

## **The Role of ECOWAS in the Promotion of Democracy, Peace and Security in West Africa: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects**

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### **Abstract**

*In a geopolitical environment increasingly marked by persistent military coups, civil wars, and fragile democratic institutions, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as an essential actor in the defense and restoration of constitutional rule, prevention and resolution of violent conflicts, and the strengthening of democratic norms. Its interventions ranging from high profile peacekeeping deployments in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, to mediation in political crises and the support of electoral integrity demonstrate its capacity to influence political transitions and foster post-conflict peacebuilding. This article provides a critical and comprehensive examination of the evolving role of ECOWAS in promoting democracy, peace and security across West Africa, with particular attention to its institutional mechanisms, major interventions, and normative frameworks, while contemplating its future prospects in these areas of intervention. The research is grounded around a critical review of theoretical and empirical literature on governance and regional integration and desk-based inquiry, adopting an exploratory qualitative research design based on descriptive and thematical analysis of facts derived from secondary sources. The analysis of key issues, placed within the theoretical framework of regional integration, constructive regionalism and democratic peace theories enables the authors to reach important findings and conclusions. Perhaps, the most striking finding of this article is that while the achievements of ECOWAS give hope for democratic consolidation, peace and security in West Africa, there remains critical structural and operational challenges which need to be overcome if the regional community is going to place itself as a true central actor in West Africa's current and future democratic peace and development. For example, the resurgence of military takeovers, resilience of authoritarian tendencies, sovereignty sensitivities among member states, ongoing resource constraints, and escalation of transnational security threats continue to test the limits of ECOWAS's effectiveness. The article concludes by recommending fundamental institutional and operational reforms that can play not a small role in enhancing ECOWAS's strategic effectiveness in matters of democratic consolidation, peace and regional security in West Africa amid rapid global and regional political, social, and security transformations.*

**Keywords:** ECOWAS, democracy, peace, security, regional integration, West Africa

### **1. Introduction**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 under the Treaty of Lagos as a regional economic organization with the primary objective of promoting economic integration and collective self-sufficiency among West African countries. Conceived in the context of post-colonial aspirations for regional solidarity and development, ECOWAS

initially focused on facilitating trade, harmonizing economic policies, and fostering cooperation aimed at reducing dependency on external powers. However, the region's persistent challenges ranging from political instability and weak governance structures to recurring civil conflicts soon revealed the limits of purely economic cooperation in achieving sustainable development. As a result, ECOWAS's mission evolved beyond economics to encompass peacekeeping, political stability, and the promotion of democratic governance.

From the early 1990s onward, ECOWAS began to assume a more assertive and multidimensional role in regional security and political affairs. The protracted civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone not only threatened the stability of the subregion but also underscored the need for a collective response to internal conflicts. ECOWAS responded by establishing the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990, marking an unprecedented step in African regionalism through direct peace enforcement operations. These interventions later extended to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, and The Gambia, demonstrated the organization's increasing recognition that economic growth and political stability are mutually reinforcing pillars of regional development.

The transformation of ECOWAS's mandate was institutionalized through a series of normative frameworks. The 1993 Revised Treaty expanded the organization's scope to include political cooperation and security, while the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security laid the legal foundation for proactive intervention. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance further cemented ECOWAS's commitment to constitutional order, rule of law, human rights, and electoral integrity principles intended to curb the wave of military coups and political crises that had long plagued the region.

Despite its bold institutional architecture and notable successes, ECOWAS continues to grapple with significant challenges. The resurgence of military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger has tested the organization's resolve and highlighted the fragility of democratic consolidation in West Africa. Implementation gaps, resource constraints, and divergent political interests among member states often restrict ECOWAS's enforcement capacity. Furthermore, emerging transnational threats such as terrorism, violent extremism, and climate induced resource conflicts have expanded the scope of regional insecurity beyond traditional state-based crises. This article examines the evolving role of ECOWAS in promoting democracy and peace across West Africa, with particular attention to its institutional mechanisms, major interventions, and normative frameworks. It explores the organization's key achievements, from early peacekeeping initiatives to recent democratic transitions, while analyzing the structural and political impediments that continue to hinder its effectiveness. Ultimately, the discussion underscores ECOWAS's dual function as both an economic union and a regional security actor, arguing that its continued evolution will shape the trajectory of governance and stability in one of Africa's most dynamic yet volatile regions.

## **2. Methodology**

This research is grounded around a critical review of theoretical and empirical literature on governance and regional integration and desk-based inquiry, adopting an exploratory qualitative research design based on descriptive and thematic analysis of facts derived from secondary sources. To this end, data is explored from a wide variety of secondary sources such as, books, research articles, internet and media reports, international reports, policy documents on

ECOWAS. The use of the qualitative approach enabled a more complete and in depth understanding of the issues under study than a quantitative approach could allow. This article therefore examines the evolving role of ECOWAS in promoting democracy, peace and security across West Africa, with particular attention to its institutional mechanisms, major interventions, and normative frameworks. It provides a comprehensive examination of ECOWAS's achievements, places them in the context of regional integration and democratic peace theory, and analyzes its institutional mechanisms, including legal instruments, mediation structures, and peace support operations. The analysis includes illustrative regional case studies and theoretical perspectives to highlight the organization's dual evolution as a peace enforcer and a norm entrepreneur.

### **3. Theoretical Framework of Analysis**

A careful reading of the literature specializing in African regional integration, peace, security and democratic development helped to define the theoretical framework of analysis, constructed around three main theories of international relations and regionalism: *Regional integration*, *Constructivist Regionalism* and *Democratic Peace theories*.

#### **3. 1 Regional Integration**

Regional integration theory provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the transformation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from a primarily economic organization into a multidimensional political and security actor. Broadly, regional integration theory posits that cooperation among states within a geographically defined area can generate mutual benefits, foster interdependence, and ultimately promote political stability and conflict mitigation (Haas, 1958; Nye, 1971). Pooling sovereignty in selected policy areas makes it possible for states to reduce the risks of conflict, enhance regional bargaining power, and generate collective goods that would be unattainable through isolated national efforts (Haas, 1958; Mattli, 1999; Söderbaum, 2004).

The neo functionalist approach, advanced by scholars such as Ernst Haas (1958) and Leon Lindberg (1963), provides a foundational perspective within this body of theory. Neo functionalism argues that integration in one sector often economic, creates pressures that naturally extend into adjacent sectors, a process described as the “spillover effect.” This dynamic occurs because the successful functioning of one integrated area necessitates deeper cooperation in others, ultimately driving the gradual transfer of authority from national to supranational entities. Haas emphasized that this process is not merely technical but also political, as it encourages the emergence of transnational interests and shared norms that underpin collective governance (Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963).

The trajectory of ECOWAS offers a compelling empirical embodiment of this neo functionalist logic. Established in 1975 as an economic community through the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS's founding objectives centered on trade liberalization, economic cooperation, and regional market integration. However, the prevalence of political instability, military coups, and civil wars in the region soon revealed that economic collaboration could not thrive in an environment of insecurity. As member states pursued their collective economic agenda, they confronted the reality that the absence of peace and democratic governance posed existential threats to regional progress. This recognition produced a functional and political “spillover” from economic integration into the domains of security and governance.

From the late 1980s onward, these dynamics became more visible as ECOWAS began adapting its institutional framework to emerging security challenges. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrated that economic cooperation alone could not shield the region from conflict driven economic dislocation and humanitarian crises. Consequently, ECOWAS initiated the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990, launching its first military intervention to restore peace in a member state. What began as an ad hoc response to crisis evolved into a cornerstone of ECOWAS's institutional architecture, reinforcing the interdependence between political stability and economic development. Through successive protocols particularly the 1993 Revised Treaty, the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS not only expanded its functional scope but also consolidated a normative order emphasizing democracy, constitutionalism, and human rights.

Beyond demonstrating institutional deepening, ECOWAS's trajectory illustrates the political dimension of neo functionalism, where regional actors and institutions cultivate a shared identity and legitimacy that transcend national boundaries. The regional organization emerged as a collective security actor with the authority to sanction unconstitutional changes of government, mediate disputes, and intervene militarily when necessary. In doing so, ECOWAS assumed a quasi-supranational character within certain policy spheres, aligning with Haas's contention that integration generates "a new political community" rooted in shared values and goals. (Haas, 1958, p 16)

Nevertheless, ECOWAS's experience also highlights some limitations of neo functionalism in the African context. Unlike the European Union model that inspired early integration theories, West African states retain strong commitments to national sovereignty and often prioritize domestic political interests over regional objectives. Inconsistent political will, resource constraints, and divergent regime types have frequently slowed the pace of integration and hindered the consolidation of supranational authority. Yet, even within these constraints, ECOWAS's evolution underscores how pragmatic responses to interlinked economic and security challenges have produced deeper forms of cooperation consistent with neo functionalist predictions.

Regional integration theory and particularly the neo functionalist concept of spillover provides a robust analytical framework for understanding ECOWAS's transformation. The community's journey from an economic bloc to a regional peace and security institution reflects the adaptive and cumulative nature of integration processes. It demonstrates that, in regions where economic and political challenges are intertwined, integration in one domain almost inevitably compels cooperation in the others, reinforcing the interdependence that underpins regional stability and collective progress.

### **3.2 Constructivist Regionalism**

Constructivist scholars emphasize that the behavior of states in international and regional systems is not determined solely by material capabilities or institutional arrangements but also by shared ideas, norms, and collective identities (Wendt, 1992; Katzenstein, 1996). As articulated by Acharya (2014), constructivism underscores how regional organizations evolve through the social construction of shared meanings and practices that shape members' perceptions of their interests and obligations. In this view, regional cooperation emerges not merely from rational calculations of economic or security gains but from a sense of community grounded in common values and mutual expectations of appropriate behavior.

ECOWAS provides a compelling case study of this constructivist logic in action. Since its establishment, the organization has transitioned from a pragmatic economic bloc to a normative community emphasizing democracy, peace, and collective security (Francis, 2009; Hartmann, 2016). This transformation has not occurred through formal treaty revisions alone but through repeated practices such as peacekeeping operations, mediation efforts, and public declarations that have gradually constructed a regional identity centered on democratic governance and stability. Each intervention or diplomatic engagement whether in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, or The Gambia has reinforced the normative belief that political legitimacy in West Africa is inseparable from constitutional rule and participatory governance (Adebajo, 2002).

The concept of 'ECOWAS' as both a "*community of democracies*" and a "*security community*" reflects this process of identity formation. Through frameworks such as the *1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention* and the *2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance*, member states have institutionalized collective norms that define acceptable political behavior within the region (ECOWAS, 2001). Coupled with mechanisms for sanctioning unconstitutional changes of government, these instruments not only codify behavioral expectations but also express a shared understanding that democracy and peace are mutually reinforcing objectives.

Regional Constructivism thus offers valuable insights into ECOWAS's normative evolution. The organization's legitimacy and authority increasingly derive from its role as a custodian of regional values rather than solely from formal legal structures or power asymmetries among states (Acharya, 2014; Söderbaum, 2016). Fostering a collective identity around democratic norms and conflict resolution has enabled ECOWAS to contribute to the gradual construction of a regional order in which political stability and community solidarity are sustained by shared principles rather than coercive enforcement alone.

### 3.3 Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic peace theory posits that democracies are less likely to engage in armed conflict with one another, suggesting a strong correlation between democratic governance, political stability, and peaceful relations both within and among states. Pioneered by scholars such as Michael Doyle (1983), this theory rests on two principal assumptions: first, that democratic institutions impose constraints on leaders, making aggressive or unilateral military action less likely; and second, shared norms of negotiation, accountability, and respect for individual rights, foster mutual trust and cooperation. Within regional contexts, these dynamics imply that the spread of democracy can mitigate internal instability while also reducing the likelihood of interstate conflict.

ECOWAS's governance agenda closely aligns with the normative foundations of democratic peace theory. Recognizing that democracy and peace are mutually reinforcing, the organization has progressively institutionalized democratic principles as central to its regional security framework. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance codified a clear stance against unconstitutional changes of government and established mechanisms to ensure the protection of constitutional order. These include provisions for election observation, mediation in post electoral disputes, and sanctions such as suspension of membership rights or economic restrictions against regimes that seize power through coups *d'état*.

Through such measures, ECOWAS has demonstrated a proactive commitment to cultivating a democratic political culture across West Africa. Its interventions in Sierra Leone (1998), Liberia (2003), and The Gambia (2017) underscore the organization's willingness to defend electoral

legitimacy and uphold civilian authority, even when doing so required military or diplomatic pressure. Election monitoring missions and technical assistance programs have further helped to enhance transparency and credibility in electoral processes across member states.

From a theoretical perspective, ECOWAS's emphasis on democracy as a foundation for peace aligns with the democratic peace proposition that stable, accountable governments are less prone to violent conflict. In operational terms, it reflects the organization's belief that democratic governance provides the institutional safeguards and participatory mechanisms necessary for long term stability and regional integration. Linking peacebuilding with democratization has enabled ECOWAS to move beyond traditional diplomacy to embed democratic peace principles within its normative and institutional frameworks, thereby reinforcing the conception of democracy as both a moral imperative and a strategic instrument for sustainable peace in West Africa.

#### **4. ECOWAS and the Promotion of Democracy in West Africa**

##### **4.1 Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

The legal foundation of ECOWAS's democratic and governance agenda is firmly anchored in a series of binding frameworks that collectively define the organization's normative and institutional mandate. Chief among these is the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which remains the cornerstone of ECOWAS's efforts to entrench democratic norms across the subregion. Building upon the 1993 Revised Treaty and the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, the 2001 Protocol codifies the principle that democracy, constitutional order, and respect for human rights are indispensable prerequisites for peace and development in West Africa.

Legally, the Protocol articulates key governance standards that member states are obligated to uphold. It expressly prohibits unconstitutional changes of government, defining such acts as threats to regional peace and stability. It further enshrines the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while mandating the conduct of periodic, free, and fair elections. These provisions position democracy not as a discretionary political choice but as a binding legal commitment under ECOWAS law. The normative force of these instruments reflects the community's evolution into both a legal and political actor capable of enforcing compliance within its jurisdiction.

Institutionally, ECOWAS's democratic governance framework operates through a well-defined network of bodies charged with promoting, monitoring, and enforcing these legal commitments. The ECOWAS Commission serves as the executive institution responsible for implementing the organization's protocols and coordinating capacity building initiatives in member states. The Mediation and Security Council has the authority to respond to democratic breaches through sanctions, suspensions, and, where necessary, authorizes collective diplomatic or even security measures. The ECOWAS Court of Justice provides a judicial avenue for seeking redress over violations of ECOWAS law, especially in cases involving human rights and governance standards. The ECOWAS Parliament complements these institutions, promoting participatory and harmonized democratic practices through parliamentary diplomacy and oversight.

Operationally, ECOWAS undertakes Election Observation Missions (EOMs) in line with its legal obligations to foster credible, transparent, and peaceful elections across the region. Since 1999, the organization has observed over 100 elections (ECOWAS Commission, 2024), issuing reports that assess compliance with both ECOWAS and international standards and providing

recommendations for improvements in electoral integrity. These missions not only enhance transparency but also serve as early warning mechanisms, flagging potential democratic backsliding before it escalates into full blown crises.

### **Enforcement Mechanisms and Sanctions**

A defining feature of ECOWAS's legal and institutional architecture is its robust enforcement regime. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol and related treaties expressly empower ECOWAS to take concrete measures against breaches of constitutional order. When member states witness coups *d'état*, illegitimate extensions of term limits, or manipulated election outcomes, ECOWAS deploys a toolkit that includes:

- Diplomatic engagement: Mediation, shuttle diplomacy, and preventive dialogue are the first lines of defense, often led by the ECOWAS Commission or eminent persons' groups.
- Sanctions: If mediation fails and unconstitutional acts persist, ECOWAS has the authority to impose a range of sanctions, including suspension from decision making bodies, border closures, travel bans, and financial or economic measures against junta leaders or parties undermining democratic order.
- Suspension of membership: Member states that perpetrate unconstitutional changes can be suspended from the organization's activities, stripping them of voting rights and participation in ECOWAS forums.
- Collective security measures: In extreme cases where constitutional order cannot be restored through diplomatic or economic measures, ECOWAS may authorize collective security interventions, as seen in Liberia (1990), Sierra Leone (1997/98), and The Gambia (2017), where the objective was to restore democratically elected governments and prevent escalation of conflict.

Recent coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have tested the limits and effectiveness of this enforcement architecture. ECOWAS responded to these takeovers by instituting sanctions, suspending junta administrations, and offering pathways to negotiate transitional roadmaps for democratic restoration. While sanctions are often criticized for their uneven efficacy occasionally failing to trigger immediate regime reversals, they nevertheless signal ECOWAS's commitment to its legal principles and help exert sustained pressure for a return to constitutional order.

Furthermore, the legal backing for these measures extends to the ECOWAS Court of Justice, which provides judicial review and can be petitioned by individuals or institutions alleging infringements of their rights under ECOWAS law. This judicialization of regional governance underscores both the sophistication and increasing legalism of ECOWAS's architecture and the recognition that the rule of law is fundamental to sustainable peace and integration.

ECOWAS's layered legal and institutional frameworks anchored in binding protocols, empowered by dynamic institutions, and supported by credible enforcement mechanisms establish the community as a model of sub regional governance in Africa. While challenges in implementation and enforcement persist, the continual adaptation of these frameworks marks ECOWAS as a proactive and resilient actor, persistently striving to safeguard democracy and regional stability against evolving threats.

#### 4.2 Democratic Interventions and Sanctions

ECOWAS has consistently demonstrated a proactive stance in defending democracy among its member states, showing a readiness to utilize both sanctions and military interventions to restore constitutional order (Adebajo, 2002; Hartmann, 2016). This robust enforcement posture is grounded in the organization's legal frameworks particularly the *1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security* and the *2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance* which empower it to respond decisively when democratic norms are threatened (ECOWAS, 2001). Through such actions, ECOWAS has reinforced its role as a guarantor of political legitimacy and regional stability.

The 2017 Gambian political crisis stands as a landmark example. When President Yahya Jammeh refused to accept his electoral defeat to Adama Barrow, ECOWAS initially attempted diplomatic mediation to resolve the impasse. However, as the stalemate persisted and the risk of violent conflict escalated, ECOWAS invoked its governance and security protocols, mobilizing a regional military force under the auspices of *Operation Restore Democracy*. The swift deployment of troops across the Gambian border backed by the credible threat of military action proved decisive. Facing mounting internal and external pressure, Yahya Jammeh ceded power, enabling a peaceful democratic transfer and reaffirming the inviolability of electoral outcomes in the region (Akindele, 2018; Bah, 2017). This intervention not only restored constitutional order but also sent a powerful message about ECOWAS's resolve to enforce its democratic mandate.

ECOWAS has similarly responded to recent unconstitutional seizures of power in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Niger (2023) by imposing an array of sanctions. These include suspending affected countries from regional decision-making bodies, freezing financial assets, closing borders, and introducing travel bans on coup leaders and their associates (ICG, 2023; Oloruntoba, 2024). Such economic and diplomatic pressures are designed both to punish anti-democratic actors and to incentivize a rapid return to civilian led governance. While these approaches demonstrate regional solidarity and collective enforcement, they have also sparked criticism. Observers and humanitarian groups often highlight that sanctions, though targeted at political elites, may inadvertently harm ordinary citizens by disrupting livelihoods, increasing inflation, and deepening socioeconomic hardship (Aning & Atuobi, 2009; Olonisakin, 2022).

Despite these concerns, ECOWAS views sanctions and, when necessary, coercive interventions as essential tools for upholding its democratic charter and deterring future unconstitutional actions. The organization strives to balance the imperative of accountability with efforts to mitigate negative impacts on local populations, often combining punitive measures with mediation, technical support for electoral transitions, and timelines for restoring democratic rule (Francis, 2009).

Ultimately, ECOWAS's willingness to apply sanctions and, when required, military force underscores its commitment to a legal and moral regional order rooted in democracy and constitutionalism. These interventions reinforce expectations of legitimate governance and reflect the organization's evolution into a credible, norm enforcing actor in West African politics (Hartmann, 2016; Söderbaum, 2016).



#### 4.3 Mediation and Preventive Diplomacy

In addition to its enforcement capabilities, ECOWAS has significantly developed its institutional frameworks for mediation, conflict prevention, and crisis management, thereby strengthening its role as a principal peace and security actor in West Africa (Aning & Atuobi, 2009; Francis, 2009). Two of the organization's most important bodies in this regard are the Mediation and Security Council (MSC) and the Council of the Wise (CoW).

The Mediation and Security Council is tasked with overseeing regional peace and security initiatives, responding to emerging crises, and authorizing diplomatic and, when necessary, military interventions. It plays a central operational role in facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and coordinating ECOWAS's multifaceted response to political upheavals (ECOWAS, 1999). The Council of the Wise, composed of respected statespersons, former heads of state, and eminent personalities from the region, operates as a high level advisory and mediation organ. Drawn from a reservoir of experience and moral authority, this council serves to build trust, provide quiet counsel, and encourage peaceful settlements in times of political tension or conflict (Adebajo, 2002; Hartmann, 2016).

These two bodies have played pivotal roles in mediating several of the region's most challenging political crises. For example, they were instrumental during the peace process in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2007), supporting negotiations between warring factions and international partners to achieve a fragile yet essential ceasefire and eventual power sharing arrangements (Bah, 2010). Similarly, interventions in Liberia (2003) enabled the brokering of ceasefires and the creation of transitional governance mechanisms, paving the way for the end of a long running civil war (Francis, 2009). In Guinea Bissau (2012), the mediation efforts of ECOWAS helped deescalate tensions following a military coup and facilitated dialogue that contributed to transitional arrangements (ICG, 2012).

Beyond crisis intervention, ECOWAS invests heavily in *preventive diplomacy* and *early warning*, recognizing that preemptive action is vital to forestalling escalation. The ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism (ECOWARN) is a key tool in this regard. Drawing on information from zonal bureaus across the subregion, ECOWARN collects, analyzes, and disseminates data to identify potential sources of instability ranging from political grievances and social unrest to transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime (Aning & Bah, 2010). This early warning intelligence mechanism forms the basis for timely diplomatic engagement, confidence building measures, and deployment of ECOWAS fact finding or mediation missions before crises erupt (ECOWAS, 1999; Zounmenou & Bah, 2013).

Collectively, the work of the Mediation and Security Council, Council of the Wise, and ECOWARN substantively enhances ECOWAS's capacity for conflict prevention and resolution. Through a blend of high-level mediation, early warning, and adaptive response mechanisms, ECOWAS continues to position itself as the region's primary architect of peace delivering timely interventions that have, on multiple occasions, averted broader conflict and promoted dialogue amidst deep divisions (Francis, 2009; Söderbaum, 2016).

## 5. ECOWAS and Peacebuilding in West Africa

### 5.1 Peacekeeping and Military Interventions

ECOWAS holds the distinction of pioneering African led peacekeeping through the establishment of the **ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)** in 1990 a watershed development not only for West Africa but also for the broader evolution of Africa's collective security mechanisms. ECOMOG's creation during the devastating **Liberian civil war** marked the first time a sub-regional African organization deployed its own military resources to enforce peace within a member state. This initiative set a precedent and provided a template for subsequent African led interventions under regional and continental mandates.

In Liberia, ECOMOG emerged as a direct response to the region wide destabilization caused by civil conflict, large refugee movements, and the risk of cross border insecurity. Despite constrained resources, logistical difficulties, and accusations of political partiality, ECOMOG succeeded in halting large scale violence, creating safe corridors for humanitarian access, and facilitating negotiations that culminated in the 1997 elections and post war reconstruction. The mission demonstrated ECOWAS's recognition that sustainable economic integration was unattainable without regional stability and peace (Adebajo, 2020).

Building on lessons from Liberia, ECOWAS intervened decisively in Sierra Leone (1997, 2000), where a brutal civil war and the collapse of state authority threatened regional security. ECOMOG's deployment in support of the democratically elected government against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) showcased the organization's growing operational maturity. Though initially challenged by well-armed insurgents and complex political dynamics, ECOMOG's persistence, complemented by shifting domestic and international support especially through humanitarian backing and logistical assistance from the United Nations enabled the restoration of constitutional order. This intervention laid the groundwork for Sierra Leone's post war peacebuilding, transitional justice, and democratic consolidation (ibid).

ECOMOG's involvement in Guinea Bissau (1998, 1999) and Côte d'Ivoire (2002, 2004) further solidified ECOWAS's credibility as a regional peace and security actor. In Guinea Bissau, the mission facilitated ceasefire agreements and opened channels for dialogue in an otherwise volatile environment. In Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS combined ceasefire monitoring, mediation, and limited peace support operations to curb escalation and create a basis for political settlement efforts later reinforced by French and UN missions. The Mali intervention of 2013 marked another turning point, as ECOWAS deployed a stabilization force to counter jihadist advances in the north, acting as a precursor to subsequent African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) missions. This intervention underscored ECOWAS's ability to adapt to emerging security threats such as transnational terrorism, and its evolving role as both a first responder and a coordinator within a multilateral security architecture.

Most ECOWAS peace operations now occur in close coordination with the African Union and the United Nations, reflecting a layered and complementary peace and security architecture. The AU provides strategic political legitimacy and continental coordination, while the UN contributes logistical support, peacebuilding expertise, and global diplomatic leverage. This synergy enhances ECOWAS's credibility, resource mobilization, and operational efficiency, anchoring the organization firmly within Africa's collective security system.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS led missions have not been without challenges. Limited funding, coordination difficulties among contributing states, and periodic accusations of bias have occasionally undermined operational effectiveness. Yet, despite these obstacles, ECOWAS's peacekeeping experience represents a historic shift toward African ownership of peace and security, demonstrating that regional organizations can act decisively and effectively in addressing internal conflicts. Through these interventions, ECOWAS has helped normalize African led peacekeeping, promote post-conflict reconstruction, and support democratic governance, reaffirming its role as a cornerstone of West Africa's and indeed Africa's security architecture.

## **5.2 Violent Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Systems**

In 2008, ECOWAS formally adopted the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), marking a significant step towards institutionalizing a holistic and anticipatory approach to peace and security in West Africa. The ECPF was conceived as a policy blueprint to systematize the organization's efforts across the spectrum of conflict management including preventive diplomacy, early warning, mediation, and post conflict reconstruction. This framework recognizes that sustainable peace cannot be secured by reactive military interventions alone but, rather, requires robust structures to identify risks and address grievances before they escalate into violent conflict. At the heart of the ECPF's preventive strategy is the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN). This sophisticated system is designed to collect, process, and analyze real time data on potential and emerging threats across ECOWAS's member states. Drawing on zonal bureaus and national focal points situated throughout the region, ECOWARN aggregates information on a range of indicators including political instability, communal violence, social unrest, economic shocks, and human rights violations. The integrated database and reporting system enable ECOWAS to detect patterns, forecast risks, and formulate targeted alerts for policy makers and crisis managers (Aning & Bah, 2020).

This capacity for proactive crisis management fundamentally enhances ECOWAS's ability to act before violence erupts. By generating timely early warning reports, the organization empowers its Mediation and Security Council, the Council of the Wise, and other decision-making bodies to deploy preventive diplomacy tools including quiet mediation, shuttle diplomacy, or deployment of preventive missions customized to specific local contexts. The ECPF framework further provides guidelines for coordinating humanitarian responses and supporting post conflict peacebuilding, such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex combatants, ensuring a more comprehensive and sustainable peace. Through these mechanisms, ECOWAS has increasingly demonstrated the transition from crisis driven intervention to a forward looking, institutionalized system for managing complex security challenges. The ECPF, underpinned by ECOWARN, has moved conflict prevention closer to the center of West Africa's regional security agenda, serving both as a model for other African subregions and as a core pillar of ECOWAS's reputation as a proactive, norm driven regional community.

## **5. 3 Post-conflict Reconstruction and Peacebuilding**

ECOWAS's contributions to regional peace extend far beyond its headline grabbing military interventions. Recognizing that sustainable stability requires comprehensive post conflict engagement, the organization has assumed a pivotal role in promoting governance reforms, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, and institutional rebuilding in the aftermath of armed conflict. These initiatives are not merely reactive measures to end

violence they are designed to address the structural roots of instability, rebuild state legitimacy, and lay the foundations for long term democratic consolidation and civil military normalization (Adebajo, 2020).

Following its military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOWAS worked closely with international partners, national governments, and civil society organizations to steer post conflict recovery processes. In Liberia, the organization was instrumental in supporting the 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which established a transitional government and initiated an extensive DDR program. ECOWAS collaborated with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and other stakeholders to design and implement initiatives that disarmed and demobilized tens of thousands of former combatants (Sesay, 2012; Obi, 2019). These efforts provided ex fighters with vocational training, psychosocial support, and reintegration pathways into civilian life and economic activity. The result was a significant reduction in armed violence, the re-establishment of public security, and the creation of an environment conducive to free and credible elections, thereby facilitating the restoration of democratic governance (Akindele, 2018; Adebajo, 2020).

In Sierra Leone, ECOWAS's peacebuilding engagement focused on strengthening the rule of law and enhancing justice sector reforms. The organization coordinated with the United Nations and other partners to implement integrated DDR programs that addressed the complex humanitarian consequences of war. Particular emphasis was placed on rehabilitating child soldiers and other vulnerable groups through psychosocial counseling, education, and vocational training (Bangura, 2016; Obi, 2019). This comprehensive approach helped dismantle warlord networks, foster community reconciliation, and rebuild trust in state institutions. Through these initiatives, ECOWAS demonstrated that peacebuilding is as much a social and psychological process as it is a political and security one (Adebajo, 2020).

Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS's post crisis interventions emphasized constitutional reform, electoral governance, and civil military trust building. The organization supported initiatives aimed at professionalizing the armed forces, depoliticizing command structures, and strengthening civilian oversight of the military measures essential for insulating democratic institutions from coercive interference (Bah, 2021; Akindele, 2018). By reinforcing good governance and social cohesion, ECOWAS contributed to the gradual normalization of political life and the consolidation of democratic institutions in the country.

Collectively, these post conflict engagements highlight ECOWAS's evolution from a security-oriented organization to a holistic peacebuilding actor. Through its involvement in DDR, institutional reforms, and reconciliation efforts, the organization promotes the reintegration of ex combatants, mitigates the risks of conflict relapse, and enhances the legitimacy of post war governments. In doing so, ECOWAS has redefined its peace and security mandate from one of "peace enforcement" to "peace consolidation" cementing its reputation as a cornerstone of stability and democratic renewal across West Africa (Adebajo, 2020; Obi, 2019; Bah, 2021).

## **6. Achievements**

Over the last three decades, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has undergone a significant transformation in both its mandate and operational reach. The organization has become an influential architect of democratic governance and regional security in Africa. Several core achievements stand out, demonstrating ECOWAS's effectiveness and adaptability in addressing complex regional challenges.

#### **- Institutionalization of Democratic Norms and Practice**

One of ECOWAS's most significant contributions has been the embedding of democratic governance as a binding regional norm. Through legal instruments such as the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, the organization has established explicit principles prohibiting unconstitutional changes of government and setting standards for free and fair elections, separation of powers, and respect for human rights (ECOWAS, 2001; Adebajo, 2020). These frameworks have elevated democracy from a national aspiration to a subregional obligation, signaling that member states, irrespective of internal political dynamics, are expected to adhere to these norms. Deviations such as coups d'état or other anti-democratic actions trigger collective responses, including sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and other enforcement measures (Akindele, 2018; Bah, 2021). Making unconstitutional governance unacceptable has also made it possible for ECOWAS to foster a normative climate in which constitutional governance is recognized as essential for democratic development, peace, and stability in West Africa.

ECOWAS's active support for election observation, mediation, and dialogue has further strengthened democratization and political participation. Its Election Observation Missions (EOMs) have monitored over 100 elections since 1999, enhancing transparency and accountability in electoral processes (Francis, 2009). Mediation efforts and facilitation of stakeholder dialogues have encouraged the inclusion of civil society, women, youth, and marginalized groups in political governance. As citizens and political actors observe ECOWAS's consistent advocacy for credible polls and peaceful transfers of power, public trust in both regional and national democratic institutions is incrementally reinforced. This growing engagement nurtures the emergence of an informed, mobilized citizenry, which is essential for sustaining long term democratic consolidation and resilience against unconstitutional challenges (Adebajo, 2020; Bah, 2021).

#### **- Sub -regional Peace, Security and Stability**

ECOWAS's commitment to peace and security is exemplified by its pioneering role in Africa led peace operations. The establishment of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990 broke new ground as the continent's first sub-regional peace enforcement initiative (Adebajo, 2020). ECOMOG's interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone set important precedents, demonstrating that African states could take the lead in managing regional security crises, even in the absence of direct United Nations leadership. These operations not only ended devastating civil wars but also laid the groundwork for post conflict transition, reconstruction, and democratic renewal (Akindele, 2018; Francis, 2009). Subsequent deployments in Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and The Gambia have further cemented ECOWAS's status as a leader in sub-regional African peacekeeping efforts, inspiring similar initiatives across the continent (Bah, 2021; Hartmann, 2016).

Moreover, the frequency and intensity of interstate and civil wars in West Africa have materially declined since ECOWAS intensified its proactive interventions in the 1990s and 2000s. While the subregion is not immune to recurring instability including recent waves of military coups there has been a discernible reduction in large scale armed conflicts and interstate wars (Adebajo, 2020; Obi, 2019). Much of this progress can be attributed to ECOWAS's robust legal mechanisms, early warning systems, and willingness to enforce democratic and peace norms (ECOWAS, 1999; Bah, 2021). By fostering collective security arrangements and supporting

national reconciliation, ECOWAS has contributed to an environment where the incentives for open warfare are reduced, while the costs of subregional destabilization are increasingly shared among member states.

#### **- Collaboration with Global Actors**

Recognizing that regional challenges rarely exist in isolation, ECOWAS has actively pursued strategic collaboration with global partners, including the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), and European Union (EU) (Adebajo, 2020; Bah, 2021). These partnerships have been crucial in bolstering ECOWAS's legitimacy, mobilizing resources, and enhancing operational capacity. Joint missions, funding arrangements, and technical cooperation have enabled the organization to scale up the scope of its peacekeeping, election monitoring, and post conflict programs.

For instance, in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia, ECOWAS led or supported interventions were implemented in close coordination with AU and UN mechanisms, effectively leveraging both local legitimacy and international expertise to maximize impact (Francis, 2009). Such collaborations not only improve operational effectiveness but also strengthen the interconnected regional peace and security architecture, underscoring ECOWAS's role as a vital bridge between local dynamics and international norms (Akindele, 2018; Hartmann, 2016).

## **7. Challenges**

#### **- Political Will and Sovereignty**

ECOWAS's ability to enforce regional commitments is frequently impeded by member states' reluctance to cede aspects of their sovereignty. Political leaders often prioritize national interests, hindering collective enforcement of democratic norms and limiting ECOWAS's supranational authority. This tension between the community's integration ambitions and individual sovereignty claims became starkly evident when Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger collectively exited ECOWAS in January 2025, fracturing the region and exposing deep governance rifts.

The dominance of heads of state within ECOWAS's executive authority further compounds this, dampening the autonomy and reach of other regional bodies and sometimes undermining effective policy coherence.

#### **- Financial Constraints**

Despite grand ambitions, ECOWAS's operational capacity remains severely restricted by limited funding. The ECOWAS Peace Fund and other strategic mechanisms often depend heavily on donor contributions rather than reliable internal revenue, with only a fraction of the community levy consistently allocated to peace and security initiatives. This chronic underfunding affects staffing, mission preparation, and the sustainability of peace support operations, leading to duplicated efforts, delays, and overly ambitious mandates that exceed financial realities.

#### **- Inconsistent Enforcement and Perceptions of Bias**

ECOWAS has faced criticism for selective enforcement of its protocols and inconsistent responses to political crises (Akindele, 2018; Bah, 2021). In some instances, the organization has adopted swift and forceful measures imposing sanctions or threatening military intervention without sufficient diplomatic engagement, which has been perceived as heavy handed. Notable

examples include the 2015 coup attempt in Burkina Faso, the 2021 military coup in Mali, and the 2023 coup in Niger, where ECOWAS acted rapidly to suspend the countries from its decision-making bodies, freeze assets, and threaten the use of force (Adebajo, 2020). While these actions underscored the organization's commitment to democratic norms, critics argue that such aggressive posturing sometimes exacerbates tensions and raises questions about proportionality and engagement strategies.

Conversely, ECOWAS has also been criticized for leniency or delayed action in certain crises, often due to political considerations, the complexity of domestic politics, or external pressures. For instance, the 2012 political crisis in Guinea Bissau, the 2019 electoral crisis in The Gambia, and the 2012 2013 political standoff in Côte d'Ivoire saw comparatively slow responses, with sanctions or interventions implemented only after prolonged negotiation or external prompting (Francis, 2009; Hartmann, 2016). Such delays have occasionally undermined confidence in ECOWAS's impartiality, suggesting that political or strategic calculations can sometimes take precedence over strict adherence to the organization's democratic protocols.

These contrasting patterns highlight the challenges ECOWAS faces in balancing enforcement, diplomacy, and legitimacy. While the organization has established itself as a leading norm enforcer in West Africa, selective application of rules and inconsistencies in crisis management underscore the limits of regional capacity, political will, and external influence in shaping outcomes (Adebajo, 2020; Bah, 2021).

#### **- Rising Coups and Democratic Reversals**

The resurgence of military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and most recently Niger between 2021 and 2023 signals a serious threat to regional democratic consolidation (Nzubechi Akubueze, 2024, Mensah Akuamoah, 2021). These military takeovers reflect not only the fragility of democratic institutions but also popular disenchantment with civilian governments perceived as corrupt or ineffectual. ECOWAS's successive suspensions and sanctions, often applied with rapid timelines and threats of military intervention, have at times been perceived by the juntas as heavy handed and coercive, exacerbating tensions rather than encouraging compliance (Bah, 2021; Adebajo, 2020). In reaction, the juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger withdrew from active engagement within ECOWAS and, in a strategic realignment, formed a new alliance of the three Sahelian states to assert regional autonomy and resist ECOWAS's pressures.

This development has significant implications for regional integration and democratic consolidation. The formation of a separate Sahelian bloc has fragmented West African political cohesion, weakened ECOWAS's capacity to enforce democratic norms collectively, and introduced uncertainty into mechanisms for conflict prevention, mediation, and coordinated development. Consequently, the crisis underscores the limits of ECOWAS's current enforcement strategies and highlights the need for more context sensitive, inclusive approaches that balance diplomatic engagement, regional solidarity, and respect for domestic political dynamics (Hartmann, 2016).

### **7.5 Transnational Security Threats**

West Africa faces a rising tide of transnational challenges including terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime, illicit trafficking, and climate driven resource conflicts that place enormous strains on ECOWAS's resources and regional security frameworks. The spread of groups like

Boko Haram and increased banditry in border regions have stretched crisis response mechanisms and created new humanitarian emergencies. Existing protocols, though robust on paper, often lag behind the rapidly evolving security environment, necessitating urgent reforms and deeper cross border cooperation.

## **7.6 Public Disillusionment and Disconnect from Grassroots**

A growing chasm exists between ECOWAS's high level political operations and the everyday experiences and expectations of West African citizens. Many view ECOWAS as an elitist or distant organization, more concerned with the prerogatives of heads of state than the priorities of ordinary people. Youth frustration in particular is escalating, with a rising openness to anti-democratic alternatives in the face of persistent insecurity and socioeconomic hardship. Without renewed civic engagement, grassroots involvement, and participatory reforms, ECOWAS risks losing critical public support and failing to fulfill its own vision of a "community of the people".

## **8. Prospects and the Way Forward**

To strengthen its democratic and peacebuilding capacity in the face of regional fragmentation, rising insecurity, and legitimacy crises, ECOWAS must undertake ambitious, multi-dimensional reforms. The following priorities present a roadmap for building a more effective, resilient, and people centered regional democratic and peace community.

### **- Reform Institutional Frameworks**

ECOWAS's institutional architecture must evolve to overcome enforcement gaps and restore credibility. Current structures vest disproportionate power in the Authority of Heads of State, limiting the autonomy and effectiveness of the ECOWAS Commission and specialized agencies. Strengthening the authority of the ECOWAS Court of Justice is imperative. Its decisions on democracy, human rights, and governance should be made automatically binding on member states to end lingering patterns of noncompliance and indifference. Simultaneously, the sanctions regime should be clarified and codified, with transparent criteria for activation and sunset provisions to prevent civilian suffering and minimize political manipulation.

Institutional reforms must further include transitioning to formal voting systems rather than closed door consensus for decisions on democracy and governance. This would foster greater accountability and transparency. Enhanced parliamentary oversight, introduction of public hearings for the appointment of Commissioners, and direct elections to empower the ECOWAS Parliament would rebalance internal power structures and legitimize the organization in the eyes of the public.

### **- Enhance Funding Autonomy**

Persistent financial constraints have hampered the reach and impact of ECOWAS peace missions and governance programs. The organization must prioritize the full implementation of a sustainable community levy or similar mechanisms to ensure predictable, autonomous financing for peace and security operations. Reducing dependence on external donors whose priorities may diverge from regional needs will enhance ECOWAS's strategic autonomy, enable faster deployment of resources in crisis situations, and ensure the continuity of mandated programming.



**- Strengthen Civil Society Involvement**

To bridge the growing gap between ECOWAS and grassroots constituencies, the organization must institutionalize active participation of youth, women, and civil society in its decision-making processes. Fast tracking and fully operationalizing the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would inject new perspectives and enhance the legitimacy of regional decisions. Holistic engagement goes beyond consultation: it should include funding for youth led and women's organizations, routine civil society representation on ECOWAS committees, and support for inclusive public dialogues, especially on governance and constitutional reforms.

**- Leverage Digital Diplomacy and Early Warning Tools**

Harnessing the power of digital technologies can revolutionize ECOWAS's early warning, conflict prevention, and civic engagement capabilities. Expanding and upgrading the ECOWARN early warning system with real time digital data tools, social media analytics, and mobile feedback loops will enable timely detection of emerging crises and facilitate rapid, tailored responses. Simultaneously, digital platforms can enhance public participation, improve transparency, and strengthen youth engagement, especially in rural and marginalized communities. These tools also provide opportunities for remote diplomacy and collective problem solving, even under conditions of insecurity or limited physical access.

**- Promote Regional Security Cooperation**

As threats transcend borders, deeper cooperation with the African Union Peace and Security Council, the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, and sub-regional entities is essential. Joint operations, intelligence sharing, harmonized policies on terrorism, and collaborative peacekeeping missions will help ECOWAS meet complex security challenges and present a unified response to violent extremism, organized crime, and climate induced threats. Formal mechanisms for routine joint planning and resource mobilization anchored in shared strategy documents and annual reviews will institutionalize this cooperation, closing the gap between ambition and action.

**- Address Root Causes of Conflicts and insecurity.**

Long term peace cannot be achieved by security measures alone. ECOWAS must lead coordinated, multi sectoral interventions that address the deep-rooted causes of conflict (economic inequality, poor governance, corruption, marginalization, and exclusion of minority groups), insecurity (both state centric and Human insecurity). Supporting national governments with best practice policy guidance, standardized anti-corruption frameworks, and targeted regional funding for developmental diplomacy can address grievances before they escalate. Programs that focus on jobs creation, education, climate adaptation, and social safety nets especially for vulnerable youth and women can steer them and other vulnerable populations (such as the elderly, handicaps etc.) away from violence and toward constructive regional engagement.

Enacting definitive reforms in these six key domains, can enable ECOWAS to transform current crises into opportunities for a more resilient, democratic, secure and sustainably peaceful and developed West Africa. While the scale of the task requires high level political will and some painful tradeoffs including the inevitable transfer of some sovereignty from member states to the (sub)regional governance level, such an evolution is both necessary and urgent for the community to safeguard its vision of an "ECOWAS of the Peoples."

## 9. Conclusion

ECOWAS has played a truly transformative role in shaping the political and security landscape of West Africa, demonstrating that regional cooperation can yield remarkable progress in fostering democracy, peace, and integration among diverse states. This distinctive achievement of ECOWAS compared with other RECs in Africa is nicely captured in a *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* report as follows:

Among the RECs, ECOWAS has been the most effective, with Nigeria serving as a strong anchor and advocate for democratization and peacekeeping. ECOWAS has intervened against, sanctioned, or condemned actions taken by most of its member states over the past two decades. It has organized peaceful resolutions and restored constitutional governments in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gambia, among others (Khadiagala, 2018:1)

Through its robust legal instruments, innovative peacekeeping missions, and frequent diplomatic interventions, ECOWAS has proven that collective action can address long standing instability and promote shared norms of governance within a historically turbulent subregion. At its strongest, ECOWAS nurtured democratic transitions, curbed violent conflicts, and enhanced civic engagement through election observation and inclusive dialogue. The sustained decline in interstate wars and the strengthening of institutions across several member states bear witness to these achievements. ECOWAS's ability to collaborate with continental and global partners including the African Union and United Nations has further amplified its legitimacy and operational reach while broadening the scope of peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives.

Collectively, these achievements highlight ECOWAS's multifaceted approach to regional democratic governance, peace and security. Hence, rooting its interventions in legal norms, pioneering regional peace operations, reinforcing stability, inviting global collaboration, and stimulating civic engagement, ECOWAS's has established itself as a model of sub-regional governance on the African continent. While challenges remain, the organization's track record offers valuable lessons in building resilient, democratic, and integrated regions faced with persistent governance, peace, security and governance problems.

Yet, the resurgence of coups that have seen "democratically elected" Heads of States toppled by military juntas, persistent state fragilities, and the proliferation of transnational security threats make it clear that these gains remain fragile. Recent democratic reversals in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, and the emergence of public disillusionment amidst economic and governance deficits underscore the urgent need for renewed political commitment and institutional reforms (Nzubechi Akubueze, 2024, Mensah Akuamoah, 2021)

ECOWAS must address its internal capacity challenges, enhance funding autonomy, and expand inclusive governance to restore public trust and effectiveness. Ultimately, sustaining democratic peace and stability in West Africa demands that ECOWAS moves decisively toward deeper and more resilient integration. Investing in strategic reforms including clearer enforcement mechanisms, broader civic participation, and stronger regional security cooperation, can place ECOWAS as the cornerstone of a democratic, peaceful and prosperous West Africa, capable of meeting contemporary peace, security and development challenges and fulfilling its founding vision for generations to come.

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