among the most relevant creations of this phase, one must count the 1990 so-called ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). In fact, ECOMOG was a regional peacekeeping force first deployed in Liberia with the purpose of helping resolve the civil war that had come to grips with that country (Adepoju, 2002; and Bassey, Etefia and Ebong, 2024). The deployment of ECOMOG marked the first military intervention by ECOWAS into the affairs of a member state and thus established a precedent in the region for this regional organization's peacekeeping role. The ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and later in Guinea-Bissau, demonstrated what ECOWAS is capable of doing to take up regional security challenges and underlined the political and security dimension for regional integration.

Besides peacekeeping, during this phase, ECOWAS was also able to go a long way in democratic governance. Indeed, the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance by ECOWAS in 2001 enunciated the commitment of the organization to the advancement of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law within the sub-region (Bah, 2016; Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). The protocol thus made ways to monitor and support democratic transitions in its member states, with provisions to sanction countries that broke democratic principles (Aning & Bah, 2009). This marked the major step forward in the development of ECOWAS, to the extent that it recognized interlinkages between economic integration, political stability, and good governance.

The third phase, spanning from the early 2000s to date, has seen efforts towards deeper economic integration without losing its sight on political and security cooperation (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). During this time, ECOWAS tried to consolidate the successes of ETLs through the passage to the establishment of a customs union and a common currency (Aning & Bah, 2009; Annan, 2021). The adoption of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in 2015 marked an important step in this direction, providing the basis for a customs union in West Africa (Raga, Lemma and Keane, 2023). In addition to these economic integration developments, ECOWAS has remained very active in the resolution of regional security challenges. The institution has also been involved in peacekeeping and conflict resolution in some of the countries that have been plagued by political upheavals in West Africa, including Mali, Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia. This indicates the continuous relevance of the institution toward peace and stability in West Africa. The capacity of the organization for military intervention and peacekeeping was further institutionalized with the establishment of the ECOWAS Standby Force in 2004—a fact that reflected the transformation of ECOWAS as a regional security actor into a much stronger one.

The Commission of ECOWAS has had to surmount the difficulties ranging from economic disparities among member states to political instability, and even to external pressures emanating from world economic forces, in its pursuit for regional incorporation and stability throughout West Africa. Many of these challenges have been surmounted by ECOWAS through various means of diplomatic initiatives, institutional reforms, and regional solidarity, amidst these many obstacles.

One of the major challenges with which ECOWAS has been faced is economic disparities in its member states. West Africa is a region with sharp economic inequalities, from the relatively large and diversified economies of Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire to countries like Liberia and Guinea-Bissau that are heavily dependent on agriculture and foreign aid. These disparities have made the harmonization of economic policies and the playing field for regional trade rather difficult to attain. In a bid to grapple with this challenge, a series of measures have been put in place by the ECOWAS, including the establishment of an ECOWAS Fund meant for Cooperation, Compensation, and Development to give grants to less developed member states to help them meet the cost of regional integration.

Apart from the problem of economic integration, another big challenge to the sub-region is political instability. Within the region, there have been series of coups, civil wars, and political crises that have threatened to abort the

efforts of the organization in ensuring regional integration. In response, ECOWAS has adopted a very proactive approach to conflict resolution and peacekeeping, as exemplified by the establishment of ECOMOG and the ECOWAS Standby Force (Aning & Bah 2009). These interventions have helped to stabilize these conflict-prone countries and prevent spill over into other neighbouring states, thereby preserving the integrity of the regional integration process.

Another challenge which ECOWAS has grappled with is a changing global economic environment. The organization came into being at a time when the world economy was relatively stable. However, since then, this region has witnessed a raft of external shocks: commodity price boom and bust, financial crises, and now the consequences of climate change. The external shocks put considerable demands on the resilience of both ECOWAS and its member states and finally necessitate an approach to regional integration that is flexible and adaptable. In this respect, the adoption of the ECOWAS CET was in part a sign of the desire to unify and make the regional market competitive amidst increasing global competition.

Besides these difficulties, problems of governance and accountability within the institutions have also been encountered by ECOWAS. The organization has come under criticism for what is perceived as a lack of transparency and inclusiveness, especially in decision-making. To this end, a number of institutional reforms have been taken up by the Commission with a view to enhancing governance and increasing the participation of civil society and other stakeholders into the regional integration process.

STATE FRAGILITY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ECOWAS MEMBER STATES (2020-2024)

The most sensitive challenge that has always confronted ECOWAS, amongst many other hefty burdens, pertains to maintaining regional stability due to the fragility of its member states. From 2020 to 2024, a good number of its member states faced political instability, economic woe, and governance issues, cumulatively weakening the regional organization. This section analyses those factors, focusing on political instabilities, economic challenges, governance issues, and specific case studies of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso as representatives of these challenges.

While many member states of the ECOWAS Council faced political instability, several countries in the subregion witnessed coup situations, controversial elections, and civil tumult between 2020 and 2024. Of course, such political challenges make the region less stable and create serious barriers to regional integration processes. Mali is one of the most politically turbulent countries in West Africa, and it has gained widespread attention in the last five years. In August 2020, following months of demonstrations against corruption, bad governance, and worsening security conditions, a military coup d'etat removed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (International Crisis Group, 2023). A transitional government was installed, but the situation remained volatile; another putsch in May 2021 plunged the country into further chaos. The political crisis in Mali has therefore carried significant consequences for the sub-region of ECOWAS, which was apparently incapable of mediating the conflict and reinstating democratic government (Hartmann, 2021).

The recent political turmoil in Guinea combusted in October 2020, President Alpha Condé won a controversial third term in office after a constitutional referendum that allowed him to extend his rule. The election was blighted by violence and fraud claims, subsequently attracting widespread protests and a deteriorating political climate across the country (The Guardian, 2021). Condé was later overthrown in September 2021 in a military coup that sent the country reeling deeper into instability. According to reports, the political crisis in Guinea basically indicated that democracy was not well institutionalized in this country and asked some serious questions about how to resolve the conflict from ECOWAS.

In Burkina Faso, the situation was no different, where political instability accompanied the growing insecurity and violence. In January 2022, a military coup threw out the President, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, amid a wave of protests over his government's handling of the security crisis in the country (Haavik, Bøås & Iocchi 2022). The root of this coup was the growing frustration over the inability of the government to contain jihadist violence that has spread across the Sahel region, including Burkina Faso. The inability of the organization to deal with the security challenges and reinstate democratic governance further weakened ECOWAS because of the political instability within Burkina Faso.

It has greatly influenced the political instabilities of ECOWAS, given that all these have somehow derailed the ability of the organization to foster regional integration and stability. The repeated coups and disputations of election results in strategic member states have also eroded the credibility of ECOWAS as a regional player and exposed its ineffectiveness in dealing with political crises. But aside from these, economic challenges have equally played a huge role in the deepening of state fragility within the ECOWAS member states. Various reasons, starting from the COVID-19 pandemic and fluctuating commodity prices to persistent poverty and inequality issues, were encountered between the years 2020 and 2024. These economic difficulties not only weakened the individual states but also created ripples of consequences within the regional stability and integration processes. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the economies of the ECOWAS member states (World Bank, 2021).

The pandemic saw a major decline in the level of economic activity, with the fact that many of these countries went into recession in 2020. It is also evident that the slowdown of the economy has had the ripple effect of job losses, reduced government revenues, and increased levels of poverty within countries. For example, Nigeria, the largest economy in West Africa, contracted by 1.8% in 2020, while Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire economies suffered severely during this period (World Bank 2021). These economic challenges posed by the pandemic exacerbated the previously existing vulnerabilities of member states in ECOWAS that caused ripples in social unrest and political instability.

Fluctuations in commodity prices have been another factor that has hit the economies of the member states of ECOWAS very hard, besides the pandemic. That is to say, many countries in that region are considerably dependent on commodities such as oil, cocoa, and minerals for their exports. For instance, Nigeria and Ghana, major oil exporters, have suffered a lot from the collapse in the price of oil in 2020, associated with a dramatic decline in government revenues and foreign exchange reserves (IMF, 2021). Volatility in commodity prices that emanates from the vulnerabilities of these economies and the importance of diversification. However, it has been slow in the process of diversification and this therefore places most ECOWAS member states at the mercy of external economic shocks.

Poverty and inequality remain major challenges in the region that further contribute to state fragility. While some progress is being made, a number of the ECOWAS member states face high levels of poverty, particularly in rural areas. For example, in Mali, more than 40% of its population lives below the poverty line, and similar numbers are recorded in Niger and Burkina Faso (World Bank, 2021). This was in 2021. The resulting poverty and inequality have contributed to social unrest, which in turn has entrenched political instability as injustices felt by these marginalized populations are aired in protests and, in some instances, through support for insurgent groups.

The economic conditions in most member states of the ECOWAS have been a major determinant of regional stability. The COVID-19 pandemic, fluctuating commodity prices, and deeply entrenched poverty have not only eroded the economic foundations of most states but also rendered them prone to political instability and conflict. These economic challenges also hamper the regional integration process insofar as the current state of affairs has compelled the states to focus on domestic compulsions rather than collective action at the regional level. The problems of governance indeed have been one of the most prevalent contributing factors to state fragility among the member states in ECOWAS. Governance, poor as manifested by corruption, weakness of institutions, and insolvency, has taken a huge toll on the modicum of efficiency governance machinery can achieve. This includes poor governance that compromises the effectiveness of governments and erosion of public trust. Such conditions have played a critical role in weakening ECOWAS in advancing regional integration and stability.

Corruption has been one of the major fictions to many ECOWAS member states in terms of getting out of their political instability and underperformance economically. Corruption tends to undermine the rule of law, distort economic incentive, and lead to misallocation of resources. In the case of Nigeria, for instance, corruption has perennially posed a major obstacle to such development, with billions of dollars siphoned off through corruption by corrupt officials (Transparency International, 2022). In this light, corruption in the member states has deeply eaten into the fabric of public confidence in government institutions and has fanned popular discontent into protests and, in some instances, support for anti-government movements.

The second major challenge to governance in the region is that of weak institutions. Most of the member states of ECOWAS lack the institutional capacity to effectively govern and deliver services efficiently to their public. This

can be seen, for example, with conflictive situations in Mali and Burkina Faso, where weak state institutions simply have not been able to maintain control over their territories, providing security for their populations (International Crisis Group, 2023). Institutional weakness results in a power vacuum to which the actions of insurgent groups—most often foreign Islamist militant groups—further destabilize those countries and the region at large.

Accountability has also been a very marked factor for state fragility in most of the member states of ECOWAS. Most countries have had leaders manipulate their constitution for personal interests and benefits, extending terms of service, creating political crises, and undermining democratic governance. For example, in Guinea, after massive opposition, President Alpha Condé finally declared that he would run for a third term, a move that attracted mass protests and a military coup this year, 2021 (The Guardian, 2021). In most member states of the ECOWAS, democratic norms that have been eroded have weakened governance structures and concentrated power in the hands of a few people.

These problems in governance have persisted and continue to have a devastating consequence on ECOWAS as a regional organization. Corruption, weakened institutions, and non-accountability in member states have combined to make the organization's commitment to ensuring regional integration and stability exceedingly difficult. Furthermore, the inability of the organization to address these governance issues has rendered it less legitimate since the organization has not been successful in dealing with the root causes of instability in the region.

The three-country case studies drawn here—Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso—are used to help illustrate the implications of state fragility on the regional body of ECOWAS in terms of the political, economic, and governance challenges that were discussed above. Mali has been among the most fragile states in West Africa within the 2020–2024 period. The country has been facing political instability for quite some time, having gone through two military coups in a period of less than one year, while fighting in the north and centre is ongoing. Weak governance, with state institutions incapable of offering either security or basic services in big parts of the country, shows how fragile the Malian state has become (International Crisis Group, 2023). The increase in jihadist groups and the proliferation of armed militias have continued to destabilize the country, further in a manner considered a key challenge to the efforts of ECOWAS in the restoration of stability, alongside regional integration.

Another example of state fragility in West Africa is Guinea. This situation of political crisis in the country has been brought about by the controversial third term of office by President Alpha Condé, which came to a head when the military carried out a coup in September 2021. The coup underlined the fragility of democratic institutions within Guinea and highlighted the challenges of governance facing it (The Guardian, 2021). What this crisis in Guinea has done is present larger ramifications with ECOWAS, which has struggled thus far to respond effectively to the coup and help broker a peaceful resolution to this conflict.

State fragility challenges have also been deeply felt within Burkina Faso. The country has grappled with a deteriorating security crisis with jihadist violence spreading across the Sahel. In fact, the weakness of state institutions in Burkina Faso has prevented the government from responding effectively against security threats and has caused wide-scale displacement and humanitarian crises to date (Haavik, Bøås & Iocchi 2022). This has been compounded by the political instability in Burkina Faso—the latest being the military coup in January 2022—in efforts by ECOWAS for the maintenance of regional stability and the promotion of integration.

COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON ECOWAS

The concept of complex interdependence that was developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye provides the leading analytical framework through which to describe the tangled web of relations that binds states together within a region like West Africa. While interdependence can spur cooperation and collective action, it also often heightens vulnerability, thereby perpetuating fragmentation—especially in those regions where the prevalence of fragile states is common. This section does an analysis of the complex interdependence effects on the Economic Community of West African States, considering in detail how economic, political, and security interdependencies within member states have exacerbated regional vulnerabilities and engendered fragmentation.

Complex interdependence refers to the many ways in which states are connected along a number of dimensions-economic, political, and in terms of security. In the context of ECOWAS, these take the form of interrelated trade relationships, political alliances, and mutual security arrangements. Economic unions, regional infrastructure projects, and regional security initiatives have altogether been driven by regional actions for integration. However, those very interdependencies that glue ECOWAS member states to one another establish points of vulnerability whose disruption can shake the entire region into instability.

The second major area of interdependence in the context of ECOWAS involves economic integration: the member states are connected to one another through trade agreements, shared markets, and the flow of goods and services across their borders. The establishment of the ECOWAS CET and the efforts now being made to introduce a single currency, the Eco, are typical examples that demonstrate the economic interdependence of members in this region. However, these economic linkages also suggest that economic shocks in one country can spill over to others in the region. For instance, Nigeria is the largest economy in West Africa and therefore plays a leading role in regional trade. For example, any recessionary trend in Nigeria, say that occasioned by the collapse of oil prices in 2020, has very serious consequences for other member states of ECOWAS dependent on trade with Nigeria (IMF, 2021). This may create a situation whereby countries become susceptible to external shocks caused within the region.

Thirdly, political interdependence is an inherent ingredient of the regional dynamics of ECOWAS, given its penchant for consolidating democracy and good governance. The protocols oblige the member state to democratic principles, respect for human rights, and a collective decision-making process through regional institutions; yet, political instability of one member state can raise the entire region into a current wave of instability. As an example, the recent military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, Guinea in 2021, and Burkina Faso in 2022 have disrupted governance in those countries and shaken political relations within the subregion of ECOWAS as a whole (The Guardian, 2021). The interdependence of political stability in the region implies that disintegration in governance in one state will result in losing confidence and cooperation among other member states, hence weakening the general cohesion of ECOWAS.

Other critical integrative areas for the region are security interdependence, in which the security of one member state largely depends on that of its neighbours (especially within the frameworks of transnational threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking). For this reason, a number of initiatives like the ECOWAS Standby Force have been initiated by ECOWAS to be able to grapple with such challenges on a collective basis. Security interdependence among the members would mean that events in one country, by way of insecurity, do spill over into others. For example, the jihadist insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso have ruined the security of those countries and pose great security risks to neighbouring states, like Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana (Haavik, Bøås & Iocchi 2022). The interdependence of regional security gives rise to a situation in which the vulnerabilities of one state become the shared concern of the entire region. While complex interdependence provides an avenue for cooperation and regional integration, on the other hand, it also has the rather negative capability to heighten regional vulnerabilities, especially when there is a dominant context of state fragility. Some instances of economic, political, and security interdependencies within ECOWAS have only exacerbated some of the already detrimental challenges that make the region highly susceptible to instability and fragmentation.

Economically, the interdependence of the member states is such that economic crises in one country should create wide ramifications for the entire region. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was a situation that showed how "economic entanglement" may be heightening vulnerabilities. The pandemic generally saw heavy economic contractions across the region, with countries such as Nigeria and Ghana suffering from serious turn downs (World Bank, 2021). This economic interdependence basically meant that when key economies went into the doldrums, it had a ripple effect across the region in terms of reduced trade, increased unemployment, and heightened poverty levels. The recent pandemic has underscored the full risks that come with deep economic interdependence for a region whose capacity to respond to crisis is quite limited.

The interdependence in governance within the sub-region makes ECOWAS geopolitics extremely susceptible to spillover effects of political instability. The coups of 2020 to 2022 in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have been emblematic of how political instability in a single state can destabilize cohesion within the region. These coups also had an impact on the governance of the affected countries, but more importantly, there was an effective

creation of legitimacy crises within ECOWAS when the organization struggled to respond effectively to unconstitutional changes in government (International Crisis Group, 2023). The political interdependence within ECOWAS thus meant that instability within these countries had an undermining effect on the entire region, weakening the trust among member states and, therefore, undermining the credibility of ECOWAS as a regional organization.

At the same time, the security interdependence within ECOWAS has also heightened regional vulnerabilities in the face of transnational threats. First and foremost, it shows that the interdependence of security has potential risks linked to it, whereby jihadist violence has spread out of Mali into other neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire. With the failure by state institutions in both Mali and Burkina Faso to contain the spread of violence, this became a factor to affect the security of the entire region (Haavik, Boås & Iocchi 2022). To this end, the security within the ECOWAS is apparently interdependent, wherein the vulnerabilities in one state could actually become a regional problem. Indeed, insecurity in one country threatens the stability of its neighbours.

In this respect, the complex interdependence between the member states of ECOWAS has fragmented the region in some instances. These sets of vulnerabilities associated with complex interdependence have resulted in divisions among member states and undermined regional cohesion, hence making it impossible for ECOWAS to realize its integration objectives. The first example of how economic interdependence has led to fragmentation is regarding the differential economic impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had. While some ECOWAS member states, like Côte d'Ivoire, were able to ride out the economic storm, other members like Nigeria and Sierra Leone witnessed sharp contractions (IMF, 2021). This result has been at the root of tensions within the region, given that wealthier states have concentrated their efforts on their own recoveries rather than regional initiatives. This has resulted in the fragmentation of the regional economic space, with some states retreating into national-level responses to regional economic policies.

The reaction to military coups within the subregion also ushered in a politicized fragmentation within ECOWAS. The coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso brought to the fore sharp divisions among members over how to react toward unconstitutional changes to government. Whereas some countries like Ghana and Senegal have spoken for firm penalties and robust responses to the coups, others, such as Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire, have made calls for soft approaches toward diplomacy (The Guardian, 2021). Such divisions have weakened the capacity of ECOWAS to assume a united front and therefore fragmented political cohesion in the region.

Added to these have been spillover effects of jihadist violence, which have contributed to fragmentation in the areas of security. The failure of ECOWAS to manage the current security challenges of Mali and Burkina Faso has been so rife that individual states have taken to unilateral measures for the security of their borders (Haavik, Boås & Iocchi 2022). This has weakened collective security arrangements within ECOWAS, including the region's security architecture.

NEW ARGUMENTS ON FUTURE OF REGIONAL UNITY IN WEST AFRICA

The Economic Community of West African States has been a critical player in encouraging regional unity and stability within West Africa for some time. Formed with the objective to bolster economic integration, cooperation, and collective security, the history of ECOWAS has oscillated between progress and setbacks. While the latter challenges have been most pressing from 2020 through 2024, very tangible questions are being raised over its ability to deal effectively with the present crisis, let alone those that may arise in the future. This paper shall further analyse the recent crises for implications on the future of the ECOWAS region, consider various scenarios of what can be expected vis-à-vis regional stability, and evaluate the preparedness of the organization for the tempestuous journey ahead.

The current state of ECOWAS has a number of disturbing implications for its future. Key member states have reeled under political instability, economic difficulties, and governance issues that substantially reduced the effectiveness of the organization. Global pressures and economic dependencies further complicate the situation. Recent events of coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso further bring into startling view how ECOWAS has been vulnerable to both internal and external shocks in a manner that tests the ability of the organization to

maintain political order. International Crisis Group (2023), thus reports an erosion of the authority of ECOWAS because of the inability of the Commission to prevent or address these crises satisfactorily. This erodes the confidence in the leadership of the organization by member states and thus regional unity.

Of all the challenges the ECOWAS is currently facing, probably the most serious consequence relates to the erosion of trust among its members. Inequality in political stability and economic development has created a division which seriously threatens cohesion - a pre-requisite for regional integration to be successful. Nigeria is the largest and most influential member, and this often finds her in the forefront of affairs relating to ECOWAS. Nevertheless, internal issues such as the Boko Haram insurgency and economic recessions have disrupted Nigeria's capability for predictable leadership to the organization (Oyekanmi & Rosenje, 2022). Alienation or the alleged pressure inflicted on the smaller states by heavyweight members weakens the spirit of cooperation that is supposed to define a united West Africa.

The second major concern is that ECOWAS's dependence on external actors for economic and security assistance. This dependence on foreign intervention and financial aid from powers such as the United States, China, and the European Union has brought about a number of vulnerabilities that dent the autonomy of the organization. Alden and Alves (2009) give weight to this argument, asserting that as valuable as it may be, external support can be viewed as a way of injecting foreign agendas into the regional project, perhaps not reconciled or accepted by all member states in pursuit of their interests. This dependency on global powers can further break down the organization and impede its ambition to pursue one regional strategy. These endless challenges facing ECOWAS prove that the organization stands at a crossroads, the future of this organization as a cohesive regional entity cast into doubt. What is urgently needed is a reassessment of strategies at ECOWAS-a fresh resolve in forging much closer bonds within the organization. Failing that, fragmentation may set in with potential destabilization and erosion of West African unity.

The outlook going forward is varied with regard to ECOWAS and regional stability. In one very positive probable scenario, regional integration in ECOWAS has been revived: a structural transformation that would require the commitment of its member states toward addressing state fragility and governance concerns at both the national and regional levels. Democratic institutions would be strengthened, economic gaps closed, and governance improved. ECOWAS could further develop its crisis management capability through a far-reaching regional security arrangement that would at least be somewhat independent of third-party actors. Assuming such changes are, for the most part, accepted, the transformed outcome in the case of ECOWAS may well become one which is better able to confront difficult circumstances in the maintenance of stability in the region as a result of deeper coordination among members of the regional body. This should permit a more substantial regional identity to emerge along with coherence in regional policies.

The less optimistic scenario would mean continued fragmentation and weakening of ECOWAS. The political and economic divergences among member states would have been further accentuated, leading to a decline in trust and cooperation. Internal divisions may have indeed rendered the organization paralyzed and unable even to reach consensus on strategic regional issues. As members may increasingly turn to other international groupings in the absence of effective regional coordination, the potential for loss in autonomy would make ECOWAS more of a nominal than functional regional body.

A third scenario is one of redefinition of regional cooperation in West Africa. In this, ECOWAS would probably be a flexible organization, relatively decentralized. Sub-regional groupings within ECOWAS would play prominent roles in regional affairs, with smaller blocs of member states coordinating their policies more effectively. While this would probably have the effect of diminishing the cohesion of the entire ECOWAS, it could also lead to more focused cooperation among like-minded states. This would, however, have to be carefully handled so as not to further widen the divisions and also ensure that all the member states are represented in decision-making. How ECOWAS manages future crises will be fundamental to the determination of its future as a regional organization. A critical look at the capacity of the organization presents certain positive and negative pointers that need resolution. On one hand, it has been able to prove that ECOWAS can handle crises with effectiveness. For instance, mediation efforts and peacekeeping actions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the civil wars of the 1990s managed to calm situations in these countries (Francis, 2009). Furthermore, the political crisis of Gambia, through the mediation of ECOWAS, was sorted out without any hiccups in 2017, consequent to an election that was

disputed to ensure a peaceful transition of power in the country (Bah, 2016). The institutional framework of the organization, with its different commissions and agencies, provides a bedrock on which regional cooperation can be instituted since, if impressively implemented, it would have gone a long way in consolidating integration efforts.

Notwithstanding all these strengths, there are a number of vital weaknesses that weaken the capacity for crisis management by ECOWAS. A very fundamental weakness is that generally, mechanisms for enforcement are lacking. While there are protocols of ECOWAS on political instability and unconstitutional change of government, it is mostly unable to enforce them effectively. Besides that, the recent coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have shown how limited the enforcement powers of ECOWAS are (International Crisis Group, 2023). The reasons being, over time, some member states have never shown any commitment to the charter or principles of the organization, which has hugely incapacitated the ability of ECOWAS to act uniformly. More so, diverging political and economic interests of the member states override regional commitments so frequently, yielding policy incoherence and inaction.

Financial constraints also make the work of ECOWAS less effective. The organization largely depends on the contributions of member states, most of which are economically challenged themselves. This creates financial instability that adversely affects the ability of ECOWAS to finance peacekeeping operations, development projects, and other initiatives within the region. It is this security and economic dependence on actors outside of it that cripples the autonomy of ECOWAS in laying down its independent regional policies and practices in tackling regional challenges (Francis, 2009). While this is external help, dependency on foreign powers precludes the pursuit of sustainable solutions that are homegrown and emanate from within ECOWAS itself.

The Commission of ECOWAS, in its quest to improve its capacity towards crisis management, should undertake certain strategic reforms. First, there has to be a reinforcement of mechanisms for enforcement. This can take a few forms, including the creation of a regional court that can impose sanctions against member states guilty of infringement of the tenets of the organization. Second, ensuring financial stability. One possibility is diversification of funding, for instance, to a regional development fund contributed to by the member states and supplemented by external donors. The second is fostering more region-wide coherence. Capacity-building in the weaker states might be combined with economic integration measures, like regional infrastructure projects, as a way of closing the political and economic gap among its members. Finally, investment in regional security forces and mediation capabilities would decrease dependence on external actors, therefore strengthening its position to deal with any future crises.

Finally, a number of serious internal and external pressures continue to cloud the future of West Africa's regional unity as represented through ECOWAS and will weigh on the organization's functionality as a regional entity. However, these challenges can be overcome and position ECOWAS at the hub of processes for stability and integration in West Africa, provided there are adequate reforms effected with revitalized commitment by members. Success will lie in how the organization handles its weaknesses and lays a sound foundation for the future. In this way alone can ECOWAS remain the cornerstone of regional unity and development in West Africa.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the probable challenges facing ECOWAS between 2020 and 2024. It further examines to what extent state fragility and complex interdependence have contributed to the increasing fragmentation within the sub-region. Key findings from the study indicated that political instabilities, economic crises, and weak governance in a number of member states have actually posed serious threats to regional stability and integration processes. These have increased the vulnerabilities within the organization by weakening regional cohesion, adding to a growing sense of fragmentation among member states.

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