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**Sustainable Development Goals and Regional Security in West Africa: Critical  
Assessment of the Decline of ECOWAS**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to explore the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security body for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in West Africa and to provide solutions that would aid in repositioning the ECOWAS for optimal productivity.

**Methodology:** The paper employed qualitative research design in its study by sampling the various ECOWAS protocols, events and literatures on the subject matter. The data collection and used in the results and discussion segment focused on the period January 2014 to January 2024 covering a period of 10 years. Qualitative data were collected from existing database from journals, reports and books on the subject matter. These data were analysed descriptively to establish the relationships, patterns and trends of the variables.

**Findings:** The study discovered that the West African sub-region is characterized by a complex interplay of ethnic diversity, political instability, and socio-economic challenges which presents a unique environment for the implementation of SDGs and the assurance of regional security. Since inception of ECOWAS in 1975, it has played a central role in fostering economic integration and political stability among member states. However, the decline and survival of ECOWAS as a regional organization face significant challenges which threaten both the achievement of SDGs and regional security. Issues of interconnection between security and development remains inadequately addressed within the ECOWAS framework. The persistent issues of terrorism, civil conflicts, and organized crime within West Africa have severely hindered progress towards achieving SDGs. The paper assessed weak institutional capacity, internal conflicts and political stability, rising economic disparities of member states, and external influences as some key issues leading to ECOWAS decline.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The paper recommended, strengthening regional governance and institutions, resolving internal conflicts and political instability, reducing economic disparities among member states, countering external influences, and focus on sustainable development goals as way forward.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Development, ECOWAS, Regional Security, Decline*

**JEL Classification:** *Q01, O19, F55, H56*

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## INTRODUCTION

Regional security and integration have been a key strategy for economic development and political stability all over the world. Many leaders and policymakers have recognized that the economic fragmentation and political fragility of individual states could be mitigated through collective action and regional cooperation. Regional integration refers to the processes where countries within a specific geographic region cooperate to increase economic, political, security or social cohesion. It is also the process through which neighbouring countries enter into an agreement to enhance cooperation through common institutions and rules. This cooperation typically occurs in areas such as trade, economic policies, political cooperation, social policies, security and infrastructure development, with the goal of increasing overall development and competitiveness of the region. In Europe, the European Union (EU) is one of the most advanced forms of regional integration. EU promotes economic cooperation, free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, and has a single market with a unified currency the Euro. EU also operates in political, judicial and social areas.

In America, the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), was established on 1 January 1994. NAFTA is now replaced by United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) on 1 July 2020. The USMCA is a trilateral trade bloc between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, promoting trade liberalization, reducing tariffs, and stimulating economic growth in the region. It retains many of the features of NAFTA but introduces new provisions to modernize the agreement for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In West Africa, the vision of our forefathers led to the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, a landmark regional bloc aimed at fostering economic cooperation and political unity among its member states (Asante, 1986). ECOWAS was primarily tasked with promoting economic integration, intra-regional trade, and free movement of goods and people, as well as serving as a platform for political cooperation to ensure peace and stability across the region.

ECOWAS was also seen as a means of overcoming the legacies of colonialism, which had left the region divided into French, British, and Portuguese spheres of influence, with economies structured to serve external rather than intra-African trade (Akindele & Akinterinwa, 1992). ECOWAS was initially focused on economic cooperation, with an emphasis on establishing a common market, reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, and promoting regional infrastructure projects. The signing of the ECOWAS Treaty in Lagos in 1975 reflected the optimism that regional integration could strengthen the region's collective economic standing (Asante, 1986). Additionally, the creation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) was intended to facilitate free trade within the region and enhance intra-African commerce, thereby reducing dependency on external partners.

However, over time, the mandate of ECOWAS expanded beyond economic matters to encompass political and security issues to ensure sustainable development within the region. The end of the Cold War and the rise of intra-state conflicts in West Africa, particularly civil wars in Liberia (1989-2003) and Sierra Leone (1991-2002), necessitated a shift in ECOWAS' priorities. The organization became increasingly involved in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, most notably through its military wing, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which intervened in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts in the 1990s (Adebajo, 2002). These interventions marked a significant moment in ECOWAS' evolution, transforming it from a purely economic bloc into a key player in regional security. Despite these successes, ECOWAS has faced significant challenges in fulfilling its

ability to function effectively in ensuring regional security for enhanced sustainable development in West Africa.

A global model of regional security for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes the interconnectedness of security and development. This model suggests that regional security frameworks must integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions to achieve sustainable development. In this context, regional organizations like ECOWAS play a critical role in addressing security threats that can hinder progress toward the SDGs. The model posits the following key components for regional security in the context of SDG implementation; transnational cooperation, conflict prevention and resolution, inclusive governance, sustainable resource management, and capacity building. ECOWAS plays a vital role in advancing the sdgs through its regional integration and cooperation initiatives. this role relates, conflict resolution and peacekeeping, development of policy framework, economic integration, and focus on climate and environmental issues (Boko et al., 2018, ECOWAS, 2020, & Adebajo, 2018). Despite ECOWAS efforts, there are notable oversights in ECOWAS's implementation of the SDGs as highlighted in current literature such as, weak institutional capacity, insufficient advocacy and awareness, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, limited cross-sectoral integration, and neglect of gender issues (Okeke, 2021, Adebajo, 2018, Boko et al., 2018, & Khan et al., 2020). Thus, this study seeks to explore the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security body for the attainment of SGD in West Africa

### **Statement of the Problem**

The West African sub-region is characterized by a complex interplay of ethnic diversity, political instability, and socio-economic challenges which presents a unique environment for the implementation of SDGs and the assurance of regional security. Since inception of ECOWAS in 1975, it has played a central role in fostering economic integration and political stability among member states. However, the decline and survival of ECOWAS as a regional organization face significant challenges which threaten both the achievement of SDGs and regional security. Issues of interconnection between security and development remains inadequately addressed within the ECOWAS framework. The persistent issues of terrorism, civil conflicts, and organized crime within West Africa have severely hindered progress towards achieving SDGs. For instance, the rise of Boko Haram and other militant groups in Nigeria since 2009, and the Sahel region has created a security crisis that diverts national and regional resources away from developmental initiatives (UNDP, 2016). For instance, according to the Global Terrorism Index (2020) the Sahel region witnessed a total of about 4000 deaths in 2020 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020). In Nigeria, the Boko Haram terrorism led to the death of over 40,000 persons and displacement of over 3.8 million individuals (World Bank, 2020 & UNHCR, 2021). As a result, achieving SDG 16, which focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, becomes challenging due to ongoing violence and instability within the region (Bøås & Torheim, 2019).

Furthermore, the institutional capacity of ECOWAS has consistently come under scrutiny, particularly concerning its ability to enforce collective security measures and implement development programs effectively. Despite the establishment of instruments such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and the ECOWAS Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction, there is a lack of unified and comprehensive strategies that align security frameworks with development objectives (ECOWAS Commission, 2019). For instance, despite ECOWAS several military interventions, like its role in the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) in 2013, long-term development efforts were not incorporated with security strategies (Tull,

2020). The lack of coordination with development initiatives to address poverty, governance, and infrastructural deficit has limited the effectiveness of security operations, allowing terrorism and instability to persist. These failures were also evident in ECOWAS conflict resolution in Guinea-Bissau, maritime security initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea and failure in addressing transnational organized crime (Iwilade, 2013, Moses, 2021 & UNODC, 2014). In all these scenarios, ECOWAS prioritized immediate security responses over long-term development initiatives, leading to incomplete solutions that fail to address the underlying causes of instability. This disconnect undermines the effectiveness of regional responses to security threats and the realization of SDGs, resulting in fragmented efforts that fail to address root causes of conflict and insecurity.

Additionally, the socio-economic disparities among ECOWAS member states pose substantial obstacles to a unified approach to regional security and sustainable development. The economic discrepancy within ECOWAS member states aggravates tensions and fosters situations conducive to conflict. For example, countries with high levels of unemployment and poverty are more susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups, thereby posing a direct threat to regional security (International Crisis Group, 2018). Without addressing these disparities and promoting equitable development, the overarching goals of both ECOWAS and the SDGs remain unattainable. Likewise, the implications of external influences and geopolitical dynamics pose huge challenge to the survival of ECOWAS. The presence of foreign intervention, particularly by global powers with vested interests in the region, complicates the security landscape. For instance, the role of France in the Sahel, particularly in its counter-terrorism operations, has implications for the sovereignty of ECOWAS member states by creating tensions between indigenous populations and foreign troops (Malan et al., 2020). The reliance on external aids often undermines the independence and effectiveness of ECOWAS initiatives directed at promoting sustainable development and security. The interplay between the Sustainable Development Goals and regional security in West Africa presents a multifaceted problem that needs a critical evaluation of the decline of ECOWAS. Addressing the challenges of terrorism, institutional capacity, socio-economic disparities, and external influences is essential to ensure that ECOWAS can fulfill its mandate while advancing the objectives of sustainable development.

Analysing the ECOWAS situation using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this paper critically assesses the nature of regional security dynamics in West Africa, arguing that the interdependence of security among states in the region demands a robust and functional ECOWAS. According to RSCT, “regions form distinct security complexes where the security of one state is closely tied to its neighbours, making regional cooperation essential”. The decline and weakening of ECOWAS disrupts this cooperative framework, undermining collective efforts to achieve SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Decline in the context of the paper refers to the progressive weakening of ECOWAS capacity, legitimacy and political will to act as an effective regional security and governance institution. The critical question in the research is; How effective is ECOWAS in achieving sustainable developments amid the array of issues bordering on weak institutional capacity, internal conflicts and political stability, rising economic disparities of member states, and external influences as a regional security organisation? The objective of the paper is to provide solutions that would aid in repositioning the ECOWAS for optimal productivity. The assessments in the paper will contribute to identifying gaps and recommending way forward for improvement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Clarification

The variables for the discuss are sustainable development and regional security. These form the crux of the mapper and would be conceptualized with their relationship discussed.

### Sustainable Development

According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987), “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. These are in the thematised into 17 goals which include SDG 1(no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), and SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy). Others include SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), SDG 15 (life on land), SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). This definition places strong emphasis on intergenerational equity, ensuring that present developmental activities do not exhaust resources or destroy ecosystems to the point that future generations are disadvantaged. The definition is broad, allowing it to be adapted to different contexts, whether applied to economic policies, social programs, or environmental strategies. However, it lacks clarity in terms of how to operationalize sustainable development, making it difficult to measure and implement in practical terms (Lele, 1991). It is also ambiguous on “needs” which can be subjective, raising questions about whose needs are prioritized and how to balance differing priorities (Redclift, 2005).

Furthermore, the United Nations SDG (2011), refer to sustainable as “plan of actions for development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It posits that sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet. For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize 3 core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies”. The definition emphasizes human development, highlighting the need for equitable access to resources and opportunities, which aligns with the core goals of poverty reduction, social inclusion, and human well-being. It also links human development with environmental sustainability which ensures that economic growth does not come at the expense of natural ecosystems, thus promoting intergenerational equity. Notwithstanding, the definition is criticised on its overemphasis on human development. Critics argue that the UNDP’s definition might focus too heavily on human development aspects, potentially underplaying the environmental challenges that require more immediate and rigorous attention, such as biodiversity loss and climate change (Redclift, 2005). Additionally, implementing such a holistic framework requires substantial coordination between sectors and policies, which can be challenging in regions with weak governance and resource constraints (Dodds, 2012).

Thus, sustainable development in the context of the paper are efforts put in place by governments at all levels to ensure that all peoples live a fulfilled life within a conducive environment. Sustainable development is the foundation for today’s leading global framework for international cooperation as enshrined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, Ghana integrated SDGs into its national development planning, focusing on goals like poverty reduction, quality education, and clean energy. To this end, the Ghana Statistical Service developed an SDG indicator baseline report to monitor progress. Likewise, Nigeria established the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) to coordinate implementation. The Nigeria's National Development Plan (2021–2025) also aligns with the SDGs, emphasizing economic diversification and social inclusion. On the regional level, the West Africa Food System Resilience Programme, a World Bank-funded initiative promoted by ECOWAS to strengthen food system risk management and harmonize agricultural markets in the sub-region was commissioned towards the attainment of SDG (Agricinafrica, 2022). Participating countries in the programme include Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Despite these efforts, most West African states face challenges balancing development goals with environmental sustainability such as issues of deforestation and land degradation which affect agricultural expansion among others. On regional security for the attainment of SDG, ECOWAS has undertaken various interventions to maintain regional security. For instance, ECOWAS deployed troops to enforce the electoral victory of President Adama Barrow after incumbent Yahya Jammeh refused to step down (The Point, 2017). Additionally, under the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), ECOWAS contributed troops to combat Islamist rebels in Northern Mali, supporting the Malian government (United Nations, 2012). The operationalization of SDGs in West Africa is a complex process influenced by regional dynamics, environmental challenges, and security concerns. While ECOWAS has made significant strides in promoting regional integration and security, recent political upheavals and resource constraints have highlighted the need for renewed commitment and strategic adaptation to ensure sustainable development and stability in the region.

### **Regional Security**

Buzan & Waver (2003) refers to regional security “a set of states whose primary security concerns are so interlinked that their national security cannot realistically be considered apart from one another”. The definition posits that regions form security complexes where states are interdependent due to geographic proximity, shared threats and historical interactions. For example, the security of states in the EU are interconnected due to factors such as resource competition and the spread of political ideologies. The definition focuses on interdependence of states, implying that regional security is a collective issue rather than a concern for individual states. This situation is relevant in areas where conflicts in one state spill over into neighbouring states. However, Acharya (2007), criticised the definition on its overemphasis on state actors focusing heavily on state actors and traditional security threats, and neglecting non-state actors like terrorist groups, insurgencies, or transnational corporations that also influence regional security. The critics also emphasised its inclination to prioritize state-centric threats over broader human security issues, such as poverty or health crises, that contribute to insecurity at the regional level.

Furthermore, Moller (2005), posits that regional security is “the mutual agreement among states within a region to protect one another from threats, relying on collective action to address both internal and external security challenges”. The concept emphasises the formation of regional security organizations that targets to address shared threats like terrorism, regional conflicts, and natural disasters. For instance, the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) plays a significant role in conflict prevention and resolution on the continent. The definition emphasis on cooperation focusing on the importance of regional cooperation and collective

action in dealing with security threats. It also recognizes that no solitary state can address complex, multi-dimensional threats alone and emphasizes regional organizations approach which highlights the role of diplomacy, multilateralism and institution-building in achieving long-term stability. The definition was criticised by Williams (2009) who opined that regional organizations often lack the resources or political unanimity to enforce security agreements effectively. For example, though the AU plays a crucial role in peacekeeping, it faces criticism on its limited capacity to manage protracted conflicts in regions like Somalia and the Sahel (Williams, 2009). Additionally, Ayoob (1995) argued that power disparities within regions can weaken collective security arrangements, where stronger nations may overshadow decision-making or influence the system to serve their interests at the expense of weaker states.

Thus, regional security in the context of the paper refers to a combination of state-centric and cooperative approaches reached through consents of nations towards addressing internal threats as well as those that transcend national borders. Although regional security complex theory underscores the interdependence of security issues among states, the collective security approach emphasises the role of regional organizations in coordinating joint efforts to mitigate threats. According to Buzan & Wæver (2003), “regional security complexes emerge when the security of states is so interlinked that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart”. In ECOWAS region, an instance is the spill over of the Tuareg rebellion and subsequent jihadist insurgency in northern Mali to Burkina faso and Niger, in 2012, transforming the Sahel into a regional conflict zone. In contrast, collective security relies on the principle that aggression against one is aggression against all, exemplified in Article 5 of the NATO Charter or Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Claude, 1962). In ECOWAS region, the intervention in Gambia to oust Yahya Jammeh in 2016 after failing to hand over government speaks to collective security. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding regional security in a globalized and interdependent world.

### **Relationship between Sustainable Development and Regional Security**

Sustainable development and regional security are extremely interconnected, as the pursuit of development often influences security dynamics within a region and vice versa. Sustainable development which aims to balance economic development, social justice and environmental protection, enhances regional stability by addressing the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Conversely, regional security creates the necessary conditions for sustainable development by preventing conflicts and ensuring stability. Sustainable development contributes to regional security by addressing the socio-economic and environmental factors that often lead to conflict. Sustainable development, by reducing poverty, ensuring equitable access to resources, and promoting good governance, creates conditions that mitigate the likelihood of instability. For instance, in the Sahel Region, poverty, food insecurity and climate change contribute to regional instability.

The dearth of resources, exacerbated by climate change, led to conflicts over water resources and arable land, which fuel violent extremism and inter-communal violence. Sustainable development initiatives, such as the Great Green Wall project, aim to address desertification, improve agricultural productivity and create jobs. By addressing environmental degradation and poverty, these initiatives aim to reduce the root causes of conflict, thereby enhancing regional security (UNCCD, 2021). Efforts at promoting sustainable land use and providing livelihoods, reduces competition for resources and alleviates the key drivers of conflict in the Sahel. Furthermore, while sustainable development promotes regional security, the reverse is also true. Security is often a prerequisite for sustainable development. In regions plagued by

conflict, achieving sustainable development goals becomes almost impossible. Security provides the necessary stability for economic growth, environmental conservation, and social development. For example, the Horn of Africa is a region where conflict, insecurity and underdevelopment are deeply intertwined. The ongoing conflicts in Somalia and Ethiopia have hindered development initiatives and led to widespread humanitarian crises. However, efforts to stabilize the region through regional security organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have aided to create conditions for development. IGAD's conflict resolution mechanisms, combined with peacebuilding efforts, have provided a more stable environment for development programs (Healy, 2011).

According to the UN 2030 Agenda, "there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development." (United Nations, 2015). In this light, regional organizations often serve as platforms where sustainable development and regional security efforts intersect. Many regional organizations, such as the AU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ECOWAS, have security and development mandates, reflecting the recognition that the two are mutually reinforcing. For instance, the ECOWAS Vision 2050 emphasizes "peace and shared prosperity", where economic transformation, social cohesion, and security are key pillars (ECOWAS Commission, 2021 & 2013). Furthermore, ECOWAS Agricultural and Youth Employment policies are all efforts at achieving SDG. In the area of regional security, ECOWAS establishment of Standby Force and Early Warning Mechanism and the Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2013 among the various peace operations in the region are evident (Aning, & Bah, 2009, & Ukeje, 2005). For instance, ECOWAS action plan on regional security and youth radicalization; support for reintegration and humanitarian aid was aimed at addressing the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, as well as its sanctions, mediation in 2020–2021, and pressure for democratic governance linked to aid and regional development assistance in Mali are all directed at attaining SDGs. The relationship between sustainable development and regional security is critical in addressing the complex challenges faced by many regions around the world. Sustainable development provides a foundation for security by addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, regional security creates the stability needed for sustainable development efforts to succeed. This mutually reinforcing relationship highlights the importance of integrated approaches that address both development and security challenges simultaneously.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The relationship between sustainable development and regional security could be explained using several theories. Some of these theories include Liberal Institutionalism, Dependency Theory, Human Security Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) among others. The Human Security Theory focuses on the security of individuals, emphasizing freedom from fear, want, and indignity (UNDP, 1994). While RSCT focuses on interstate security dynamics within a region explaining how the security of states is interdependent.

The paper however, adopted the RSCT because it provides a robust framework for understanding the interconnected nature of security and development within regions. The theory was propounded by Buzan & Waver in their 2003 book titled 'Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security'. The theory argues that states within a given geographic area (such as West Africa) form "security complexes" where the security concerns of one state affect others in the region. The theory emphasizes the regional nature of both security threats,

like terrorism, transnational crime, and civil conflicts, and development challenges such as environmental degradation and economic inequality.

Although RSCT has been influential in understanding regional security dynamics, it has been severally criticized focusing on its conceptual limitations, methodological biases, and its applicability to diverse regions.

- **Influence of Non-State Actors:** Morgan (2007), argued that RSCT does not sufficiently account for the influence of non-state actors. These actors have become increasingly important in modern conflicts, especially in regions like the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Global Influence:** Acharya (2007), suggesting that RSCT underestimates global influence as evident in regions like Southeast Asia where external powers, particularly the U.S. and China, play a crucial role in shaping the regional security environment. Furthermore, Sending (2015), points out that RSCT's geographic determination may overlook the ways in which security dynamics are becoming globalized, with non-territorial issues like cyber security and climate change impacting multiple regions simultaneously.
- **Regional Diversity:** Jackson & Sorensen (2016), contends that RSCT's emphasis on security thereby neglecting broader development issues, which are essential for long-term stability and peace in regions. In the area of regional homogeneity, Hurrell (1995), argues that RSCT failed to sufficiently account for the divergent political and economic conditions within regions, which can impede the formation of a coherent regional security complex.

Despite these criticisms of RSCT, it is apt for analysis in the paper based on its strengths. These include its usefulness in explaining the dynamics within ECOWAS, as it highlights the interconnectedness of security and sustainable development across borders. It also acknowledges that insecurity in one state, such as the rise of extremism in northern Nigeria, can spill over into neighbouring states, affecting the entire region's sustainable development prospects (Buzan & Waver, 2003). Additionally, the theory emphasizes the complexity of regional security and sustainable development challenges, incorporating political, economic and environmental factors. It also allows for a more nuanced analysis of how multiple types of threats (terrorism, migration, resource scarcity) can interact and exacerbate one another. An instance is the insecurity in Mali or Burkina Faso as a regional spill over, influencing neighbours like Niger and Nigeria through cross-border insurgency. The RSCT offers concrete insights for policy, as it suggests that regional organizations like ECOWAS must adopt integrated security and development strategies that recognize the interconnectedness of these challenges which calls for coordinated regional responses rather than isolated national policies.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper employed qualitative research design in critically assessing the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security organization towards achieving sustainable developments. The basis for choosing this design was to allow for the gathering of data and analysis of relationships between regional security and sustainable developments with critical focus on the ECOWAS. The paper sampled the various ECOWAS protocols, events and literatures on the subject matter. The data collection and used in the results and discussion segment focused on the period January 2014 to January 2024 covering a period of 10 years. Qualitative data were collected

from existing database from journals, reports and books on the subject matter. These data were analysed qualitatively by describing the relationships, patterns and trends of the variables.

The steps taken in the research include; collection of relevant data, organizations and preparation of the data, analysis of the data, data interpretation and reporting of findings. The limitation to the study dwell on the dearth of literature as well as unavailability of updated data on the subject matter. Despite these limitations, the findings and result of the research are valid and addresses the research question; How effective is ECOWAS in achieving SDGs amid the array of issues bordering on weak institutional capacity, internal conflicts and political stability, rising economic disparities of member states, and external influences as a regional security organization? This context presents an opportunity to critically assess the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security organization towards achieving sustainable developments.

## **RESULT**

### **Critical Assessment of the Decline of ECOWAS**

The ECOWAS has faced numerous challenges in recent years that have hindered its ability to effectively manage regional security and SDGs. Key issues include, weak institutional capacity, internal conflicts and political stability, rising economic disparities of member states, and external influences. These are analysed subsequently.

#### **Weak Institutional Capacity**

Weak institutional capacity refers to the inadequate abilities, resources and governance structures of an organization to effectively carry out its functions. In the context of ECOWAS, this can encompass political, financial, and operational dimensions that hamper its ability to respond to crises, implement policies, and promote sustainable development initiatives (ECOWAS, 2019). ECOWAS since inception, has struggled to maintain the necessary institutional capacity to effectively implement its sustainable development and security agenda. According to Francis (2009), bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource constraints limit its ability to carry out peacekeeping missions, enforce trade agreements, or coordinate regional development projects.

The ECOWAS has faced numerous security challenges such as terrorism, civil conflicts and organized crime, that require prompt and coordinated responses. However, the lack of robust institutional structures has hindered its effectiveness in addressing these issues. For instance, the ECOWAS Standby Force, established to intervene in conflicts and restore peace, has often been criticized for its limited operational capacity, insufficient funding, and lack of comprehensive training (Malan et al., 2020). The inability to respond effectively to the Boko Haram insurgency or the civil unrest in Mali and other member states, exemplifies ECOWAS's limitations. The International Crisis Group (2021), observed that the delay in intervention during critical moments has allowed conflicts to escalate, exacerbating regional instability in West Africa.

Furthermore, the institutional weaknesses within ECOWAS impede its ability to implement policies aimed at fostering peace and sustainable development. Governance structures are inefficient and characterized by bureaucratic inactivity, which complicates decision-making processes. This inefficiency suppresses timely action on critical issues, such as food security, economic integration and health crises, all of which are vital for achieving the SDGs (Boas & Torheim, 2019). An instance is the ECOWAS inability to swiftly coordinate a regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic which highlights its weak institutional capacity. The lack

of a unified health strategy resulted in disjointed national responses, showing that ECOWAS could not effectively leverage its authority to address a pressing transnational crisis (World Bank, 2021).

Resource constraints is another issue exacerbating weak institutional capacity. This situation significantly impedes ECOWAS's operations, limiting its ability to engage in capacity-building initiatives and implement development programs. Katz (2021), observed that member states often fail to contribute adequately to the organization's budget, leading to underfunded initiatives that lack sustainability. Without efforts at enhancing the resource availability especially financing would see ECOWAS struggle to mobilize the necessary personnel and equipment for its security missions, thereby compromising its effectiveness. Likewise, in the area of socio-political disparities among member states, weak institutional capacity creates friction and hinder collaboration. Countries with more robust institutions often find it challenging to engage with those that lack the same level of governance and stability (International Crisis Group, 2021). This disparity impacts ECOWAS's ability to maintain a cohesive and united front in addressing shared security challenges thereby impinging on the attainment of SDGs. Thus, weak institutional capacity is a critical factor in the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security body, ultimately hindering the attainment of SDGs in West Africa.

### **Internal Conflicts and Political Instability**

Internal conflicts refer to violent disputes and confrontations occurring within a state's borders, often fueled by ethnic, political, or economic grievances. Likewise, political instability encompasses disruptions in governance and state authority, which can manifest in coups, protest movements, or deteriorating rule of law. Both phenomena significantly impede effective governance and social cohesion, leading to deep-rooted crises that challenge regional security frameworks (Malan et al., 2020). The ECOWAS was originally established to foster economic integration and ensure regional stability. This the body has achieved in some intervention such as the successful halt of conflict during the Liberian civil wars of 1990-1997 and 2003, the restoration of Ahmad Tijan Kabbah as president of Sierra Leone after a military coup in 1997-1999 and the Gambian 2017 political crisis resolution (Adebajo, 2002, Olonisakin, 2008, & Hartmann, 2017).

However, the rise in internal conflicts, such as coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, has exposed the limitations of ECOWAS in enforcing democratic norms and ensuring political stability in member states have emerged as significant factors contributing to the organization's decline as a regional security body. These crises have led to divisions among member states, weakening ECOWAS' ability to present a unified front in managing regional security issues (Hartmann, 2022). These issues also complicate ECOWAS's efforts to maintain peace as well as undermine the attainment of the SDGs in West Africa. The ECOWAS is mandated to intervene in internal conflicts for the restoration of peace and stability. However, the prevalence of internal conflicts and political instability in member states has severely tested its capacity to fulfil this role. For example, the repeated coups in Mali (2020 and 2021) as well as the ongoing civil friction in Guinea and Burkina Faso have strained ECOWAS's capacity to respond effectively (International Crisis Group, 2021). These situations expose the limitations of ECOWAS's protocols for intervention, such as the Policy for Conflict Prevention, which stipulates mediation and peacekeeping efforts that can become complex by the domestic political landscape (ECOWAS, 2019). Furthermore, the 2021 coup in Mali led to the suspension of the country from ECOWAS and the imposition of sanctions, which rather than

stabilizing the region, fueled further unrest and defiance among the Malian population against perceived external interference (Katz, 2021). Such scenarios illustrate how internal political instability hinder ECOWAS's diplomatic and security goals.

Moreover, internal conflicts and political instability have dire consequences for SDGs. Sustained violence in the region often leads to displacement, loss of livelihoods and disruption of social services, which are critical for achieving SDGs such as poverty alleviation (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) (United Nations, 2015). For instance, conflicts in the Sahel Region have resulted in over 3 million human internal displacement, impairing access to education and basic health services (UNHCR, 2021). Also, political instability aggravated by conflicts diverts resources away from development initiatives toward military expenditures and crisis management. This diversion ultimately stalls progress toward SDGs, as governments preoccupy on immediate security concerns rather than long-term development (Boas & Torheim, 2019).

Additionally, political instability often arises from failures in governance, due to corruption, lack of accountability and poor rule of law. These issues create an environment favorable to conflict and extremism, thereby weakening state institutions and undermining public trust (International Crisis Group, 2021). Countries like Nigeria and Guinea, experiencing high levels of corruption and nepotism, provide environments for both internal conflicts and challenges to ECOWAS's governance. The inability of these governments to provide for their citizens can lead to unrest, further complicating ECOWAS's tasks related to conflict resolution and SDGs.

As internal conflicts and political instability persist in various member states, ECOWAS's credibility as a regional security body is increasingly questioned. Some member states view ECOWAS less as a facilitator of peace and more as an ineffective bureaucratic institution, informing their decision to rely on their own military capabilities or external partners (Malan et al., 2020). This diminished credibility complicates collaborative efforts to stabilize the region and efforts towards achieving SDGs. Therefore, internal conflicts and political instability are critical factors contributing to the decline of ECOWAS as a regional security body. These issues not only obstruct the organization's ability to mediate and resolve conflicts effectively but also have significant repercussions on the attainment of SDGs in West Africa.

### **Economic Disparities**

Economic disparities refer to the unequal distribution of wealth and resources among individuals and states. In the context of ECOWAS, this varies across member states, with countries like Nigeria and Ghana exhibiting more robust economic growth, while others, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, continue to struggle with high levels of poverty and limited infrastructure (Boas & Torheim, 2019). This uneven distribution creates significant societal inequalities, which can lead to tension and conflict. Economic disparities limit the capacity of ECOWAS to function effectively as a regional security body. Richer member states often assume a dominant role in decision-making and influence the direction of security policies, which may not adequately address the needs of less developed member states. As a result, the collective security framework skews towards the interests of economically richer nations thereby sidelining issues pertinent to poorer states (International Crisis Group, 2021). For instance, Katz, (2021), opined that in response to conflict situations, richer states may be better equipped to deploy resources and troops while poorer states lack the military and logistic potentials necessary for effective participation in peacekeeping missions. This creates an

imbalance in regional security initiatives, leading to inefficiencies in response and cooperation among ECOWAS member states.

Furthermore, economic disparities also pose a significant obstacle to attaining the SDGs across West Africa. The lack of uniform economic development contributes to disparities in health, education and social services, which are crucial for achieving SDGs such as poverty reduction (SDG 1) and quality education (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015). In countries with weaker economies, limited access to education and healthcare services perpetuates a cycle of poverty and disempowerment, further impeding progress on the attainment of SDGs. For example, low educational attainment and high unemployment rates in economically disadvantaged areas often lead to increased susceptibility to conflict and violence, undermining SDG 16, which emphasizes the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies (UNICEF, 2021). Malan et al (2020), noted that the relationship between poverty and conflict is well-known, indicating that areas with limited economic opportunities are more prone to instability and violence.

Economic disparities also tend to fuel regional tensions, as member states compete for limited resources or rebel against perceived economic injustices. Countries suffering from chronic underdevelopment might view richer neighbors as exploitative, leading to a cycle of blame that can spark conflict (Boas & Torheim, 2019). For example, the tensions between Nigeria and its neighbors, such as Cameroon and Niger, over issues of resource control and economic migration illustrate how unequal economic conditions can heighten regional discord. Moreover, the lack of equitable economic benefits from regional integration initiatives can breed resentment among member states. If a wealthy nation is perceived to reap more benefits from ECOWAS policies than poorer nations, it can lead to calls for a reassessment of membership and cooperation, ultimately undermining regional stability (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Economic disparities also exist in fiscal policy implementation. ECOWAS fiscal policy, initially set in 2001 and revised over time, has coordination as part of its broader strategy to achieve macroeconomic convergence, essential for a common currency and regional market integration (ECOWAS Commission, 2021). The fiscal policy is however challenged by weak compliance, high fiscal deficit and public debt in Nigeria, Ghana and others due to low revenue mobilization, subsidy spending, and election-year pressures, and lack of fiscal harmonization tools. The ECO which is to aid the fiscal policy, was intended to replace the CFA franc and unify ECOWAS under a single currency to boost intra-regional trade, simplify transactions and reduce exchange rate risks, and strengthen identity and independence from France (for CFA users). The planned timeline for the adoption of the ECO was originally for 2003, then 2015, 2020, and now tentatively 2027 (World Bank, 2022). The delay in implementation of the ECO is attributed to divergence in macroeconomic indicators among members, political disagreements, especially between Francophone and Anglophone countries, disagreement over currency pegging system (Francophone states proposed a pegged ECO to Euro, while Nigeria favours a flexible exchange rate). Based on the challenges to the adoption of the ECO the project reflects ambition without sufficient policy coordination, and an incomplete institutional groundwork. Analysts suggest a phased or multi-speed approach involving ready countries first for the implementation before the wider acceptance (IMF, 2021). Furthermore, the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) is the development finance arm of ECOWAS, focused on infrastructure, agriculture, private sector development, and energy (World Bank, 2022). The EBID is funded by ECOWAS member contributions and external partners such as

the African development Bank (AfDB), and China EXIM Bank among others. The EBID has disbursed over UD\$ 1.5 billion in loans across ECOWAS states between 2006 and 2022, sponsored key investments in regional highways, power grids, rural development, and SME finance with recent strategic plans (2021–2025) focusing on post-COVID recovery, green finance, and industrialization (EBID, 2022). Despite these achievements, is underperforming due to inconsistent capital contributions from member states, leading to funding gaps, debt sustainability concerns limit borrowing capacity in fragile states, and project implementation delays due to bureaucratic bottlenecks and weak project readiness.

These economic disparities challenge ECOWAS's ability to maintain its credibility and authority as a regional security body. As regional security concerns rise alongside economic inequalities, the ability of ECOWAS to mediate conflicts and implement effective SDGs strategies suffers. Wealth disparities fosters disparagement about an organization's effectiveness and lead to calls for further action that may not be feasible given the existing economic inequalities (Katz, 2021). Thus, economic disparities among ECOWAS member states constitute a significant barrier to the organization's performance in security and SDGs initiatives. The uneven distribution of resources and wealth limits collaborative efforts to achieve SDGs and hampers ECOWAS's ability to maintain peace and security in the region.

### **External Influences**

External influences refer to the political, economic, and military dynamics that arise from the involvement of foreign governments, international organizations and multinational corporations in a region. In the West African context, these influences are often characterized by historical ties to former colonial powers, notably France, as well as growing engagements from countries like China, the U.S. and other Western nations (Malan et al., 2020). Francis (2009), criticised ECOWAS for relying too heavily on external military support in conflict situations, such as the intervention in Mali and adopting development strategies influenced by global powers rather than indigenous approaches. These external influences have important implications for the efficacy of the ECOWAS as a regional security body and its ability to attain the SDGs.

A significant aspect of external influence is the erosion of ECOWAS's autonomy as member states increasingly look to external governments for support and solutions to domestic crises. For example, the French military interventions in the region, such as Operation BARKHANE in Mali and previous operations in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, have been criticized for sidelining ECOWAS as a credible regional security provider. Such actions foster perceptions that ECOWAS is ineffective to manage security challenges independently (International Crisis Group, 2021). As a result, member states especially the Francophones, become overly reliant on France's military capabilities instead of strengthening their own security resources and interventions through ECOWAS, thereby undermining regional cooperation as well as institutional integrity (Katz, 2021). Additionally, the ongoing instability in Mali following the coups in 2020 and 2021, where the Malian government turned to France for military assistance while neglecting ECOWAS, which struggled to mediate the crisis effectively, illustrates this point (BBC News, 2021). This situation raises critical questions about ECOWAS's legitimacy as a security authority for the provision of SDGs in a context where external powers are perceived to exert more influence.

Another major factor arising from external influence is economic dependencies and resource allocation. External economic influences often manifest in the form of foreign direct

investment, trade agreements and economic aids. Though these provides short-term relief, they also lead to long-term economic dependencies that hinder self-sufficiency and sustainable development (Boas & Torheim, 2019). For example, France's continued economic interests in West Africa, particularly in sectors like extractives, telecommunications and trade, creates dependencies that limit the autonomy of ECOWAS member states. Such dependencies often lead to unequal economic arrangements, which can exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder the attainment of SDGs (Boas & Torheim, 2019). Additionally, French companies dominate several key sectors in West African economies bypassing local enterprises and strangle indigenous development initiatives. For instance, between 2003 and 2013, Nigeria's FDI increased from UD\$ 2.005 billion to US\$ 5.609 billion. However, the industrial sector's contribution to GDP declined from 12.14 per cent in 1982 to 9.4 per cent in 2016, indicating that increased FDI did not translate into industrial growth (Keji, 2023, & Nwosu, 2018). Additionally, the manufacturing sector's output growth remains sluggish despite FDI inflows, suggesting that foreign investments have not effectively stimulated indigenous business development (Chibuike, 2023). Moreover, foreign companies often bring their own labour force and expertise, reducing opportunities for local employment and technology transfer. This practice strangles the growth of local industries and impede the development of a skilled domestic workforce. The consequence is that ECOWAS member states may prioritize short-term economic relationships with external powers over implementing long-term development strategies aligned with the SDGs. Poor governance and corruption, exacerbated by foreign economic influence, undermine efforts toward achieving SDGs growth in areas such as poverty alleviation (SDG 1) and gender equality (SDG 5) (United Nations, 2015).

External influence also affects ECOWAS ability for a sustainable policy direction. For instance, France's involvement in West Africa extends to shaping policy directions through diplomatic and economic leverage to former colonies. This influence challenge the autonomy of ECOWAS's decision-making processes as member states provide to the interests of France rather than focusing on collective regional interest (Malan et al., 2020). In the area of monetary policy, France's economic influence in West Africa affect greatly ECOWAS survival. A key component of this influence is the CFA franc, a currency used by 14 countries in West and Central Africa, 8 of which are members of ECOWAS. The CFA franc is pegged to the Euro and guaranteed by the French Treasury, ensuring monetary stability but limiting the economic sovereignty of the countries that use it (Sy, 2020). Critics argue that this system benefits France more than the African nations involved. For instance, between 1990 and 1995, CFA franc countries exported an average of 21 per cent of their goods to France, while imports from France accounted for 35 per cent of their total imports. Conversely, these trade volumes represented only 1.2 per cent of France's imports and 1.8 per cent of its exports, indicating a disproportionate economic relationship (Bayoumi, & Ostry 1997). Furthermore, the fixed exchange rate regime has been criticized for overvaluing the CFA franc, making exports less competitive and increasing reliance on imports. This dynamic strangles local production and entrepreneurship, as domestic goods struggle to compete with imported alternatives (Signé, 2019). The CFA franc zone has been both a stabilizing force and a source of contention within ECOWAS. On one hand, the currency has provided its members with low inflation rates and a relatively stable macroeconomic environment, which has facilitated trade and investment (Sy, 2020). On the other hand, the CFA franc is widely viewed as a remnant of French colonialism that perpetuates economic dependency on France.

Additionally, critics argue that the CFA franc arrangement benefits France more than the West African nations, as it gives France significant control over the economic policies of these

countries and by extension ECOWAS (Kohnert, 2020). Additionally, it has also been suggested that the CFA franc has impeded deeper economic integration within ECOWAS, as non-CFA franc countries such as Nigeria and Ghana are wary of aligning with CFA franc (Ogunnubi & Amusan, 2019). Furthermore, the ongoing debate over the creation of an ECOWAS single currency, the “ECO”, illustrates the tension between fostering regional economic autonomy and maintaining ties to France’s monetary system. The rise of new powers, such as China, in West Africa introduced complex dynamics that challenge ECOWAS’s objectives. Chinese investment in infrastructure and agriculture, while beneficial in some respects, often operates alongside significant debt burdens for borrowing states (Alden & Alves, 2008). This scenario complicates SDGs efforts because heavily indebted states may prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability, thereby jeopardizing achievements toward SDGs related to climate action (SDG 13).

As external influence shapes governance and policy, it leads to instability within states that feel pressured to align with the interests of external powers rather than their national needs. The resulting social and political discontent cause unrest, further complicating ECOWAS's ability to enforce peace and security measures. In this scenario, the perceived role of ECOWAS as a vehicle for regional integration, stability and sustainable developments becomes jeopardized, fueling a cycle of conflict and dissatisfaction with governance (International Crisis Group, 2021). Thus, the influence of external powers, particularly France, contributes significantly to the challenges faced by ECOWAS as it seeks to enhance regional security and achieve SDGs. The resulting erosion of ECOWAS’s authority, economic dependencies, policy manipulations, and challenges to local governance diminish the organization's capacity to foster unity and stability in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The critical assessment of ECOWAS's role in the pursuit of the SDGs reveals significant challenges that undermine the regional body's effectiveness and overall progress toward building peace, stability, and sustainable development in West Africa. The decline of ECOWAS can be primarily attributed to four interrelated challenges, weak institutional capacity, internal conflicts and political stability, rising economic disparities among member states, and external influences, each of which directly impacts the region's ability to attain specific SDGs. Weak institutional capacity within ECOWAS hampers its effectiveness in implementing robust policies and programs that are essential for achieving the SDGs. A lack of resources, technical expertise, and efficient governance structures impedes initiatives that address critical issues such as poverty alleviation, health care and education, which are central tenets of SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Strengthening institutions is vital for improving accountability, enhancing service delivery, and fostering transparency, all integral in advancing the regional development agenda. Internal conflicts and political instability further exacerbate the challenges faced by ECOWAS. Ongoing disputes and unrest in member states not only distract from developmental priorities but also create an environment of insecurity that inhibits economic growth and investment. Such instability undermines the pursuit of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as conflict-ridden regions struggle to attract business and investment needed to build resilient economies.

The rising economic disparities among member states pose another significant barrier to achieving the SDGs. Countries experiencing rapid economic growth may overshadow their neighbours lagging behind, leading to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities.

This disparity threatens the objectives of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as marginalized communities within economically weaker states continue to face challenges in accessing basic services and opportunities for development. Addressing economic disparities through inclusive growth strategies, equitable resource allocation, and targeted support for the least developed member states is essential to building regional cohesion and stability. External influences, including geopolitical interests and the impact of global economic changes, further complicate the landscape for ECOWAS. These external pressures can divert attention from regional cooperation and development efforts, making it difficult for ECOWAS to respond effectively to the unique challenges faced by its member states. As an interconnected world increasingly affects local realities, a coherent strategy for managing external influences is vital to preserve the sovereignty and agency of ECOWAS member states, which is crucial for the successful realization of SDGs across the region. Addressing these challenges are imperative not only for the revitalization of ECOWAS but also for the advancement of the SDGs in West Africa. The region stands at a critical juncture where concerted efforts to strengthen institutions, promote peaceful governance, ensure equitable economic opportunities, and navigate external pressures can pave the way for sustainable development. Only through a proactive, collaborative, and multi-faceted approach can ECOWAS fulfil its mandate and contribute significantly to the achievement of the SDGs, ensuring a more stable, prosperous, and equitable future for all member states.

### **Way Forward to Improving ECOWAS Efforts at Ensuring Sustainable Development Goals for Enhanced Regional Security in West Africa**

Addressing the challenges facing ECOWAS requires a multifaceted approach, combining institutional strengthening, conflict resolution, economic inclusiveness and countering external pressures. For ECOWAS to attain its SDGs and regional security, it must focus on building resilient institutions, fostering political stability and ensuring that all member states benefit from economic growth. A coordinated and strategic response to these issues will help ECOWAS reclaim its role as a leading regional security organization. These strategies are highlighted subsequently.

#### **Strengthening Regional Governance and Institutions**

Weak institutional capacity is identified as factor which hamper ECOWAS's effectiveness in addressing regional security challenges thereby impinging on the attainment of SDGs. Strengthening regional governance and institutions would address this factor through the following measures:

- i. **Enhancement of ECOWAS's Authority:** ECOWAS should focus on reaffirming its mandate and authority in regional security matters by updating the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework. The update could include a robust clearer protocol for accountability and compliance of member state with regional decisions. Efforts at creating mechanisms that ensure the respect of democratic principles and sustenance of rule of law by member states would enhance ECOWAS's credibility. This would ensure the attainment of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Additionally, in the area of peace and security, ECOWAS needs a robust training and development initiatives for its personnel. This could be achieved through effective collaborations with international organizations like the African Union, the United Nations, European Union and NATO to enhance technical expertise thereby ensuring SDGs 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

- ii. **Capacity Building Programs:** ECOWAS should prioritize capacity-building initiatives to improve governance and accountability by member states. This could include providing training for government officials, supporting anti-corruption measures and fostering participatory governance. Strengthening local institutions aligns with SDGs related to strong institutions (SDG 16).
- iii. **Resource Mobilization:** ECOWAS must improve its mechanisms for resource allocation, ensuring adequate funding for its institutions, particularly the ECOWAS Standby Force and EBID. This requires increasing member states' contributions and seeking additional funding from external partners such as the European Union (EU) and bilateral donors this align with SDGs 8, 9, 11, 16 and 17.

### **Resolving Internal Conflicts and Political Instability**

ECOWAS member states face internal conflicts and political instability, often triggered by poor governance and ethnic tensions. These issues undermine regional cohesion and security. The way forward includes.

- i. **Strengthening Early Warning Systems.** ECOWAS Early Warning Systems has over the years faired acceptably but not without hitches which lead to late and poor intervention. These lapses include delayed response and political will, resource constraints, data gaps and coverage issues, and insufficient integration with national mechanisms. To address these gaps, ECOWAS should enhance its disaster and conflict prevention framework by strengthening early warning systems to detect and address potential disasters before they escalate. By enhancing political commitment and timely action, boosting financial and logistical support, strengthening national early warning systems, and improving data collection and analysis ECOWAS would address SDGs 3, 4, 6, 7, 13, 15, 16 and 17.
- ii. **Support for Democratic Governance.** The inability of ECOWAS to safeguard democratic ideals within its member states impinge on its effectiveness as a regional organization. Though ECOWAS made encouraging efforts at promoting free and fair elections, prevention of unconstitutional changes of government, and promotion of democracy through capacity building, much is yet to be desired. The decline of ECOWAS is hampered by persistent coups and political instability, election-related violence and contestation, inconsistent enforcement of democratic norms, and external influences and geopolitical complexities among others. To this end, ECOWAS should engage in efforts at enhancing political will and unity, addressing underlying socioeconomic factors, supporting judicial and electoral reforms, and increasing civic engagement towards addressing the 17 SDGs collectively.
- iii. **Mediation and Dialogue.** ECOWAS has engaged in mediations and dialogue towards addressing contemporary issues within the region. Some successes achieved include the mediation and dialogue efforts in The Gambia (2016-2017), Sierra Leone (1990s and early 20000, Cote d'Ivoire (2010-2011), Guinea-Bissau (2012, 2019 and 2020), Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). To further reposition ECOWAS in its mediation and dialogue roles it should strengthening the capacity for rapid response, enhancing political cohesion among member states, engaging civil society and local actors, and leveraging international partnerships towards addressing SDG 16 and 17.

### Reducing Economic Disparities among Member States

Rising economic inequalities within ECOWAS threaten regional stability and integration. Disparities in wealth and development fuel migration pressures and tensions between richer and poorer member states. The way forward includes.

- i. **Inclusive Economic Policies:** ECOWAS has made great strides at ensuring inclusive economic policies within the region. Some of these include facilitation of trade, single currency initiative, the West African Power Pool (WAPP), Trans-West African Highway, West African Agricultural Productivity Program, Youth and Women Empowerment Programs, and alignment to UN SDGs and AU Agenda 2063. Notwithstanding these efforts, ECOWAS face issues relating to economic disparities among member states; limited implementation of key economic policies due to lack of political will, bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource constraints; high unemployment and economic inequality and fragility of social safety nets. To mitigate these gaps, ECOWAS should strengthen regional economic convergence, enhancing policy implementation and institutional capacity, promoting sustainable and inclusive growth, and building resilience to external shocks towards addressing SDGs 1, 8, 9, 10 and 12.
- ii. **Economic Diversification:** ECOWAS has made efforts toward economic diversification in West Africa, notwithstanding its success has been limited by structural challenges such as heavy dependence on primary commodities, inadequate infrastructure, weak industrialization and insufficient economic integration among member states. While there have been initiatives to diversify economies, create value-added industries and promote regional trade, the overall pace of diversification has been slow, and many member countries continue to rely heavily on a narrow range of exports. To address the shortfalls in economic diversification by ECOWAS, there is the need to accelerate existing projects and invest more in regional infrastructural development especially in the energy and transport sectors. There is also the need for ECOWAS to focus on and encourage industrial policies that promote value-added production in key sectors like agriculture, mining and manufacturing. Political stability and good governance are essential for attracting investment and promoting diversification. Thus, ECOWAS should continue to support initiatives that strengthen democratic institutions, reduce corruption, and create a stable business environment in the region as well as invest in human capital and innovation to develop educational skill and innovation to foster. This focuses on SDG 1, 2 and 12.

### Countering External Influences

External factors, such as foreign governments and multinational corporations, often exert undue influence on ECOWAS member states, weakening regional integration and autonomy. Addressing these gaps requires:

- i. **A Unified Foreign Policy.** ECOWAS needs a more coherent and united approach to dealing with external actors. This could involve coordinating trade and security agreements at the regional level to ensure that external engagements benefit the region as a whole, rather than individual states. This is directed at achieving SDG 17 which invariable provided aids towards achieving other SDGs.

- ii. **Reducing Dependency on Foreign Aid.** ECOWAS should prioritize reducing dependency on foreign aid by encouraging self-sustaining economic development strategies. This includes increasing intra-regional trade and fostering a regional market that can compete globally. This is directed at enhancing SDG 8, 9, 12 and 17.

#### **Focus on Sustainable Development Goals**

ECOWAS should create a comprehensive framework for monitoring and implementing SDGs across member states. This framework should emphasize cooperation among nations to achieve shared developmental goals, including setting clear, measurable targets. Additionally, integrating environmental sustainability into national policies can align development initiatives with SDGs related to climate action (SDG 13) and life on land (SDG 15). Promoting renewable energy projects and sustainable agriculture practices will also foster economic resilience and address the impacts of climate change.

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