

Regional Security from Below: the case of ECOWAS

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I. Introduction

It now seems widely acknowledged that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has the most sophisticated and arguably the most successful regional security structure in Africa. For an organisation originally established to cater for regional economic concerns, the successful dispatching of three regional peacekeeping missions and the establishment of a close working arrangement with a complex set of partners is an excellent testimony to a credible security arrangement. While the credit for the success of regional security architecture has almost always gone to governments and individual Presidents, the roles played from “below” also needs to be properly recognised, especially the subtle pressures and the unmentioned sacrifices made by these informal actors.

This paper takes a look at the neglected role of informal actors operating below the radar of international attention. Specifically the paper assesses the contributions made by informal, non-institutionalised and non-governmental groups in the search for regional stability in West Africa and investigates how this can be further strengthened to complement the activities of the actors operating from “above”. The central argument in this paper is that the often ignored role of the actors from “below” is arguably as important, as the policy formulation and implementation that come from “above”. The paper also posits that the increasing involvement of civil society and other actors from “below” are crucial to any attempt to establish a durable and effective security mechanism in the West African sub-region.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section two, which follows this introductory section, looks at the various security challenges confronting West Africa. The objective here is to set the background against which to measure the concerns and/or activities of actors from below. The third section discusses the contributions made by actors operating from “below” across West Africa. Section four focuses on the relationship ECOWAS has developed with civil society investigating specifically the history, nature and extent of the link the organisation has established with the actors operating at local levels. In section five, there is the interrogation of the ways the new ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Mechanism (ECPF) takes into consideration the role of actors operating from “below”. Being the latest security mechanism in the region, it will be necessary to look at the role ascribed to non-state actors, especially civil society, in the implementation of ECPF. The sixth section concludes the discussion in this paper.

II. The challenges requiring response: the Nature of West African (in) Security

Any attempt to discuss the activities of actors from both “above” and “below” must identify and discuss the security situation that these actors have to react to. Indeed, for most of the late 1980s and 1990s, West Africa faced considerable security challenges which brought the region to the focus of global attention. Apart from the bitter civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire, there were other challenges like controversial democratic transitions, conflicts over the ownership, management and control over natural resources, religious conflicts, separatist tendencies and border disputes. In this section, there is a

panoramic discussion of these security challenges and how they have constituted security challenges that attracted the attention of the regional organisation, and actors from both “above” and “below” in West Africa.

(a) *Civil Wars*

The dawn of the 1990 decade saw civil wars break out in three West African nations in relatively quick succession: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire. The conflicts in these three countries have attracted considerable attention from scholars such that it will be unnecessary to go into any details here. What is thus presented here is a summary that is sufficient for the focus of this paper. Liberia, the first of the three countries to experience civil war, has had its conflict come in two phases: 1989 – 1996 and 1999 - 2004.¹ The first took off as a war against organized by Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) against the government of the late President Samuel Doe but later took a multi-dimensional civil war.² This phase of the war ended after local and international initiatives organized an acceptable election.

In the election, which was won by Charles Taylor, another opportunity came to bring durable peace to the country. This, however did not last long when a second phase of war began in the country. During this second phase, two armed groups: the Liberia United for Reconstruction and Development (LURD), and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), fought against the Taylor administration.³ The civil war was to attract the unpleasant distinction of being one of the worst in the continent and it is estimated that up to 200,000 could have died in the war. As will be shown later in this paper, the regional organization, ECOWAS, countries in the region, the United Nations and a host of actors operating locally, contributed to ending this bitter conflict.

While Liberia was still in flames, war again broke out in the neighbouring Sierra Leone. Again, different aspects of the war in the West African nation of Sierra Leone have also received considerable attention.⁴ In the country, a rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front

¹ People in the country often say that the war has come in three phases. The first war was the one against Doe, while the war against Taylor has been divided into three. I find this potentially confusing for those who are not deeply knowledgeable about events in the country. Thus, for convenience, I have divided the war into two: against Doe and against Taylor.

² Among the factions that emerged in the course of the conflict are: the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) under Charles Taylor, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) of Prince Yomie Johnson; Liberian Peace Council (LPC) of George Boley; ULIMO K of Alhaji Kromah and (ULIMO J) of Roosevelt Johnson.

³ The Liberian United for Democracy and Reconstruction (LURD) began its campaigns in September 1999. It later joined with another group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). In June 2003, their action degenerated into a bloody civil war, and its attendant cataclysmic three phases referred to in the local Liberian parlance as World War I, II, and III.

⁴ See, for example, Krijn Peters and Paul Richard, “Why we Fight: Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone”, *Africa: Journal of International African Institute*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 1998; “Sierra Leone Prisoners of War? Children Detained in Barracks and Prisons, Index: London: International Secretariat of Amnesty International; Paul Richards, “Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: A Crisis of Youth?” In O. Furley (ed.), *Conflict in Africa* London: I. B. Tauris, 1995 and Ibrahim Abdullahi, “The Lumpen Proletariat and the Sierra Leone Conflict” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, June 1998. These include David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, London: IISS Adelphi Paper; 1998, William Shawcross, “In Praise of Sandlines”, *The Spectator*, August 1998; Funmi Olonisakin, “Mercenaries Fill the Vacuum”, *World Today*, June 1998. Examples of these include Funmi Olonisakin, “Nigeria and the peacekeeping Mission in Sierra Leone”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, July 1998; Paul Conton, “The Battle for Freetown”, *West Africa*, 2 – 15 March 1998; Desmond

(RUF), under the leadership of the late Foday Sankoh,⁵ fought four successive governments between 1994 and 2002, resulting in up to 150,000 casualties and several more displaced persons.⁶ The war in Sierra Leone has also brought out an array of actors, including the national army, local civil defense units, known as the *Kamajors*,⁷ regional peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, the United Nations military team, mercenaries and members of the British army.⁸

The Ivorian Civil War began in September 2002. It was set against a number of contexts, especially the death of former President Felix Houphouët Boigny who had ruled the country with dictatorial tendencies for 30 years. The tight grip with which he held the country meant that organising a successor was difficult. Other key issues that played key roles in the conflict included the large number of foreigners in Côte d'Ivoire and the Ivorians perception of the role they can play in determining the outcome of elections; of somewhat recent foreign descent and the implications for electoral voting in the country; the discrimination toward people of Burkinabe origin, which made neighboring countries, particularly Burkina Faso, fear a massive migration of refugees; economic downturn and general unemployment. At the beginning, violence was turned against African foreigners, especially Burkinabes. The actual war began on 19 September 2002, when troops, many of whom originated from the north of the country, mutinied. They launched attacks in many cities, including Abidjan. The war had gone through many phases.

A number of forces were involved in the conflict, including: official government forces, the National Army (FANCI), also called *loyalists*, formed and equipped essentially since 2003; the *Young Patriots*: nationalist groups aligned with President Laurent Gbagbo; mercenaries recruited by president Gbagbo; former combatants of Liberia, including under-17 youths, forming the so-called "Lima militia"; *New Forces* (Forces Nouvelles – FN), ex-northern rebels, who hold 60% of the country French military forces: troops sent within the framework of Operation Unicorn and under UN mandate, 3000 men in February 2003 and 4600 in November 2004. Although the casualties were not as high as those in Liberia and Sierra Leone, they were also high and also took the intervention of external forces to bring the situation under control. After several months of fighting, a peace agreement was signed in March 2007 between the government and the New Forces. This marked the beginning of the peace process in the country.

Davies, "Peacekeeping: African Style", *West Africa* 4 – 17 May, 1998. See, among others, E. Garcia, *A Time of Hope and Transformation: Sierra Leone Peace Process Report and Reflection*, London: International Alert, 1997.

⁵ Foday Sankoh was a member of the Sierra Leone armed forces. He was arrested and jailed for alleged involvement in a military coup against the government of the late President Siaka Stevens. After his jail term, he went on exile from where he planned his rebellion. He died in July 2003 from a stroke.

⁶ The number of those who died in the Sierra Leone civil conflict has been quoted as being between 75 and 200 thousands. It is, of course, impossible to get an accurate figure, but I think a figure of about 100,000 may not be too far away from the mark.

⁷ The word, *Kamajor*, is the Mende (one of the main ethnic groups in Sierra Leone) word for hunter.

⁸ For a discussion on all these actors in the civil war, see Lanasana Gberie, *Sierra Leone: Destruction and Resurgence*, London: Hurst, 2005.

Some of the most unpleasant aspects of these wars were the ways civilians came into the equation as both victims and as perpetrators. Children became weapons of war in ways that had not been previously seen in West Africa. Children were abducted from schools and conscripted into rebel forces.⁹ Similarly, incessant rape of women and their abduction for use as sex slaves and as part of fighting forces became a regular features of these wars. These were more profound in Sierra Leone and Liberia. As will be shown later, these were major considerations underlining the involving of civil society, in preventing a recurrence of the violent civil conflicts with widespread regional impact.

(b) Controversial Democratic Transitions

Democratic transitions have always been crucial issues in West Africa and on a number of occasions elections have resulted in civil tensions that have attracted the involvement of civil society. Some of the recent elections in this regard include those in Togo, Guinea and Niger Republic. In Togo, the death of late President Gnassingbe Eyadema resulted in a sudden even if questionable transfer of power to his son. This was a test for ECOWAS and it took the intervention of the organisation and some key countries like Nigeria and Ghana to ensure that the trend was reversed and a more credible transfer of power was arranged.

In Guinea, the controversies that have surrounded democratic transition began first with the activities of late President Lansana Conteh. The sudden death of the ailing President Conte resulted in military take over that received region-wide condemnation. The new government was created under the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) and Captain Mousa Dadis Camara proclaimed himself head. At the beginning the coup leaders gave the population hope by promising them accountability, democracy, employment and a better lifestyle. Nine months into his Presidency, Dadis did not live up to his initial promises and indeed began to indicate his interest in standing for elections and this was seriously challenged by civil society. Further complications came into the equation when in-fighting among the coup plotters resulted in another attempted assassination of the new leader. Camara was shot by one of his aides in December 2009 and was flown to Morocco for treatment first before being transferred to Ouagadougou in January 2010. Guinea is currently led by Gen. Sekouba Konate who is perceived as more flexible. He has elected a Civilian Prime Minister-Jean Marie Dore from the “Forces Vives” and Rabiadou Serah Diallo (Secretary General of Guinea’s National Workers Confederation) has been nominated head of the council in charge of the transition from military rule to civilian rule. Both nominations illustrates that the government has realized that it is crucial to work with civil society for a smooth transition. As of the time of writing, there still remains general confusion in the country as to the state of leadership in the country.

The situation in Niger, also on-going as at the time of writing, is equally complex. Here, the attempt by the elected President to extend his mandate beyond constitutional stipulation received local and regional condemnation. This resulted in ECOWAS making strong policy statements on the country. Again, complications came into the equation when a military coup was organised against the President in February 2010. This resulted in the country being suspended from both the African Union and ECOWAS. But apart from these cases where major problems came as a result of controversial democratic transitions, ECOWAS has been deeply involved in the other countries’ efforts to ensure credible democratic transitions. As

⁹ The single highest incidence of abduction of children occurred in Sierra Leone in January 1999 with the abduction of approximately 4,000 children by rebel forces during their invasion of Freetown.

will be shown later, the organisation has worked with local community groups in organising election monitoring and ensuring grass-root participation in elections.

(c) *Conflicts over the ownership, Management and Control of Natural resources*

Natural resources have been at the centre of many conflicts in West Africa. While ECOWAS has not been too deeply involved in many of these conflicts, largely because they are often seen as internal affairs of these countries, local civil society groups have raised the issues with the organisation and have brought key issues of concern to its attention. Although the natural resource at the centre of many of these conflicts is land, other natural resources primary to national economies in the region are now coming to the focus of attention. In Nigeria, the situation in the Niger Delta has gained global attention, just as the management of diamonds in Sierra Leone, timber in Liberia and Uranium in Niger. In northern Ghana, conflict among different ethnic groups over land later got compounded with disagreements over *chieftaincy* matters to result in violence that engulfed a whole region. Also the civil wars discussed above have clear links with natural resources as these resources were used to finance some of the wars. As will be shown later in this paper, actors from “below” have contributed to addressing the security challenges that have emanated from the politics of natural resource management and their involvement has been invaluable. The discovery of oil in a number of West African countries has also raised the importance of natural resource politics in the region.

(d) *Religious Unrests*

While religious conflicts are not common occurrences in West Africa, the few countries experiencing them have suffered enormously from their devastating consequences. Most of these conflicts have been between Christians and Muslims and the country where this has been most prevalent is Nigeria. Here, religion has mixed up with economics, politics and haphazard governmental policies to result in bitter civil conflicts that have resulted in the death of thousands. The latest of these was in January 2010, when riots broke out in the northern Nigeria town of Jos between Christians and Moslems. As with conflicts involving natural resources, conflicts here have also been linked to political differences, economic rivalries and social tension. Other West African countries where religion has been at the centre of local disputes include Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia. It needs to be pointed out though that in none of these cases was the situation as serious as that in Nigeria.

(e) *Separatist Tendencies*

While there are very few disputes with the national composition of many West African states, there are some cases of where sections of the populations are clamouring for secession from the rest of the population. As would be expected, this has been resisted and there have been few conflicts emanating from this tendency in West Africa. The best example of this is the Casamance region of Senegal that has been clamouring to form an independent nation. Although far from being of the same comparable scale, there are also similar tendencies being expressed by sections of the population in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. A tendency that seems common with many of the regions aspiring separatism is their endowment with natural resources. While the Niger Delta is rich with oil and natural gas the Casamance region is widely regarded as the bread-basket of Senegal.

(f) *Border Disputes*

Although border disputes have receded significantly, there are still a few that are attracting attention. One of such is between Guinea and Sierra Leone over the Yenga region. Yenga is a

village in the Kissi Teng Chiefdom in the Kailahun District of Easter Sierra Leone. It is about 804 metres from the left bank of the Makona/Moa River. In 2000, the Guinean Armed forces occupied Lilema Hill, approximately 300 metres from the left bank of the river, a boundary dispute has emerged in the country since 2002. While Guinea is not contesting that Yenga belongs to Sierra Leone, there is still a problem to agree on the official boundary between the two countries along the Makona/Moa River as outlined in the British/French protocol of July 1912 and associated maps. It is, however, important to point out that a number of NGOs in Sierra Leone are now trying to work closely with counterparts in Guinea to resolve the conflicts.¹⁰

In concluding this section, it can be pointed out that the security situation in West Africa in the last two decades has necessitated the deep involvement of both the regional organisation, ECOWAS and a host of other actors operating locally. It is apparent that ECOWAS recognised the importance of the activities of these local actors and has tried to factor this into its strategy. The next section assesses the various ways in which actors from below have contributed to peace and security in West Africa.

III. *Assessing the activities of actors from below*

It is difficult to list all the various actors that have operated from “below”. However, key among these have included: civil society organisations, religious organisations, trade unions, gender-focused groups and youths. In many cases, these groups have worked in close association with the regional organisation, ECOWAS, while in others they have worked independently and have sometimes reported back to ECOWAS. In this section, there is a discussion of the role played by these actors from across the region.

(a) Civil Society Organisations

Over time, West African civil society has developed various strands of activities around the security issues of concern to them, including, for example, awareness campaigns, advocacy, policy and programmatic interventions. In different national contexts, civil society has provided the active voice and response to the security challenges impacting the daily lives of citizens. This advocacy has served to bring these issues onto the global and regional security agenda, thus shifting the focus from traditional state security concerns. A number of local civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were founded to respond to some of these security concerns. These include, for example, groups such as Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) in Sierra Leone, Centre for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE), Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, and Foundation for International Integrity (FIND) in Liberia; Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA), African Security Dialogue and Research (ASDR), and West African Network for Peace-building (WANEP West African Network for Peace-building (WANEP) in Ghana; African Strategic and Peace Research Group (AFSTRAG), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and CLEEN Foundation in Nigeria; RADHO in Senegal; Foundation

¹⁰ The names of Sierra Leone NGOs that have formed this network include The Campaign For Good Governance, (CGG), The Mano River Union Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET), Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms (SLANSA), Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), West Africa Network on Peace-building (WANEP), Centre for the Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA) and Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)

for Security and Development of Africa (FOSDA), and the West Africa Women's Association (WAWA and the African Security Sector Network (ASSN), which extends beyond West Africa to the whole continent.). All these organizations are working with ECOWAS on issues of governance, early warning, small arms proliferation and gender.

Similarly, the West African Network on Small Arms (WAANSA), grew out of a global campaign against the proliferation of illicit arms, which was led largely by the International Network on Small Arms (IANSA) coordinated by International Alert, Saferworld and BASIC – all UK-based NGOs. This global campaign in turn gained momentum as a result of the first global conference on the Small Arms and Light Weapons at the United Nations in 2001, which led to follow-up conferences.

It must be pointed out that civil society does not always speak with one voice. Indeed, a noticeable trend in some of the countries where natural resources have been among the issues at the root of conflict is the divergence of opinion among civil society. This tendency has further increased with the realization by the elite of the importance of civil society and their attendant determination to exploit it to their advantage. For example, in Liberia, the civil society was divided at the beginning of the war. The media, for instance, was divided between those who supported the old order and those in support of Charles Taylor's order.

The same applied to Sierra Leone, where a segment of the civil society actively supported the government and other pitched their tent with the rebels. However, the best example was in Rwanda, where the Church, historically part of the ruling party, actively supported the genocide. It was, however, not long after the beginning of conflicts in all these countries, when the extent of the devastation became pronounced, that a "people-conscious" civil society emerged to challenge the elite monopolization of the civil society. This has been assisted by two factors: the formation of non-governmental organizations geared towards the activation of the civil society and the foreign sponsorship of these organizations and other forms of mass participation in governance.

Also in Sierra Leone, civil society played a major role in the effort to end the war. Although the civil society had started making efforts to get the Momoh government and the rebel group the RUF to find a way of ending the war, the efforts became more pronounced after the military took over from Momoh in 1992. Indeed, by the time Valentine Strasser was overthrown and Julius Maada Bio assumed power, civil society had become strong enough to force the government to hold elections, despite the government's desire to the contrary. From this period onwards, civil society became stronger, and has been active in the attempt to end the war. As a civil society spokesperson in the country noted, civil society decided to hijack the initiative and thus prevent a situation where the RUF and the government "give the people peace when they (RUF and government) want and take it back when they like" (interviews to be cited).

Initially, civil society was reluctant to talk to the RUF so as not to give them what was considered an undeserved recognition. However, after the January 1999 crisis, the civil society realized that the government or even ECOWAS could not provide the necessary protection, and thus decided to talk directly with the RUF, but insisted it must be on its own terms. The civil society formulated the principles that would guide discussion. Among these are:

- (a) Provision of direct dialogue with the RUF
- (b) Provision of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee
- (c) Provision of a conditional, but not a general amnesty
- (d) The RUF to withdraw from Kono and other resource-rich areas
- (e) No provision for power sharing
- (f) Unconditional release of all abducted children

One particular NGO that played a formidable role in organizing the civil society is the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), led by Zainab Bangura. The civil society tried to put its views across before the Lomé Peace agreement was signed but was ignored. In response the civil society organized a successful one-day protest. The success of this made the government and the RUF to realize the new resolve of the civil society.

In Liberia, too, civil society made efforts to end the war. Unlike Sierra Leone, however, this involvement came much later. The subsequent proliferation of armed factions in the war further meant that several segments of civil society that could have stood up to protest inevitably found themselves involved in partisan alliance with one of the numerous armed factions that emerged in the course of the war. When eventually civil society took the initiative, they made little impact. During the negotiation of the Akosombo (Ghana) agreement, when it appeared that the factions were not willing to make peace, there was a demonstration across Monrovia that the parties at the peace talks should not come back home unless an agreement has been reached.

Also worthy of consideration in the role of local civil society are the activities of youth. A major issue in natural resource conflicts across Africa is the involvement of youth. In Sierra Leone, Liberia, DRC, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, youth have played a prominent role in the expression of conflicts related to natural resources. Even in communal conflicts over land, like those in South West Nigeria between the Ife and Modakeke people, and in Northern Ghana, between the Nanumbas and the Kokumbas, youths have been at the forefront of attention.

Religious Institutions

In many West African countries, religious organisations have played important roles in resolving conflicts and in some cases, they have worked very closely with ECOWAS. During the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Churches came up and were able to assist ECOWAS in the efforts to end the conflicts. Indeed, at a stage during the peace process, Christian churches took active parts in some of the peace agreements and even the organisation used local religious institutions to address security concerns. For example, in August 1980, the Liberian Inter-Faith Mediation Committee assisted the former Gambian President and ECOWAS Chairman, President Dauda Jawara, in establishing the Interim Government of former President Amos Sawyer. The arrangement also made Bishop Diggs of the Lutheran Church the Vice President.¹¹

But apart from cases of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, religious institutions have also been active in addressing conflicts in a number of other countries. In Nigeria for example, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has been at the centre of seeking solutions to many

¹¹ The Liberian Civil War, Published by the Peace and Justice Commission, Monrovia, July 1994, p. 41

of the conflicts that have occurred, especially those that are rooted to religion. Also in Nigeria, a somewhat peculiar activity from actors from “below” that has won global recognition was the activities of two individuals James Wuye, a pastor and Imam Mohammed Ashafa, a Moslen cleric. The two were respectively leaders of the youth wings of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Islamic Society of Nigeria (ISN). Both have been violent radicals in the propagation of their faith and both had personal tragedies of the roles they played in the forceful propagation of their faith. Apart from losing members of their families in riots, Wuye, in fact lost one of his arms. Amidst trepidation the two of them came together to form the “Pastor and the Imam Project”, which has won several national and global awards. Pastor Wuye noted in a February 2001 interview:

We are now like husbands and wife that must not divorce: if we divorce, our children will suffer and our children in this context are the Nigerian youths whom we must not allow to suffer. So we have vowed to stay together.¹²

Trade and Professional Unions

From 2006 to date Guinea has faced recurrent instability. The most recent protests and strikes started in 2006 both trade unions and students were involved in this. As a consequence several students were killed. In February 2007, another strike was organized by both the union and opposition leaders. This also led to death of several citizens during clashes with the police. The protest came as a result of the high prices of commodities on the market, low salaries, increasing corruption in the government and high youth unemployment. During the protests, of 2006 and 2007 the unions played an important role in organizing protests, demanding for accountability, and the departure of Conte from power. The population was also frustrated by the fact that Guinea is very rich in natural resources but is yet one of the poorest countries in the world. Only elites benefit from the profit of natural resources.

The civil society in Guinea has played a key role in the recent transitions through unions and their branches across the country. The protests in June 2006, January 2007 were organized with the union of two former rival organizations-National Confederations of Guinean Workers (CNTG) and the Workers Union (USTG). As a result of this success, in 2007, two NGOs, and the Civic Alliance, also organized nationwide strikes with unions.¹³ According to WACSEREIES (2009:15), “Guinea's unions are perceived to be symbolically important because of the key role they played in ending colonization in Guinea and installing the country's first post-independence president, former union leader Sékou Touré.” One of the key people from the Union was Haja Rabiadou Sera Diallo (Secretary of the Union of Workers of Guinea (USTG)). She confronted both the Conte regime and the CNDD thereafter. She has been praised by both Guineans in Guinea and across the Diaspora for her key role during this transition. After the September 2009 massacre, civil society organizations and unions have also called for mourning days a respect to the civilians killed in the protest. The power of union, the unions of opposition groups under the Force Vives have demonstrated that together the population can stand up to any regime in Guinea.

¹² Francis Falola, “27 years after, Handshake between Islam and Christianity”, *Sunday Punch*, February 1, 2009.

¹³ WACSEREIES, 2009

Gender-focused organisations

Gender-focused associations, especially women's groups have been active in West Africa and the regional organisation, ECOWAS has relied on their activities in its efforts to bring peace to the region. During the civil war in Sierra Leone and Liberia, women organisations took active parts in the search for peace. In Liberia, the deep involvement of women from the grass-root compelled rebels and warlords to reconsider their positions at key moments. The momentum built by the Liberian Women's Initiative, led by Leymah Gbowie and others resulted in a women's movement for peace in Liberia, which has now gained international acclaim through the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, directed by Abigail Disney. Overall, the role of women in the search for peace was to reap reward with the appointment of a female acting Head of State, Ruth Perry in Liberia, nearly a decade before the emergence of a democratically elected woman president in that country, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. But apart from these initiatives at local levels, there was also the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), which brings together women from the three Mano River Union countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. On the whole, as I have argued elsewhere, women's activism on peace and security issues in West Africa has been given added momentum by global *processes* such as the Beijing Conference on Women, in 1995, the resulting Platform for Action, and subsequent follow-up to the Beijing process, in 2000, 2005 and currently in 2010.¹⁴ While West African women, most visibly through the MARWOPNET, mobilised internally to respond to the impact of armed conflict in their region, they received tremendous boost and recognition through these global processes.

Youth

Although many of the conflicts that have torn West Africa apart had been championed by youths, it is also something of an irony that youths are also behind some of the efforts to bring peace to many of the countries in the region. Even during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, youth groups were also coming up to clamour for peace. While it was difficult for many of them to operate from their respective countries, they operated from the refugee camps they fled to after the commencement of conflicts in their respective countries. Some of these youth groups also informally sent representatives to observe some of the ECOWAS proceedings to bring peace to their country.¹⁵

Youth at local levels were also involved in the organisation of peace radios during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. With very crude technology youths from both countries organised radio station, albeit of limited coverage, with which they spread the message of peace across their area. Again, through this medium, they were able to assist in the implementation of the DDR exercise and even in the efforts to address immediate post-civil war security concerns.

Before concluding this discussion on the roles played by actors from below, it is important to point out that it is not all the time that these actors have contributed to peace. As experiences

¹⁴ Funmi Olonisakin, "Evolving Narratives of Security Governance", in Funmi Olonisakin and Awino Okech (eds), *New Narratives of Security Governance in Africa*, Oxford, Pambazuka Press, 2010.

¹⁵ I met some of the Liberian youth who claimed they formed peace vanguards from refugee camps to influence peace process in their country. These people said they sent representatives to some of the peace meetings. Although they were not allowed to enter the meetings the statements they wrote was collected from them and a promise was made for onward delivery to the warlords and others participating in the meetings. Their influence on the peace process was at best marginal.

across West Africa have shown some of these groups were also involved in the bitter conflicts that dominated the attention of the regional organisation. It is possibly against the background that ECOWAS has decided to establish a more enduring relationship with civil society and other groups in member states and get them more involved in the designing and implementation of conflict prevention mechanisms in the region as will be shown in section four. The next section discusses the process of institutionalisation of civil society relationship with ECOWAS, which ultimately created a bridge that links actors from “above” and “below”.

IV. *Regional cognizance of actors from below: ECOWAS and non-state security enhancers*

From the moment ECOWAS incorporated security considerations into its brief, the organisation realised that the task was much more than what it could handle alone. This reality came distinctly into the open when civil conflicts broke out in some of these countries. ECOWAS realised that the exigencies of the moment required innovative thinking. It was logical that civil society actors would seek to engage with national and regional institutions in their bid to contribute to policy change on the security issues of concern to them. In the first instance, many of these actors were initially responding to developments, which largely impacted people within state boundaries.

As I have argued elsewhere, three main factors became apparent in the civil society effort to take issues of security concern to the people beyond immediate locales to national and regional levels.¹⁶ First, many national governments were not as responsive to these security concerns, either because they did not have the capacity to respond, or there was no political will to do so. Second, it was the key officials of the central ECOWAS bureaucracy, the Commission, who showed the willingness to work with civil society. Third, officials of some member states, which were advanced in the democratic process were more open to civil society engagement with ECOWAS and sometimes facilitated civil society access to ECOWAS processes.

It is noteworthy that while many governments across West African were not accessible, civil society found the sub-regional organisation, ECOWAS, a more receptive entry point on a range of peace and security issues. At first glance, this appears contradictory because the Authority of Heads of State and Government remains the highest decision-making organ of the sub-regional organisation. ECOWAS is governed by the decisions of Heads of State and Government and as such, it is logical to conclude that leaders that are inaccessible to their population at home cannot effectively facilitate their access to a regional organisation in which they serve as part of the highest authority. However, West African states were not all at the same level of recalcitrance. Some states had progressed further than others in their democratic transitions and as such, they were more open to civil society engagement. States such as Ghana provided valuable entry points for regional civil society as discussed below. In addition, the ECOWAS Commission has been more open to engagement with a range of actors not least civil society.

¹⁶ See Funmi Olonisakin, “ECOWAS and Civil Society Movements in West Africa”, *IDS Bulletin*, 40:2, March 2009.

The interaction between civil society and ECOWAS began as an ad hoc one, limited only to provision of advice by some individual civil society actors often informally. Such interaction became more visible by the time ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (ECOWAS, 2001) supplementary to the ECOWAS Mechanism. Prior to the adoption of this Protocol, ECOWAS had placed two issues on its agenda, one of which was outside the traditional security domain that formed the focus of the organisation. First, the ECOWAS Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons, another indicator of ECOWAS' attempt to address pressing security challenges, was adopted in 1998. This Moratorium and the UN conference on small arms in 2001 provided some momentum for civil society activism in this area. Second, the issue of children affected by armed conflict became a key concern of ECOWAS from 2000 partly due to the activism of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, which facilitated the establishment of a Child Protection Unit in ECOWAS with the support of the Government of Canada. Civil Society engagement with ECOWAS on this issue has not been as comprehensive as initially anticipated.

After 2003, there has been a major shift in the nature and level of civil society and ECOWAS interaction. By early 2003, a number of civil society organisations including West African Network for peace (WANEP) and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) among others had become active parts of ECOWAS consultations on peace and security. Gradually, these consultations began to coalesce into concrete initiatives that built upon on-going work on peace and security in the region. Two events in January 2003 were significant not only in terms of consolidating civil society work on peace and security but also in strengthening ECOWAS-civil society collaboration. First, a number of West African civil society groups met to review the UNDP supported Programme of Coordination and Assistance on Security and Development (PCASED), which was established to backstop the ECOWAS Moratorium. Among other things, this meeting recommended that the Moratorium be transformed into a binding Convention; that a Small Arms Unit should be established in ECOWAS in part to address the gaps in PCASED-ECOWAS coordination; and proposed that these recommendations be placed on the agenda of the ECOWAS Council of Ministers' meeting also taking place in Dakar, during the same period. Second, it is noteworthy that civil society was able to gain access to this meeting largely with the support of the then Foreign Minister of Ghana, Hon. Hackman Owusu-Agyeman, who placed the issue on the agenda. This civil society group's already on-going engagement with ECOWAS, made it possible to take these recommendations forward. The adoption by ECOWAS, in June 2006, of its *Convention on Small Arms, Light Weapons, their Ammunition, and other Associated Material*, and the subsequent establishment of a small arms unit in ECOWAS have been attributed in part, to the influence of civil society.

In May 2003, what was an ad hoc interaction between ECOWAS and civil society moved toward institutionalisation. From 30 May to 1 June 2003, ECOWAS Secretariat co-convened a consultation in Abuja with the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and International Alert. This consultation focused on strengthening the capacity of ECOWAS and West African civil society on human security. Present at the meeting were senior representatives of ECOWAS institutions, civil society representatives, policy and academic experts, and representatives of bilateral and multi-lateral funding agencies. Participants analysed the human security situation in West Africa according to the conditions in states experiencing conflict or emerging from conflict, states in various stages of transition to stable

democracy or in the process of consolidating democracy and states confronted by various challenges to their human security situation. The consultation emphasised the need for collective regional response to many of these challenges.

The conclusions set a framework for institutionalising this relationship by agreeing a number of mechanisms, which include the following among others (ECOWAS, CDD and International Alert 2003):

- the establishment of national and regional monitoring mechanisms on the status of human security in West Africa using the zonal structures of the observation bureaux for early warning within ECOWAS;
- a review of the processes for civil society accreditation with ECOWAS, especially the 1994 Council Decision in this regard;
- the creation of a civil society unit within the Executive Secretariat of ECOWAS;
- an audit of status of implementation, including legislative domestication of ECOWAS treaties, protocols and decisions;
- the creation of an independent civil society secretariat to facilitate liaison between West Africa's civil society organisations and ECOWAS institutions;
- a regular Peoples' Assembly of West Africa's peoples and organisations on the back of the Ministerial Council meeting preceding the annual summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS;
- a joint ECOWAS-institutions-civil society task force to help in developing a strategic plan for safeguarding human security in West Africa and an operational and resource mobilisation plan for implementing such strategy

In order to take these proposals forward, an *ad-hoc* group was established to work with the ECOWAS Commission, other ECOWAS institutions, the authorities of designated host states for ECOWAS summit meetings and the peoples and civil society of West Africa. This group was charged with the task of developing appropriate contacts and partnerships to achieve these objectives. The process of institutionalisation has progressed rapidly since this first meeting. A civil society unit was created in ECOWAS before the end of that year. The West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF) was formed before the end of 2003 and the first peoples' assembly was held prior to the Summit of Heads of State in December 2003. Representatives of civil society presented the outcome of the Assembly to the Heads of State meeting at that Summit and this has been an annual occurrence since then.

Unlike the period before 2000, it is now not unusual for civil society to be actively involved in ECOWAS initiatives and activities. Indeed, the implementation of several aspects of the ECOWAS Mechanism is being done with the support of civil society. For example, the development of the indicators of early warning of conflict, to support ECOWAS early warning system has been developed in collaboration with WANEP. Similarly, the recently adopted ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) was developed with both ECOWAS and civil society expertise.

Apart from formal civil society groups, ECOWAS has also established and maintained links with a broad range of informal groups in many West African countries. Because of the diversity of the activities of the organisations, many organisations in member states have had reasons to relate with different sections of ECOWAS and this has added to peace and stability in the region. For example, traders operating from across the region have had to relate with

the organisation to discuss issues surrounding free movement of goods and services. Apart from this there are separate sections of ECOWAS that deal with youth and gender issues and among the subject often discussed by these sections are peace and security issues. Having now discussed the nature of the relationship between ECOWAS and other actors from “below”, this paper now examines how some of these actors have contributed to the ECOWAS search for durable peace in West Africa.

V. *ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and the cognizance of Actors from “Below”*

As noted earlier, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, (ECPF) remains the most comprehensive conflict prevention mechanism on the African continent. The Assembly of Heads of States and Government adopted this framework in 2008. The ECPF realizes the importance of working closely with local civil society in the management of conflict and paragraph 114 of the Framework provides an avenue for ECOWAS civil society engagement.

The Paragraph notes:

Cooperation between ECOWAS and Civil Society shall take the following roles and responsibilities into consideration:

- (a) Member States and civil society within them shall bear the principal responsibility for peace and security. To this end, civil society organisations and the private sector shall constitute valued and bona fide partners at regional (ECOWAS), national (Member State) and local (Community) levels in the implementation and evaluation of the ECPF and in cooperation arrangements with external partners.
- (b) ECOWAS shall facilitate [i] the periodic evaluation of the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) and other partner civil society networks in the region with a view to strengthening internal democracy, inclusiveness, programming and oversight; [ii] the establishment of a mechanism similar to the UN ECOSOC with modalities for Memorandums of Understanding and different levels of accreditation to serve as an interface with civil society networks; [iii] Information sharing with civil society networks and setting up of communication channels for civil society inputs into ECOWAS policies and programmes.
- (c) Civil Society organisations shall [i] contribute to the conceptualization, development, implementation and monitoring of ECOWAS policies and programmes on peace and security; [ii] mobilise and channel civil society concerns and findings into ECOWAS initiatives; [iii] lead advocacy in Member States through awareness raising, lobbying and campaigns around ECOWAS resources, including the Community Court and Parliament, policies and interventions; (iv) spearhead conflict prevention and peace-building activities in Member States, especially at the national policy and community levels; [v] provide, alongside the private sector, technical and financial support for the implementation of activities within the ECPF

Since the adoption of the ECPF, an implementation process has begun, with the development of action plans on the various components of the Framework. While not all the action plans for components of the ECPF have been developed, those being developed have allocated considerable role to local actors and civil society. For example, the ECPF component on *Natural Resource Governance* allocated key roles to local actors. In the Women, Peace and Security component of the ECPF, the proposed action-plan suggests key roles for women at the local level in the implementation of key security initiatives. Indeed, the entire action plan for this component is predicated on the inevitability of deep involvement of women at community levels. In yet another component whose log-frame has been developed – the Media – actors at the local level are expected to conduct key roles, including the organisation of Peace Radio at community level. Interestingly the development of the plans of action for the ECPF components have been led by civil society actors – the development of the media component, for example, was led by the Media Foundation for West Africa, based in Ghana, while the Security Governance was led by the African Security Sector Network (ASSN), which has a West Africa chapter. Indeed, West African members of the ASSN have a track record of regularly providing expertise to ECOWAS, individually or collectively. What began as an ad hoc approach from the 1990s to the 2000s has now been systematised into a collaborative arrangement between ECOWAS and the ASSN. Similarly, the West African Network on Security and Development (WANSED), consisting of members from across West African states, has engaged ECOWAS on issues of peace and security and has also provided support to the development of the ECPF Plan of Action.

VI. Overall observations and conclusions

In West Africa, as indeed, in other parts of the continent, security will most certainly continue to be a major issue for many years to come and efforts to address some of the challenges emanating from it will continue to attract interest and concern. What now seems to have become established is that the activities of actors operating from “above” cannot alone address the concerns of the citizens “below”. Indeed, it is only when the power, legitimacy and the commitment of those operating from “above” is complimented with the deeper understanding, knowledge and exposure of the people “below” that sustained peace and stability can come to all the regions in the continent. However, notwithstanding the huge achievements realised in bringing the voices and activities of actors from below to bear in regional peace and security processes and the progress realised in the effort to institutionalise the relationship between civil society actors and ECOWAS, much remains to be done. Several challenges must be addressed in order to build a true regional movement from below on issues of regional security.

The discussion in this paper reveals three broadly observable patterns. First is that particular security issues or themes have tended to receive more attention than others. One obvious area, for example, is the problem of armed conflict and attendant issues such as the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. As a result, the issue of conflict management as well as disarmament, demobilisation and small arms management, in particular countries and areas affected by armed conflict (such as the Mano River countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) tend to attract greater attention at the regional level. Invariably, the root causes of those conflicts and how they connect to larger issues of structural violence in the region, or indeed the need to comprehensively reintegrate disarmed combatants and youth or rehabilitate those affected by armed conflict get less regional attention. Although the new

ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework might now begin to address some of these gaps, this remains to be seen.

Second is that the role of local actors in contributing to peace and security tends to be restricted to certain locales and groups of countries. This is the case with the involvement of faith based/ religious actors, youth or women's groups who become actively involved in addressing security challenges in their locales. They invariably become relegated to the background or their work is restricted to those locales largely because among other things, they do not have the skills to negotiate their participation and gain access to the processes at the higher, regional level. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the alternative discourses and innovative solutions found by these actors at these lower levels either do not make it to the top for regional lessons learning or they get lost in translation.

Third and related to this, the widespread nature of the involvement of a cross-section of local actors found in those countries and locales, does not move up to the regional level, where only a certain type of civil society actors engaging on a narrower set of issues are able to engage the regional organisation. At the regional level, the actors that are more visible are the more educated, expert networks who not only provide the requisite expertise on overall regional security issues and are often of interest to ECOWAS officials who also benefit from their expertise. In principle, the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), or the ASSN for example, earlier mentioned in this paper, are expected to collated experiences from the very local levels and translate these into relevant discourse and policy recommendations at the regional level. But in reality, their focus is invariably narrower than the reality on the ground suggests and their ability to represent local voices in a robust manner is severely limited. WACSOF, for example, has spent an inordinate amount of time on election monitoring, while ASSN focus on security sector governance issues.

It is in these areas that much work remains to be done. Whether and how the plethora of security concerns at the local level and the civil society actors working on these issues can be significantly up-scaled and given prominence at the regional level is an issue that requires closer examination through further research.