

**ECOWAS KEY OBSTACLES TO CONFLICT
RESOLUTION IN WEST AFRICA: THE
STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE ECOMOG's
EFFECTIVENESS**

By

Ezeh Chinonso Kennedy

B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D.

The orchestrated successes of ECOMOG in the various conflict arenas in the West African sub-region have not been achieved without sacrifices and challenges. In fact, several problems and obstacles are still to be overcome if the ECOWAS Mechanism is to achieve the desired result. These obstacles, hindrances or challenges will be discussed further and their implications for the security of the ECOWAS sub-region, with a view to proffering new options or alternative approaches to enhance the effectiveness of ECOMOG.

ECOWAS was compelled to establish a new mechanism due mainly to the experiences of the organisation in its efforts at resolving the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and later Cote D'Ivoire. The lack of unity and consensus on the part of regional leaders, the Francophone-Anglophone divide and later Lusophone component coupled with the weak structure of

the member states were all part of experiences that stalled early success. There was also the fear of domination arising from distrust among member states. The numerical composition of ECOMOG forces as well as the command and control structure which were all dominated by Nigeria imposed a great burden on a member state alone. The new Mechanism is expected to address these problems in addition to operational deployment of troops. Under the new Mechanism, ECOMOG is supposed to be a standby arrangement for preventive and peacekeeping operations. The inherent drawbacks of this arrangement have manifested in Guinea Bissau and in Casamance Province of Senegal. Therefore, for ECOMOG to remain relevant, these problems and challenges must be addressed.

Leadership/Fear of Dominance;

The security competence of a regional organisation such as ECOWAS hinges on certain objective factors: scope of threat, availability of extra-regional sources of support and the power structure within the system. The broader the scope of threat or the more the number of states facing the threat, the greater the incentive for solidarity in security fields and the wider the base of potential regional security schemes. The presence of strong regional leadership is highly desirable. Such leadership promotes the chances for greater security competence on the part of the Community. Conversely, it may also stimulate fears in the other states to the point of considering it as another source of security threat.

A highly diffused power structure presents little or no chance for the emergence of strong leadership and tends to lack a unified orientation to security issues. This could however be compensated by a moderate level polarisation so that a core set of states undertakes the functions of leadership without substantial opposition. However, a high level of polarisation in the context of diffused power splits the region with potentially contradictory perceptions of security. This was the case with ECOWAS at the outset of the Liberian crisis with Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Gambia and Sierra Leone on one side and Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo and Mali on the other side.

Conversely, a highly concentrated power structure produces effective leadership, with the greatest power acting to underwrite the whole regional security or orchestrate security policies of individual states after its own image of security, **(Ayoob 1986:269)**.

The United States of America exemplifies this power structure in the global context. However, Nigeria, by its size and all the inherent elements of national power, is perhaps best suited to provide this leadership in West Africa. By her unequivocal commitment to the cause of ECOMOG, Nigeria bore the heavy burden of this leadership throughout the Liberian and Sierra Leonean crises which proved her to be the preponderant power in the sub-region, with the capacity and resources to provide strong leadership. This is even more so, now that democratic governance has been established in Nigeria since 1999. However, a check and balance mechanism should be in place to curb leadership excesses and finally, there should be an ECOWAS-ECOMOG

Cost-Benefit-Analysis to clear the doubts and fears of dominance which would obstruct or slowdown conflict resolution efforts in West Africa.

Burden Sharing, Inadequate Funding and External Interference:

The next concern of ECOWAS is burden sharing and inadequate funding. In its original sense, burden sharing was conceived in budgetary terms with member states paying their annual contributions for the smooth functioning of ECOWAS. With the addition of security commitment, the financial burden has been increased substantially. Till date, Nigeria's total commitment to the ECOMOG operations has not been fully quantified.

Modest estimates put it at between eight and ten billion US Dollars. Such heavy commitment was made possible because of the then military governments in Nigeria. With the present democratic government, it is most unlikely that Nigeria would swiftly embark on such a venture without the parliamentary input and approval of the National Assembly. How then can the burden be shared to sustain an effective security arrangement in West Africa?

It is therefore argued that without a high degree of international cooperation in financial burden sharing as well as in providing and equipping the forces needed, the willingness and capacity of both the UN and regional organisations to prevent or resolve conflicts might not ever be possible, **(Owoeye, 1993:275)**.

In this regard, the achievements of ECOWAS via ECOMOG should prompt the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) to provide financial assistance to support ECOWAS efforts. In

addition, external powers, in whose interest it is to have peace and stability, should also provide financial and material support to sustain ECOMOG. Since economic activities can only thrive in a secure environment, multinational corporations (MNCs) and large indigenous firms operating in the sub-region should also share the burden of security within ECOWAS. Such arrangement would create a symbiotic relationship between ECOWAS, individual states, such MNCs and large firms.

According to **Brigadier General H. Lai (2012)**, then Chief of Staff, ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), who observed and lamented that;

Most ECOWAS member states are not able to meet their financial obligations leading to inadequate funding of ECOWAS policies and programmes. For instance, the construction of the two West African highways from Lagos to Nouakchott and from Dakar to Ndjamena is yet to be completed due to inadequate funding.

This has also affected the running of ECOWAS Commission, ECOWARN, ECOMOG etc. that has resulted to dependence on external sources of funding which could compromise ECOWAS independence, cohesiveness and assertiveness in conflict resolution.

Inadequate funding has often led to external interference whereby external bodies often interfere in ECOWAS programmes to further their nest. The interference could be under the guise of providing

assistance to ECOWAS, since the mechanism for conflict resolution is mostly funded by them. For instance, the EU contributed 1.9 million Euros to enable ECOWAS operationalise some aspects of the Mechanism. USAID also provided support of 400,000 US Dollars to ECOWARN for training and technical assistance and 466,000 US Dollars to strengthen civil society capacity for conflict prevention; Brigadier General Lai (2012) further stated.

Force Structure and Lack of Collective Political Will:

The then situation at the Guinea-Liberia border and the ECOWAS experience in Guinea Bissau has exposed the weakness of ECOMOG troop-contribution arrangement. The lack of functional ECOMOG Headquarters and readily available troops, have frustrated the mediation and ECOMOG interposition efforts. These set-backs are proving costly and even threatening the breakup of ECOMOG. A former UN official with long experience in peacekeeping matters argues that:

Peacekeeping units should be regarded not as an abnormal expense but as a routine and indispensable feature of the new world order, **(Col. Simon-Hart, 2001 NDC Report).**

The need for a standby force should therefore be an overriding consideration in the security of the sub-region. Such standby force need not be large. Indeed, the essential elements should include the Force Headquarters with various operational, administrative and logistic cells to form the nucleus. With such arrangement in place, expansion of the force on mobilisation is

facilitated. By any standard and considering the capacity of the community, ECOMOG should have a standing force of a Brigade Group, comprising three battalions and support elements. As a minimum, the Headquarters should maintain a battalion group for rapid deployment, before more troops are mobilised; **(Col. Simon-Hart, 2001 NDC Report).**

One of the major factors militating against the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) and its structure has been traced to lack of collective political will among the member states. The Chief of Staff of ECOWAS Standby Force, **Brigadier General Lai (2012)** opines further that;

Some ECOWAS countries maintain military pacts and membership with other external bodies and countries apart from ECOWAS, which limits their commitment to the regional body. This dual membership often affects their willingness to contribute troops for conflict resolution and peacekeeping.

Location, Deployment and Inadequacy of Troop Strength:

The ECOWAS Secretariat is already located in Abuja, Nigeria. It might seem logical to co-locate ECOMOG Headquarters with the Secretariat. However operational exigencies would favour a more central location. Since ECOMOG force appears to be needed in the Mano River Area, any of these countries could provide a suitable base. Apart from cordiality of location, certain basic infrastructure are essential; these include airport facilities, seaport and communication facilities. Monrovia in Liberia is a suitable location with essential facilities and centrality within the ECOWAS sub-region, **(Col. Simon-Hart, 2001 NWC Report).**

Another relevant factor for consideration should include training areas within the region. Each member state should designate a training area and place some military training facilities for ECOMOG. Standardisation of equipment is an essential factor to enhance interoperability. According to Brig. General Lai, there is also the need to establish a joint ECOWAS doctrine for training of designated troops as this would ensure harmonisation of operational concepts and foster understanding of operational procedures.

However, inadequacy of ECOMOG troop strength was very evident. In Liberia, ECOMOG's initial mandate gave rise to the deployment of 3,500 troops facing Charles Taylor's over 10,000 rebels and other warring factions on their well known terrain. ECOMOG could not successfully deploy its force without changing its mandate from peacekeeping to peace enforcement and increasing its force strength to 12,000. In Cote D'Ivoire, the limited ECOMOG strength was whittled down because contributing countries such as Mali and Guinea Conakry could not deploy their troops as it was initially planned.

Legality and Discord among ECOWAS Heads of State

Another great challenge and legal burden to ECOWAS was the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states which was enshrined in the UN Charter and OAU now AU. The ECOWAS required force for intervention was the Allied Armed Forces of the Community (AAFC) which was never established. Consequently, the establishment and deployment of ECOMOG to Liberia was limited due to controversies arising from

the legality, the composition, the mode of deployment, the command and control structure and the operational role of the sub-regional force, **(Umoden, 1992:84)**.

Morally speaking, this affected the deployment process of the ECOMOG as well as its structure and effectiveness.

The discord among ECOWAS heads of state became clearer prior to the deployment of ECOMOG to Liberia. Charles Taylor's NPFL had the backing of Libya, Burkina Faso, and Cote D'Ivoire while President Doe's Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) was supported by Nigeria, Guinea and Sierra Leone. This principle of non-interference coupled with Anglophone-Francophone divide due to lack of unified official language led to fears of loosing or giving up hard-earned sovereignty. The visible cross-border crimes and its destabilisation effects also heightened the latent discord among ECOWAS heads of state.

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE ECOMOG EFFECTIVENESS

The following strategies should be adopted towards overcoming the above mentioned challenges or obstacles in future ECOMOG peace support operations in West Africa.

a. Better Appreciation of Military Challenges in Mission Area:

In order to ensure that adequate number of troops were deployed in peace support operations, efforts must be made to achieve better appreciation of the military challenges that are to be confronted. This requires that "intelligence" for the planning of the mission must be improved. In particular, the observation

centres in different countries and zones under the early warning system of the ECOWAS mechanism should develop better data banks which must be made available to the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat as peace missions are being planned. On its part, the ECOWAS Secretariat must also devise an arrangement for harnessing the information on conflict situations usually available from civil society networks and research institutions. Data from such sources, which are usually more dispassionate than official briefings of governments, could assist in developing a more realistic assessment of the conflict situation into which peacekeeping operations are being deployed.

b. Better Arrangements for Force Generation:

ECOWAS must evolve better arrangements for troop generation at short notice, especially the forces that are competently and combatantly trained and actually needed for peace support operations. While member countries may pledge stand-by units, ECOWAS should institute a control mechanism for checking the operational availability of such units. Arrangements for generation of ECOMOG troops must go beyond merely assembling the requisite number of soldiers, but also must emphasize the need for well-trained personnel.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that ECOWAS has adopted a regional arrangement for peacekeepers, based on tactical studies and training located in Zambakro, Cote d'Ivoire (now relocated to Koulikoro, Mali), operational level training in Accra, Ghana and strategic level training at National Defence College (NDC), Abuja, Nigeria. These initiatives should not only be sustained but should

also be completed with the provision of some specialised training, mainly in intelligence and civil military activities, which are particularly needed for conflict resolution. The goal must be to develop in the long run, some qualified resource persons who will be proficient enough to be involved in liaison, contact cells and in civil-military coordination cells, meant to prepare and facilitate ECOMOG deployment in hostile environment.

c. Better Command, Control and Coordination:

In view of the problems that were encountered in terms of coordination between Force Commander and Executive Secretariat, the system of command, control and coordination at the leadership level of peacekeeping operations should be reviewed.

In particular, given the sometimes rapidly changing situations in the mission area, the Force Commander should be granted latitude to respond as appropriate. However, the system must also ensure that the FC does not bypass the Special Representative to deal directly with the Executive Secretary on a routine basis.

d. Capacity Building at Executive Secretariat:

The capacity of the Executive Secretariat in planning and supporting ECOMOG operations must be improved. In this regard, a Strategic Planning Cell (SPC or Think Tank) should be created under the DES-PADS. Setting up such a political-military entity in the Executive Secretariat would be an undeniable positive contribution for the improvement of the strategic

planning and management of the military and political problems that a peacekeeping operation is unavoidably confronted with.

e. Setting up ECOMOG Logistic Base:

In dealing with the recurrent challenge of supplying the forces with equipment, two strategies should be pursued. First, ECOWAS must improve its coordination of the RECAMP and other assistance programmes, which provide for prepositioning of equipment. Secondly, ECOWAS must also develop a plan for setting up a sub-regional logistic base, where the most important equipment and material, made available by different partners, could be stored and maintained for quick deployment.

f. Establishment of Lasting Financial System:

In order to address the problem of resources, ECOWAS must improve its planning capacity for the sustenance of peace support operations. In this regard, it must identify all the possible priority needs of peace missions and manage them in a consistent and transparent manner especially the contributions of local and international donors.

The ultimate goal should be to build a special peacekeeping fund, whose objective would be to sustain ECOMOG forces deployed to fulfil missions as mandated by ECOWAS.

g. Improving Strategic Support:

In mounting peacekeeping operations that are geared towards conflict resolution in future, the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat must improve arrangements for strategic support. One strategy

for achieving this would be to ensure stronger liaison with the major powers, such as UK, Russia, China, France and US that can provide strategic lift capacities. An example of this kind of arrangement was the one between African Union and the US for the airlifting of African troops to the mission area in Darfur. ECOWAS should establish similar arrangements for providing strategic support for each troop in future missions.

h. Unity and Consensus among ECOWAS Heads of State:

The three recurrent themes (conflict prevention, good neighbourliness and greater African Unity) are at the core of Africa's political ideal to foster a sense of community among member states. A broader and right understanding of these principles will permit the Heads of ECOWAS member states to unite and overcome the individual interests of their respective countries with a view to agreeing on ECOWAS policies, programmes and institutions for peace, security and integration in West Africa. When this is achieved, the fear of domination, the Anglophone-Francophone divide, lack of unified official language and the fear of losing hard-earned sovereignty would be reduced if not vanished.

The issues that have been addressed above are by no means not the only ones affecting ECOMOG capacity and effectiveness in conflict resolution. It is expected, however, that if these core issues are addressed by ECOWAS, better results would be achieved in the future.

