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Strengthening Peace in West Africa: How Regional Infrastructures for Peace Function in Practice

Over the past 50 years, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has established mechanisms to integrate the region and lay the foundation for regional infrastructures for peace (RI4P). Yet, linkages among ECOWAS member states have remained weak, leaving the responsibility to prevent conflict to individual actors owing to changing conflict patterns. With the nature of these conflict changes, demands for stronger cooperation between ECOWAS, the member states, and local communities to harness and to connect the capabilities of all stakeholders becomes more essential – this policy brief explores how.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ECOWAS Commission should urge its member states to create national infrastructures for peace (NI4P) to forge strong links between national and local stakeholders, as well as civil society. African think tanks can function as partners by workshoping with relevant actors about what a peacebuilding network means in their context.
- National peacebuilding institutions in cooperation with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and its external partners must facilitate workshops that give local actors the opportunity to network among each other to strengthen horizontal exchange on early warning, conflict prevention, and management.
- The ECOWAS Commission and the Early Warning Directorate, in cooperation with WANEP, should implement the second phase of the Country Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (CRVA) to identify specific factors that contribute to West African communities' resilience. Based on the findings, the ECOWAS Commission and the national governments should develop a cooperation plan to activate local mechanisms.
- The mandate of the Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms initiated by ECOWAS should be clarified to understand how the institutions can relate to NI4P and the ECOWAS Commission in order to enhance functionality.

Strengthening Peace in West Africa: How Regional Infrastructures for Peace Function in Practice

Over the past 50 years, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has established mechanisms to integrate the region and lay the foundation for regional infrastructures for peace (RI4P). Yet, linkages among ECOWAS member states have remained weak, leaving the responsibility to prevent conflict to individual actors owing to changing conflict patterns. With the nature of these conflict changes, demands for stronger cooperation between ECOWAS, the member states, and local communities to harness and to connect the capabilities of all stakeholders becomes more essential – this policy brief explores how.

Regional Infrastructures for Peace in the Making

With the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) celebrating its 50th anniversary, the Regional Economic Community (REC) looks back on decades of peacekeeping and peacebuilding in West Africa. The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008) and the ECOWAS Early Warning Network (ECOWARN, 1999) are considered important steps toward the making of regional infrastructures for peace (RI4P).

I4P (defined in Box 1) can be applied to different societal levels (national, subnational, district, village, etc.), but the idea is most often applied to state-bound networks. National infrastructures for peace (NI4P) are networks formed among actors active in peacebuilding within a state; this can include public institutions, ministries, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based actors, or traditional authorities. While NI4P have received ample consideration with regard to installing early warning, early action, and mediation, the importance of regional organizations has not been

fully realized. Yet, regional actors, most notably ECOWAS¹, have long been involved in peacebuilding and engaged with their members' NI4P. RI4P allow RECs to encourage harmonization between NI4Ps by creating a region-wide understanding of peacebuilding cooperatively with stakeholders in the member states.

Box 1: Defining I4P

I4P are a tool to realize hybrid peacebuilding. During a workshop that the UN held in Naivasha (Kenya) with representatives of 14 African countries came up with the following definition of I4P: “a dynamic network of interdependent structures, mechanisms, resources, values and skills which through dialogue and consultation to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in a society” (Kumar 2011, 385).

¹ ECOWAS is far from the only REC to have engaged with RI4P; the AU has also undertaken significant work with regard to continental early warning or NeTT4Peace. This brief will, however, primarily focus on ECOWAS in RI4P.

In the following, this brief explores four distinct levers to implement and support the RI4P with the objective to mitigate violence region-wide. West African countries are at different stages of developing NI4P; these are still rare and are not integrated into a larger regional network. These efforts would benefit from stronger ECOWAS support. The inclusion and training of local actors is vital, as NI4P depend on networks across communities and institutions to remain sustainable. Yet states and communities face multiple risks. Effective, context-specific support requires identifying both vulnerabilities and existing sources of resilience. Such analysis enables the design of tailored early response institutions. Today, the region is confronted by resource scarcity driven by climate change,

political upheaval following the Sahel states' exit from ECOWAS, and the continuing threat of violent extremism. These increase the potential for violent conflict and the need for robust early warning, early action, and conflict prevention.

The Making of NI4P

Sustaining peace means acknowledging conflict as part of society but quickly recognizing when it can turn violent and navigating tensions toward violent-free resolution. As it depends on the conflict dynamics, varying sets of resources are critical for its resolution. Local volunteers are often first to respond but argue that accessing public institutions to support them

Box 2: I4P

Ghana

In Ghana, the National Peace Council began its work in 2011. It consists of a national office as well as secretariats in the regions and districts and is supported by the Peace Support Unit in the Ministry of Interior. The National Peace Council has been instrumental in preventing electoral violence by facilitating dialogue between competing parties and defusing conflictual situations.

Guinea-Bissau

While the Ghanaian structure exemplifies an institutionalized NI4P, in Guinea-Bissau a civil society-led collaborative network established through strong UN Development Program (UNDP) involvement has been enabling dialogue among local actors since 2007. Voz di Paz – in cooperation with the NGO Interpeace – has started the Regional Spaces for Dialog (RSDs), which focuses on building connections among local groups to prevent conflict.

Mano River Region

Also in the Mano River Region, including Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, the transnational network has enabled violence-free exchange in the border regions. National NGOs have initiated 18 District Platforms for Dialog (DPDs), facilitating transnational cooperation by connecting local groups in the Mano River Union countries with one another. The exchange helps prevent conflict in a region that has witnessed instability over the past decades. Networked peacebuilding has already taken a hold in West Africa, but the DPDs in the Mano River Region are the only case of cross-border cooperation. Yet, as conflict is becoming increasingly transnational, robust dialogue and response mechanisms are necessary to provide the West African people with peace.

poses a challenge. Designated peacebuilding institutions likewise regret that they lack resources to be physically present with local actors to maintain partnerships. Decreased cooperation and limited interactions between these actors makes it more difficult for them to create synergies between their approaches to peacebuilding. Transforming conflict so that communities can process prejudices and past grievances, however, needs contributions from society as a whole. Even if local communities manage violence, violence may erupt again during the electoral cycle unless national actors contribute to peacebuilding, as political stakeholders have been observed using societal divides to their advantage. By strengthening NI4P, dialogue between national, local, and regional actors opens up opportunities for stakeholders to find how they can best shape peace. Also, the United Nations' (UN) New Agenda for Peace (2023) connects the creation of an inclusive conflict prevention with strengthening national institutions that address conflict drivers, arguing that for NI4P it is incremental to enhance state institutions and civil society. On the African continent, many countries have succeeded in creating different versions of NI4P (Box 2 shows a selection of these). These structures have contributed to preventing electoral violence and decreasing tensions in conflict-ridden areas.

These mechanisms have been successful in preventing conflict by engaging various parts of society. Yet, NI4P that were created to truly forge a network between national, subnational, and local stakeholders are still rare. The ECOWAS Commission's Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) can use existing relationships with member states' governments to move along their implementation. Concretely, ECOWAS can facilitate workshops and specialized missions to provide guidance to governments on how to develop multilayered structures. This further opens up an opportunity for countries, such as Ghana, that already have developed a NI4P to share their experiences while also seeking out avenues for learning how to adapt to newly emerging conflict threats. Many West African think tanks have accumulated expertise in peacebuilding and on facilitating NI4P. The ECOWAS PAPS should continue to secure them as partners for the realization of the workshops while ensuring that these take place frequently. For this purpose, the ECOWAS

Commission should seek to continuously strengthen the framework by facilitating resources through increased partnership with the European Union (EU), Denmark's development cooperation (DANIDA), the German development agency (GIZ), and others. ECOWAS can contribute to setting up workshops that inspire national actors to create NI4P that fit and connect to specific contexts. It is relevant that ECOWAS maintains this support to build consistent engagement with and among member states.

Local Networks

Traditional, religious, and social actors have played an important role in not only preventing violence but also spearheading social transformation. As these actors are an immediate part of local peacebuilding, they have knowledge of indigenous practices necessary to reconcile conflicting parties. Yet, the resurgence of conflict at the local level is heavily dependent on local peacebuilders' capacities and resources. As local conflicts are rarely completely exclusive to one community, knowledge of developments in the surrounding area are important for understanding peacebuilding. Thus, to realize their full potential, local actors need support. Their presence in post-conflict communities has further proven incredibly valuable as they can detect and mitigate tensions early on. As in societies emerging from violence, peace can be fragile – even unfounded rumors can disturb stability. Local peacebuilders, who are usually people trusted by the community, can leverage their status to defuse tensions and create dialogue among community members.

These groups have in many cases been embedded in vertical networks. Through their partnerships with NGOs or subnational governmental institutions, they have received access to training and few material resources. Workshops were provided at the beginning of these partnerships and trained participants on conflict indicators and mediation. Local groups reported that these workshops deepened their understanding of conflict and gave them tools and confidence to address disputes. While they reported being connected with other stakeholders in their community as part of the training, many lacked connections with their peers

beyond their community. Despite the local actors' achievements in peacebuilding, this condition poses a significant challenge to their effectiveness. By not knowing peacebuilders in neighboring communities, they were unable to exchange on signs for conflict. Root causes for violence are rarely contained to one community; therefore, it is incremental for peacebuilders to be aware of what is happening in the wider region. Moreover, since local peace committees receive varying amounts of training and resources depending on their partners, exchanging with other local groups means that they can share knowledge.

Box 3: Horizontal Networks in Côte d'Ivoire

Local groups in Côte d'Ivoire that were introduced to horizontal networks by NGOs or developed these informally reported:

- Ability to understand conflict dynamics outside of their own community; and
- Cooperative organization of online events with peacebuilders in different countries made them feel more connected to transnational peacebuilding.

An experienced peacebuilder also recalled that she valued the opportunity for exchange with other local stakeholders as she had been involved in mitigating violence in one of the hotspots for violence during Côte d'Ivoire's crisis. Sharing her experiences validated her but also served as a learning opportunity for those listening.

Peace in West Africa is more durable when community relations are reinforced, as weak ties across local groups often translate into national and regional vulnerabilities. Box 3 provides an example how this is functioning in Côte d'Ivoire. To increase interactions among local peacebuilders, national

peacebuilding institutions and WANEP can continue to offer workshops for local peacebuilders as well as develop additional trainer training programs. These would ensure that knowledge on peacebuilding is updated and made accessible to new members of local groups. These workshops should emphasize more strongly network-building among participants and offer strategic advice on how to maintain these relationships. For this, concrete examples of how local groups have stayed in contact can be shown and the creation of WhatsApp groups can be encouraged. Moreover, the creation of horizontal networks can be supported by the WANEP country offices by opening up opportunities for in-person exchange more regularly. Important is that local peacebuilders feel recognized and supported as an incremental part of regional peacebuilding.

Building a Resilient Society

Strengthening resilience at community, national, and regional levels must be central to West Africa's peacebuilding agenda. Yet, the causes of violence can vary, so responses should consider context-specific needs. From 2016 until 2020, the ECOWAS Commission – in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and WANEP – conducted Country Risk and Vulnerability Assessments (CRVAs). The endeavor investigated what exactly had contributed to violence in ECOWAS' member states, as well as which mechanisms helped mitigate violence and made recommendations on how to strengthen these in the future. A follow-up to the CRVA that examines what makes West African societies resilient and how these strengths can be reinforced is important for building a RI4P.

By conducting a province-by-province analysis of ECOWAS member states, the project provided a nuanced picture of which conditions challenge peace. In country-specific reports the team discussed how violence had been mitigated and which factors contributed to conflict prevention. A major takeaway is that resilience to violence increased where networks of women's groups, traditional and religious leaders, civil society organizations, and local administration² were

2 The listed actors represent an overview of the identified resilience factors. The reports name more context-specific groups and mechanisms.

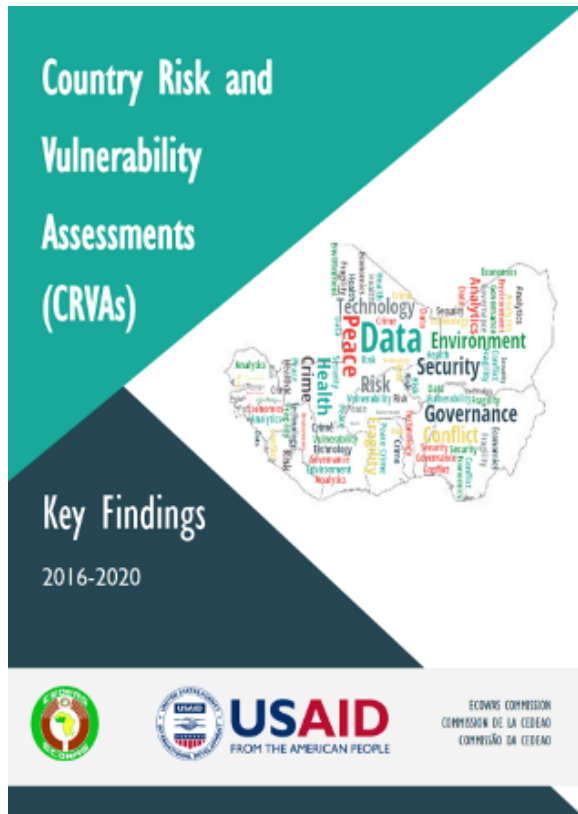


Image 1: Country Risk and Vulnerability Reports, ECOWAS Commission

permanently engaged with mediation and early warning. The CRVA's goal was to highlight risks and vulnerabilities. A second round focusing solely on resilience was planned but has not yet materialized. For this step, the objective should be to analytically deduct what factors contribute to West African communities and countries remaining peaceful. These findings should then inform targeted political action to build up resilience.

While the CRVA outlined which actors contribute to peace, the study did not dig into how. Focusing on community resilience to violence can provide direction to the ECOWAS Early Warning Department (EWD) and national peace institutions to better integrate local practices. Day-to-day interactions of people living in communities prone to violence influence how these communities are able to

mitigate conflict. By building a RI4P, these practices are integrated into national and regional contexts in which international organizations can contribute to them through technical or financial support. The second round of the CRVA should illuminate all the ways in which local groups are active in peacebuilding, thereby making local peacebuilding significantly more tangible. For facilitating knowledge on how West African communities and states mitigate violence and become resilient, ECOWAS can harness its cooperation with WANEP. Already for the first round of the CRVA, WANEP country offices conducted a wide range of interviews across all ECOWAS member states. As part of the follow-up to the CRVA, the data should be analyzed by WANEP and the EWD in a coordinated effort to showcase what has benefited national and local peacebuilding practices. As with the CRVA, detailed country reports should be produced. However, to amplify the outcome, the reports should be made available to all governments and relevant national institutions as well as civil society. Furthermore, the EWD and WANEP should host events to discuss with relevant actors from the member states what the study's results mean and how to address challenges for national and local peacebuilding together.

From Early Warning to Early Action

With ECOWARN, a multilevel early warning structure has been in place since 1999, establishing a network of conflict-related data moving from local communities to national institutions to the ECOWAS Commission. Yet, consequences to conflict reports depend on the capacities of individual communities, national civil society, and national institutions. In 2014, ECOWAS initiated the Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms³ to be established in its members states, with the objective of contributing to existing national structures and ensuring then implementation of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). The specific functions of the institutions would depend on the national frameworks they are embedded in. Since

3 Supplementary Act A/SA.6/07/14 Adopting the Policy Framework on the Establishment of Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms in ECOWAS Member States. ECOWAS. 2014. Accessed 19 May 2025. <https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/6-Early-Warning-Policy-Framework.pdf>.

the publication of the policy document, 11 such early warning and response centers were implemented⁴ (these are introduced in box 4). ECOWAS initiated these as an opportunity for the member states to implement state-owned institutions in support of peacebuilding. As such, they should be integrated into the national peace structures and navigate between the office of the president, national peacebuilding institutions, as well as the ECOWAS Commission.

In investigating their role in West African peacebuilding, however, it became evident that different understandings exist on the role of these centers in peacebuilding. This limits the extent to which they are genuine parts of national infrastructures and able to contribute to a regional one. The roles that were ascribed to them according to national legislation and how these were interpreted on the ground differ significantly. While centers in countries without institutionalized I4P had the opportunity to carve out room for

themselves as think tanks, they reported lacking connection to national institutions or civil society. This negatively influenced in how far they were able to actually engage with conflict responses. Centers implemented alongside I4P faced a lot of difficulty gaining access to the already existing structure as the role they were meant to fulfill was already taken by established institutions. As they were not included into existing structures, they had to resort to creating parallel structures leading to duplication and confusion on who is responsible for initiating responses.

For these centers to achieve their potential, the EWD and PAPS should engage national stakeholders and the existing centers to clarify their roles. As part of this process, the centers should receive access to ECOWARN. As the centers were established to connect ECOWAS with member states, they should aim for stronger cooperation with ECOWAS through the office of the ECOWAS representative to the member states.

Box 4: The Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanism in Practice

Since ECOWAS first proposed these centers, they have been opened in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia – though it is unclear whether the centers in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are still operating after the countries' exit from ECOWAS.

In the respective member states, the centers were implemented according to the host country's design. Thereby, the active institutions cover a wide range of thematic areas, such as *gender, health, criminality, climate change, security, and human rights*. This follows that the centers vary significantly in their scope. In all cases, the centers are responsible for gathering information on the thematic areas they cover, which they in turn use to prepare analysis. These are meant to be distributed to the ECOWAS Commission and the national institutions the centers respond to. In some cases, the member states added further tasks to the scope of the centers

Ghana – The center primarily works on security-related issues, meant to analyze early warning data and develop a network for immediate responses to conflict.

Côte d'Ivoire – The institution covers a wider range of topics including climate change and human rights.

4 "ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate Exchange and Assessment Mission to Liberia National Early Warning Center." 2024. News release. 25 July 2024. Accessed 09 May 2025. <https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-early-warning-directorate-exchange-and-assessment-mission-to-liberia-national-early-warning-center/>.

Conclusion

The nature of regional conflict is changing but so is ECOWAS. Over the past 50 years, ECOWAS has created legal frameworks and practical mechanisms to connect the region and build a comprehensive framework for building peace. Yet, transborder conflict, the exit of the Sahel Alliance, as well as disconnect between ECOWAS, its member states, and local communities threatens the peace that has been built. However, to ensure stability and security for the West African people, networks that recognize the capabilities of all stakeholders are necessary.

Firstly, the ECOWAS Commission continues initiating and supporting the building and upkeep of country-specific platforms for peace, which would greatly benefit stability in the region. National and local institutions are given a channel through which they can ask for help if violence seem likely and likewise offer support, thus allowing for a more robust society to emerge.

Secondly, local stakeholders are the backbone of West African peacebuilding. Horizontal networks, among others, are necessary for these stakeholders to exchange information on and experiences with rising tensions and best practices. ECOWAS' PAPS and its partners – such as, but not limited to, the GIZ, DANIDA, or the UNDP – need to support local peacebuilders in initiating such networks and offer regular trainings.

Thirdly, conflict often originates at the local level, making it instrumental to understand which actors are beneficial to conflict prevention and management. Conducting a second round of the CRVA focusing on resilience allows ECOWAS and member states' institutions to offer target support to increase communities' resilience toward conflict.

Fourth, the Early Warning and Rapid Response Centers have been implemented in a majority of ECOWAS member states, yet as their role remains unclear, they have not yet reached their full potential. Clarifying their purpose in regional and national peacebuilding is important for supplementing the early warning mechanisms with a strong response network, mitigating the risk for violent conflict.

Further Reading

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About the author

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The Competence Network "African Non-military Conflict Intervention Practices"

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