

“There is a need for well agreed coordination mechanisms”

Interview with Cyriaque P. Agnekethom on regional peace cooperation in West Africa

What has been/is ECOWAS approach towards solving the crisis in Mali and other Sahel countries? How does it differ from the policies of other organisations and actors?

The specificity of the crisis in Mali, from its beginning till now, is that there are constantly two crisis in one: the political crisis and the security crisis. It should be recalled that when the rebels started their attacks and moved from the North, a serious political crisis erupted in Bamako with the coup d'état of Captain Sanogo which overthrew President Amadou Toumani Toure. For ECOWAS and for the international community, it was

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urgent and imperative to find a solution to that political crisis in order to (re)mobilise national stakeholders to face the rebellion. In compliance with the 2001 ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance which

provides for zero tolerance for power obtained through unconstitutional means, ECOWAS imposed sanctions on the military and obtained the handing-over of power to a transitional government lead by civilians.

Within the broad framework for the resolution of the crisis in Mali, the approach by ECOWAS remains the same: address the political crisis through the Algiers Peace Agreement and resolve the security crisis through a common fight against terrorist groups in Mali and the Sahel.

When it comes to addressing the challenges facing the Sahel, my perception is that there are some nuances between ECOWAS' approach and what some of our partners or other sister organisations are doing. First, we are convinced that the geographical space of Sahel is broader and includes the 11 countries participating in the Nouakchott Process (Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.). On that basis, ECOWAS supports the efforts of the African Union Commission to revive the

Nouakchott Process, as the appropriate framework for the promotion of peace and security in the Sahelo-Saharan region and with a view to ensuring effective coordination of ongoing efforts in the region, particularly in the context of the the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of the Lake Chad Basin to fight against Boko Haram.

Second, there is need for a holistic approach to address the challenges facing this region within the framework of the African Peace and Security Architecture and the existing regional mechanisms. Third, the ECOWAS Sahel Strategy is centred on three strategic areas, namely transport infrastructure in order to address the isolation of the region and the fact that due to lack of communication infrastructure, the region is poorly integrated into the national and regional communities; resilience and food security with the objective of promoting sustainable solutions to address food and nutrition challenges; education with the view of addressing on one hand the propagation of extremism through false interpretations of Islam; and, on the other, the issue of youth unemployment caused in part by inadequate or lack of professional training. Peace and security measures, especially fighting transnational organized crime and terrorism as well as the issue of political participation are, within the Strategy, considered as a facilitating/enabling measures aimed at creating the conducive environment for the development of the Sahel.

ECOWAS is cooperating with many organisations in the region. How does this cooperation work in practice and where do you see a need for improvement?

ECOWAS is recognised by the African Union as the regional economic community (REC) in West Africa; and the Treaty establishing ECOWAS provides for cooperation with other sister organisations. On that basis, cooperation relationships are developed taking into consideration the comparative advantage of each organisation.

With the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UNEMOA) for example, there are established mechanisms such as the joint technical committee (JTC) which meet at expert level and report to the managerial and heads of institutions levels for decision-making. With other organisations, cooperation is often on some thematic areas or in the implementation of specific programmes. This is the case with the Mano River Union on cross-border security issues where the policy and plan of action are jointly developed and resources mobilized for the implementation. With the G5 Sahel, while ECOWAS fully supports the G5 Sahel Joint Force against terrorism, there are on-going discussions for a more structured cooperation with the G5 Sahel Secretariat.

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Across regions, the most important cooperation is with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). In the area of maritime security and safety,

the Summit of ECCAS and ECOWAS Heads of State and Government adopted the Declaration on Maritime Security and Safety in the Gulf of Guinea in Yaoundé, Cameroon on 25 June 2013. The Declaration led to the launch of the “Yaoundé Process”, intended to provide

the two regions with legal and operational frameworks. Further to that, a new Summit held in Lome, Togo on 30 July 2018, adopted the Lome Declaration on Peace, Security, Stability and the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism which aims to create conditions for sustainable peace and a secure environment in the common area of the two regions, through the adoption of a shared vision of the threats and common approach to the solutions.

The experience in such cooperation has shown the need for well agreed coordination mechanisms, especially at the technical level, with a clear periodicity for necessary follow up meetings. However it has been very challenging to identify and respect dates for regular meetings as each organisation is often busy with the implementation of its core mandate activities. Joint mobilisation of financial resources is another challenge due to the existing internal financial rules and procedures of each organisa-

tion. Often, the organisations rely on partners support, which leads to the impression of competition for resources to implement own core mandate programmes. Finally, there are evident difficulties in joint-planning and follow up of programmes which will require involvement of each of the organisation.

What do you expect from extra-regional partners and how could they support African ownership of regional conflict management and peacebuilding?

The most important expectation from a partner is to “build partnership” and not give the impression of imposing a vision and how things should be done. Building partnership means to agree where our different interests meet to create the “common interest” which will be the basis of our relations and collaboration. Often it is done through a process where we review together the peace and security situation, agree a diagnostic and define possible solutions to address what is foreseen as threats or challenges and finally agree the required means, including political, technical and financial. This is our approach to partnership and it is accepted by most of our partners and it works well. All being equal, our partnership with EU within the framework of the Regional Indicative Programme/European Development Funds (RIP/EDF) is based on this model.

Once the above approach to partnership is accepted, the support from our partners would have high probability of ensuring our ownership of the regional agenda on conflict management and peacebuilding. In the areas of conflict management and peacebuilding, supporting “regional ownership” means first to accept the leadership of the process by the existing regional organisation. We should also take into consideration the specific requirements for effective intervention in the different stages of a conflict cycle in order to identify the appropriate actor to lead the process. It is imperative to build on or strengthen regional dynamics and mechanisms where they do exist rather than creating what could be seen as parallel initiative or duplication of efforts. Supporting regional ownership is also to agree on burden sharing, especially on sharing the financial burden. For example, ECOWAS strongly expresses its support to the on-going efforts towards UN support to AU-led peace support operations mandated by the UN Security Council. In that dynamic, ECOWAS is of the opinion that due consideration should be given to supporting RECs as they contribute to the international peace and security. This is the case with ECOWAS intervention in Guinea Bissau since 2012 and in The Gambia in early 2017. The financial burden of the deployment of these two missions is on ECOWAS, with the European Union being the unique partner that contributes tremendously to reduce that burden.

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Please note that the views in this paper reflect Dr Agnekethom’s personal opinion only.



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