



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17231288>

ECOWAS and Military Interventions in West African Sub-Region: Causes and Effects

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ABSTRACT

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has become a pivotal regional body in addressing security and political instability within the West African sub-region. Since its establishment in 1975, the organisation has gradually expanded its mandate beyond economic cooperation to include peacekeeping and military interventions aimed at safeguarding democratic governance, regional security, and stability. This study critically examines the causes and effects of ECOWAS military interventions in the West African sub-region. It identifies key drivers such as unconstitutional changes of government, electoral disputes, insurgencies, terrorism, and cross-border conflicts as recurring triggers of intervention. The research further highlights how fragile state institutions, poor governance, corruption, and ethnic tensions exacerbate these crises. In assessing the effects, the study reveals a dual impact: while ECOWAS interventions have helped in restoring order, preventing large-scale humanitarian crises, and reinforcing democratic transitions, they have also generated controversies related to sovereignty, human rights violations, over-reliance on external support, and limited sustainability of peace efforts. The paper argues that despite its achievements, ECOWAS faces significant challenges in terms of financial constraints, political will, and capacity to enforce long-term solutions. This study contributes to the discourse on regional security by offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding ECOWAS interventions, emphasizing the need for stronger institutional mechanisms, preventive diplomacy, and inclusive governance to foster sustainable peace in West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS, military intervention, West Africa, peacekeeping, democracy, regional security, political instability

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos as a regional bloc designed primarily to promote economic integration and cooperation among the 15 member states of West Africa. Initially, its primary concern was fostering a common market and promoting regional trade, but over time, its responsibilities have expanded significantly to include issues related to governance, peace and security, human rights, infrastructure development, humanitarian coordination, and regional diplomacy. The expansion of ECOWAS's mandate reflects the evolving political and economic landscape of the region, where development challenges and internal conflicts are often interwoven (Adebajo, 2021). One of ECOWAS's core responsibilities is the promotion of regional economic integration. Through policies such as the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), and the Common External Tariff (CET), the organization has sought to remove barriers to intra-regional trade and facilitate mobility among West African citizens. It has also promoted the adoption of a single regional currency, the Eco, although the project has faced repeated delays due to differences in macroeconomic performance and fiscal policies among member states (Olayiwola & Aluko, 2022). Infrastructural development has equally been prioritized, with the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) supporting road construction, energy distribution, and digital connectivity, critical drivers of regional commerce and integration.

In the political realm, ECOWAS has developed a strong institutional framework for promoting democracy and constitutional order. The 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security are key instruments that empower ECOWAS to engage diplomatically or, in certain cases, militarily when member states face political instability or unconstitutional changes of government (Fawole, 2020). ECOWAS frequently deploys election observer missions and engages in preventive diplomacy in member states with fragile political transitions or disputed electoral outcomes. The organization also works to protect human rights, gender equality, and youth participation, establishing bodies like the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre and coordinating humanitarian assistance in times of crisis, such as during the Ebola epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic (Osei-Hwedie, 2022).

ECOWAS has also become recognized globally for its role in military interventions aimed at restoring order and democratic rule in crisis-stricken countries. ECOWAS's involvement in regional military interventions emerged out of necessity as West Africa experienced civil wars, coups, and violent political transitions during the 1990s and early 2000s. In Liberia (1990–1997) and Sierra Leone (1997–2000), ECOWAS deployed the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to contain civil conflicts and support transitional governments. These interventions marked the community's shift from a purely economic union to a security actor concerned with peace enforcement and post-conflict reconstruction (Zondi, 2023). In The Gambia in 2017, following President Yahya Jammeh's refusal to concede defeat after losing elections to Adama Barrow, ECOWAS deployed troops under the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) to compel a peaceful transfer of power. This action was widely praised as a decisive stance against authoritarianism and electoral fraud. In recent years, the organization has faced renewed challenges following the resurgence of military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). ECOWAS responded by suspending the affected countries from the bloc, imposing sanctions, and initiating dialogue aimed at restoring civilian rule—though with varying degrees of success.

The implications of ECOWAS's military interventions on socio-political stability and regional development are multifaceted. On the one hand, they demonstrate the organization's commitment to collective security, democratic consolidation, and regional peace. By deterring unconstitutional power grabs, ECOWAS has positioned itself as a custodian of political stability in West Africa. These interventions can also create the conditions for socio-economic rebuilding, allowing countries to regain international support and development assistance. On the other hand, interventions can sometimes provoke nationalist backlash or exacerbate tensions if not followed by sustained political dialogue and institution-building. Additionally, repeated coups and governance failures reflect deeper structural weaknesses in many West African states, including weak institutions, youth disenfranchisement, corruption, and underdevelopment, which military interventions alone cannot resolve. Its peace efforts are not isolated but are connected to its broader goal of sustainable regional development. By coupling military responses with support for electoral processes, economic reforms, and human rights advocacy, ECOWAS seeks to build a stable West African sub-region capable of fulfilling the aspirations of its people. In this sense, military interventions are not the end, but part of a broader framework of regional governance that emphasizes stability, legitimacy, and development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What are the causes of military interventions in countries under ECOWAS?
- ii. What are the effects of military interventions on ECOWAS' image in Africa?

- iii. What are the challenges that hindered the effective enforcement of ECOWAS sanctions on military interventions in West Africa sub-region?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine ECOWAS and Military Intervention in Africa. The specific objectives are to:

- i. investigate the causes of military interventions in countries under ECOWAS
- ii. examine the effects of military interventions on ECOWAS's Image in Africa.
- iii. identify the challenges that hindered the effective enforcement of ECOWAS sanctions on military interventions in the West African sub-region.
- iv.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopt the Liberal Institutionalism Theory which was propounded by Robert Keohane in 1984, primarily in his work *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Keohane, 1984). Liberal institutionalism, a key theory in international relations, emerged as a response to realism, emphasizing the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation among states. The theory was significantly advanced by scholars such as Robert Keohane (1984) and Joseph Nye (1977), who argued that institutions play a fundamental role in mitigating the anarchic nature of the international system by facilitating repeated interactions and establishing norms of behavior. Unlike realists, who believe that states operate in a self-help system where conflict is inevitable, liberal institutionalists contend that institutions create structured environments that promote transparency, accountability, and trust among states (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

One of the primary assumptions of liberal institutionalism is that states are rational actors that seek to maximize their absolute gains rather than focusing solely on relative gains, as realists suggest (Keohane, 1984). This idea challenges the realist notion that cooperation is rare because states are primarily concerned with maintaining power balances (Mearsheimer, 1994). Instead, liberal institutionalists argue that international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the European Union (EU) provide mechanisms that reduce transaction costs and increase the credibility of commitments, making cooperation more attractive (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). By establishing rules and facilitating negotiations, institutions help states achieve mutual benefits, even in situations where short-term self-interest might dictate defection (Oye, 1986).

Another key assumption of liberal institutionalism is that institutions help states by reducing uncertainty and providing information that enables better decision-making (Keohane, 1989). Realists argue that states often struggle with trust in international relations, leading to security dilemmas where fear of betrayal prevents cooperation (Waltz, 1979). However, liberal institutionalists counter this by emphasizing that institutions create monitoring and enforcement mechanisms that make agreements more reliable (Keohane, 1984). For instance, the WTO ensures compliance with trade agreements by offering dispute resolution mechanisms, which enhance confidence among member states (Stein, 1990). Similarly, NATO provides security assurances that reduce the likelihood of conflict among its members by institutionalizing defense commitments (Ikenberry, 2001).

Liberal institutionalism also builds on the theory of complex interdependence, introduced by Keohane and Nye (1977), which argues that states are increasingly connected through economic, political, and social ties. Unlike traditional realist perspectives, which emphasize military power as the primary determinant of international relations, complex interdependence suggests that states are less likely to engage in conflict because the costs of war outweigh the benefits (Keohane & Nye, 1977). The European Union serves as a prime example, as economic integration among member states has significantly reduced the likelihood of military conflict in Europe since World War II (Moravcsik, 1998). This interdependence extends beyond economics to include environmental

concerns, global health, and technology, further reinforcing the necessity of institutional cooperation (Slaughter, 2004).

A critical aspect of liberal institutionalism is the argument that institutions enable states to achieve collective security and address global challenges more effectively than unilateral actions (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). Realists maintain that power politics dominate international relations, but liberal institutionalists highlight cases where institutions have successfully managed crises, such as the UN's role in peacekeeping missions or the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) efforts in stabilizing economies during financial crises (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). By fostering dialogue and reducing the incentives for unilateral aggression, institutions contribute to a more stable international order (Keohane, 1984).

Despite its strengths, liberal institutionalism has faced criticisms, particularly from realist scholars who argue that institutions ultimately reflect the interests of powerful states rather than acting as independent entities (Mearsheimer, 1994). According to this critique, institutions do not have the power to enforce rules on major powers and are often manipulated to serve the strategic interests of dominant nations (Grieco, 1988). For example, the U.S. withdrawal from international agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal demonstrates that institutions rely on state commitment rather than possessing inherent authority (Krasner, 1999). Furthermore, realists argue that security dilemmas persist despite institutional frameworks, as states continue to prioritize military capabilities over cooperative agreements (Walt, 1987).

Liberal institutionalism remains highly relevant in contemporary global governance, as demonstrated by the role of institutions in addressing transnational issues such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics (Keohane & Victor, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated both the strengths and limitations of international institutions, as organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) played a crucial role in coordinating global responses, yet also faced challenges due to political tensions among states (Hale, Held & Young, 2013). The ongoing importance of regional organizations, such as the African Union and ASEAN, further underscores the continued relevance of institutional cooperation in managing conflicts and economic development (Acharya, 2001).

Liberal institutionalism offers a compelling framework for understanding how states can achieve cooperation despite the anarchic nature of the international system. By emphasizing the role of institutions in reducing uncertainty, promoting transparency, and fostering interdependence, the theory provides a counterbalance to the realist focus on power politics. While it acknowledges the persistence of state interests and power struggles, it argues that institutions, when properly designed and supported, create environments that facilitate long-term stability and mutual prosperity (Keohane, 1984). As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the role of international institutions in global governance is likely to remain a central focus of international relations scholarship and practice (Ikenberry, 2018).

The Liberal Institutionalism Theory is highly relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how regional organizations like ECOWAS engage in military interventions and peacekeeping efforts to foster stability and development in Africa. This theory, originally developed by Robert Keohane (1984), argues that international institutions play a crucial role in mitigating anarchy, promoting cooperation, and facilitating conflict resolution through established norms, rules, and collective mechanisms (Keohane, 1984). In the context of ECOWAS, this theory helps explain the organization's efforts in maintaining regional security, enforcing democratic principles, and responding to political instability through structured intervention mechanisms (Ikenberry, 2001).

One of the key applications of Liberal Institutionalism to this study is in understanding how ECOWAS functions as a platform for collective security and military intervention (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). The organization has developed various protocols, agreements, and legal frameworks that guide member states in handling regional conflicts, reflecting the liberal institutionalist perspective that international institutions shape state behavior through rules and cooperation (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). By establishing intervention mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Standby Force and

the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS exemplifies the argument that institutions reduce transaction costs and create a stable environment for cooperation (Keohane & Martin, 1995). These institutional frameworks regulate state behavior, provide legitimacy for interventions, and encourage cooperation among member states to address security challenges (Moravcsik, 1998).

Liberal Institutionalism also explains how ECOWAS has employed diplomatic measures, sanctions, and peacekeeping operations to uphold democratic governance and prevent unconstitutional changes of government (Ikenberry, 2018). The intervention in The Gambia in 2017, where ECOWAS played a decisive role in ensuring a peaceful transition of power, illustrates how regional institutions contribute to stabilizing fragile democracies (Acharya, 2014). Similarly, ECOWAS interventions in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso highlight how institutionalized norms and collective decision-making processes are used to address political crises, reinforcing the argument that institutions foster predictable and cooperative behavior among states (Slaughter, 2004). However, scholars such as Mearsheimer (1994) have criticized institutional effectiveness, arguing that powerful states still manipulate regional organizations for their strategic interests, leading to inconsistencies in enforcement.

Liberal Institutionalism sheds light on the economic and developmental aspects of ECOWAS interventions, emphasizing that institutions not only address security concerns but also create economic incentives for cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Beyond military engagement, ECOWAS employs economic sanctions, mediation efforts, and post-conflict reconstruction strategies to ensure long-term stability and regional integration, reflecting the liberal institutionalist belief that international institutions help states achieve absolute gains (Keohane, 1989). By facilitating peacebuilding initiatives, ECOWAS aligns with the perspective that institutions create incentives for cooperation and reduce the likelihood of recurring conflicts (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). This is particularly important in Africa, where prolonged instability disrupts economic activities and hampers development efforts, further reinforcing the theory's assertion that institutional cooperation is essential for long-term prosperity (Stein, 1990).

Liberal Institutionalism also helps in analyzing the challenges and limitations of ECOWAS's military interventions, particularly regarding financial constraints, political disagreements, and external influences (Krasner, 1999). While the organization operates within an institutional framework, issues such as reliance on external funding from the European Union, the United Nations, and other international partners raise concerns about the sustainability of ECOWAS-led interventions (Grieco, 1988). Moreover, the varying interests of member states sometimes lead to inconsistencies in decision-making and enforcement of regional policies, reflecting the argument that institutional constraints do not eliminate power politics entirely (Mearsheimer, 1994). Despite these challenges, institutions still play a crucial role in reducing uncertainty and enabling states to pursue cooperative strategies, reinforcing the core argument of liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984).

Another significant aspect of the theory's application to ECOWAS is its role in fostering regional integration and security cooperation, which aligns with the institutionalist emphasis on multilateralism and collective responses to security threats (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). By promoting conflict resolution mechanisms and institutionalized responses to security challenges, ECOWAS embodies the principles of Liberal Institutionalism, which argue that institutions serve as platforms for negotiation and enforcement of international agreements (Ikenberry, 2001). However, the challenges faced by ECOWAS, such as limited enforcement capacity and the struggle to balance state sovereignty with regional stability, highlight the need for institutional reforms and stronger mechanisms to enhance its effectiveness (Keohane & Martin, 1995).

While the theory acknowledges the positive impact of institutions, it also highlights the challenges that regional organizations face in maintaining security and stability in politically volatile environments (Moravcsik, 1998). Through this theoretical lens, the study examines how ECOWAS navigates these complexities and the implications of its interventions for Africa's development,

reinforcing the broader argument that institutions play a vital role in shaping international relations (Ikenberry, 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD

A research design serves as the foundational framework for conducting a study, ensuring that data collection and analysis are carried out systematically and logically to address the research questions effectively (Creswell, 2018). In social science research, various research designs are utilized, including descriptive, exploratory, experimental, correlational, and historical research designs, each serving different research purposes depending on the nature of the study (Bryman, 2021). This study adopted the historical research design, which involves the systematic collection and evaluation of past events to understand their implications for present and future developments (Neuman, 2019). The historical research design is particularly suitable for analyzing ECOWAS's military interventions as it enables an in-depth examination of past conflicts, peacekeeping efforts, and their consequences on Africa's development (Yin, 2020).

This study adopt secondary data collection, as it focuses on analyzing existing reports, scholarly articles, and official documents related to ECOWAS's military interventions, which provides extensive information from diverse sources and allows for a broader understanding of the organization's role in regional security (Scott, 2019). Given the historical nature of this study, secondary sources such as policy documents, academic publications, and reports from international organizations, including the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN), was analyzed to ensure a comprehensive examination of ECOWAS's impact on Africa's security and development (Krippendorff, 2019). This study employs qualitative content analysis, a widely used method in social science research that involves analyzing textual data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and narratives in documents, reports, and academic literature (Krippendorff, 2019). Qualitative content analysis is particularly appropriate for this study because it enables an in-depth exploration of ECOWAS's military interventions through a systematic examination of existing literature, policy documents, and case studies, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding regional security and governance (Neuman, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Descriptive Summary of ECOWAS and Military Interventions: Implications for West African Sub-Region Socio-Political Development

Variable	Description	Implications for Socio-Political Development
Timeframe of Interventions	1990s – 2025	Frequent military coups and ECOWAS responses shape governance patterns, highlighting the tension between democracy and authoritarianism.
Major Interventions	Liberia (1990, 2003), Sierra Leone (1997–2000), Côte d'Ivoire (2002, 2010–2011), Mali (2012, 2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023)	Demonstrates ECOWAS' central role in crisis management, though uneven in effectiveness across member states.
Primary Motives for Interventions	Restoring constitutional order, preventing state collapse, countering terrorism, promoting peace and security	Mixed outcomes: short-term stability often achieved, but long-term governance reforms remain weak.
ECOWAS Strategies	Diplomatic negotiations, sanctions, peacekeeping (ECOMOG/ECOMICI/ECOMIB),	Strengthens regional collective security but also exposes

Variable	Description	Implications for Socio-Political Development
	mediation, suspension of coup-led regimes	institutional and resource limitations.
Governance Outcomes	Temporary restoration of democratic governments in some states, but recurring coups undermine political stability	Persistent fragility of democratic institutions and weak civilian control over the military.
Economic Impacts	Sanctions, trade restrictions, disrupted regional integration efforts	Negative short-term growth effects; undermines ECOWAS Vision 2050 on regional integration and prosperity.
Social Impacts	Displacement, refugee crises, human rights violations during conflicts	Weakens social cohesion and trust in state institutions, but peace missions sometimes protect civilians.
Security Impacts	Curtailed of armed groups in some interventions (e.g., Liberia, Sierra Leone) but rising terrorism in Sahel persists	Shows ECOWAS' limitations in tackling transnational insecurity and insurgency.
Institutional Implications	Reinforces ECOWAS' role as a regional peace and security actor	Raises questions on sovereignty vs. supranational authority and the need for institutional reforms.
Overall Effect	ECOWAS has prevented total collapse of states but has not eliminated the cycle of coups and instability	Mixed: some progress in regional security and diplomacy, but weak consolidation of democracy across West Africa.

Sources:

Table 1 presents the descriptive summary of ECOWAS and military interventions in the West African sub-region showing that while the organization has played a central role in restoring constitutional order and preventing state collapse, its interventions have often produced mixed outcomes. In some cases, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOWAS missions helped to stabilize the region and protect civilians, but recurring coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger reveal the fragility of democratic institutions. The imposition of sanctions and peacekeeping efforts has at times fostered short-term stability, yet these measures also disrupt economic growth and regional integration. Socially, interventions have mitigated humanitarian crises but also highlighted human rights concerns and weak governance structures. Overall, ECOWAS has contributed to preventing state failure, but its limited resources and institutional weaknesses continue to undermine long-term socio-political development in West Africa.

Question 1: What are the causes of military interventions in countries under ECOWAS?

Military intervention in ECOWAS member states has often been a response to complex, multifaceted crises. These interventions are shaped by a range of internal and external factors, and understanding the causes is crucial for assessing their effectiveness and broader implications for regional stability. The primary causes of military intervention in ECOWAS member states can be categorized into political instability, ethnic and religious conflicts, security threats, and humanitarian crises.

Political Instability and Coups

Political instability remains one of the most significant triggers for military intervention in West Africa. ECOWAS's role as a regional peacekeeper has often been activated in response to coups, disputed elections, and the failure of governments to maintain constitutional order. For

instance, in the 1990s, ECOWAS intervened militarily in Liberia and Sierra Leone to end civil wars that had been exacerbated by political instability. More recently, the coup in Mali in 2021 prompted an immediate response from ECOWAS, which imposed sanctions on the military junta and called for a return to civilian rule. According to Ojo & Ekanem (2023), political instability often arises when there is a breakdown of trust between the government and the population, or when ruling elites prioritize personal and group interests over national interests (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). This results in power struggles, and the inability to control the country's political trajectory can compel military interventions. The Mali coup of 2021, for instance, resulted from a combination of factors, including military dissatisfaction with the government's handling of security challenges posed by insurgent groups in the north, as well as public disillusionment with the government's performance (Kamara, 2022). ECOWAS has historically responded to such instability by deploying its Peacekeeping Force (ECOMOG) to restore order. However, Abdullah et al. (2022) highlight that the use of military intervention as a response to political instability has been both praised for its effectiveness in certain cases, such as in Liberia, and criticized for its failure to address the root causes of instability, leaving countries vulnerable to relapse into conflict.

Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

Ethnic and religious tensions have been a major cause of military intervention within ECOWAS member states. In countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, where ethnic divisions have historically fueled violence, military intervention has been a response to prevent the escalation of conflicts that threaten to destabilize entire regions. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the 2010–2011 post-election violence, which saw both sides of the political divide mobilize ethnic militias, led ECOWAS to intervene through diplomatic measures, and when these failed, they authorized the use of force. ECOWAS's intervention was framed as a means to protect civilians from ethnic cleansing and further violence.

Koné (2021) argues that ethnic and religious divides are often manipulated by political elites for their gain, leading to the mobilization of ethnic militias and the eruption of violent conflict. In such environments, military intervention becomes necessary to restore peace, prevent ethnic violence, and establish a foundation for post-conflict reconciliation. In regions like the Sahel, where ethnic and religious boundaries are fluid and historical grievances linger, these divides have triggered violence, necessitating ECOWAS's role in managing peacekeeping operations. Zagalo (2023) points out that ethnic and religious conflicts often undermine national cohesion, and ECOWAS interventions in such contexts aim to prevent the fragmentation of countries into ethnically or religiously defined states. Although military interventions are often seen as a temporary solution, they remain vital in maintaining the territorial integrity of nations in the face of internal divisions.

Security Threats and Extremist Groups

The rising threat of terrorism and insurgencies in West Africa, particularly from extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Qaeda affiliates in Mali, has primarily driven military intervention by ECOWAS. These groups have destabilized entire regions by targeting civilians, governments, and military installations. The spread of these groups into the Sahel has transformed the region into a hotspot for military activity, compelling ECOWAS to respond with both military interventions and diplomatic efforts. In Mali, for example, the surge in insurgent activity following the 2012 coup forced ECOWAS to deploy peacekeeping forces as part of a broader international coalition. According to Tchoumba (2023), the ECOWAS intervention in Mali is a direct response to the growing insecurity caused by jihadist movements, which not only undermine the sovereignty of member states but also pose a direct threat to the entire region's stability. This threat is exacerbated by porous borders and the ability of extremist groups to operate across several national boundaries, making military intervention essential for containing the spread of terrorism. Sagnia (2022) highlights that, in recent years, ECOWAS has become increasingly involved in counterterrorism efforts, including collaboration with external actors such as France and the United Nations.

However, despite these efforts, the effectiveness of ECOWAS's military interventions in combating terrorism has come under scrutiny. The continued growth of extremist groups in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger shows that military intervention alone cannot eliminate the root causes of radicalization, including poverty, political disenfranchisement, and regional marginalization.

Humanitarian Crises and Human Rights Violations

Humanitarian crises and widespread human rights abuses, such as massacres, forced displacement, and ethnic cleansing, have also been significant causes of ECOWAS military interventions. In Liberia, for example, the brutal civil war that lasted from 1989 to 2003 saw widespread atrocities against civilians, prompting ECOWAS to intervene through its peacekeeping force. Humanitarian concerns often serve as a catalyst for international and regional bodies, like ECOWAS, to intervene in order to protect civilians and uphold international human rights standards. Adeyemi & Akinlolu (2021) argue that in the absence of effective government action, ECOWAS has been forced to step in to safeguard human lives. The case of Sierra Leone, where the government requested ECOWAS intervention to combat rebel forces committing widespread atrocities, is an example of how military intervention has been framed as a necessary step to protect civilians from human rights violations. In many cases, the effectiveness of ECOWAS's humanitarian interventions has been questioned. According to Kamara (2022), while interventions may end the immediate crisis, the long-term solutions to humanitarian issues, such as poverty, inadequate governance, and lack of infrastructure, require broader, more sustained development efforts. Therefore, ECOWAS must combine military interventions with peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance to ensure a holistic approach to conflict resolution.

Table 2: Descriptive Summary of Causes of Military Interventions in ECOWAS States and Their Implications on Socio-political Stability and Regional Development

Causes of Military Interventions	Description	Implications for Socio-Political Stability	Implications for Regional Development
Weak Democratic Institutions	Fragile constitutions, lack of civilian oversight of the military, and political manipulation of laws	Recurring coups and disruptions in governance	Weakens democratic consolidation and undermines rule of law
Corruption and Poor Governance	Mismanagement of state resources, lack of transparency, and elite capture	Loss of public trust, popular support for coups	Stagnant development, diversion of resources from public welfare
Electoral Malpractices	Disputed elections, manipulation of electoral commissions, tenure elongation	Post-election violence, legitimacy crises	Discourages foreign investment and regional integration efforts
Insecurity and Terrorism	Rising insurgency in the Sahel (Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda affiliates, ISIS-WA)	Justification for military takeovers as "security stabilizers"	Militarization of politics hinders socio-economic development
Poverty and Inequality	High unemployment, economic hardship, and social exclusion	Increases vulnerability to coup acceptance by citizens	Slows progress toward ECOWAS Vision 2050 on prosperity and human development
External Influence	Rivalry of foreign powers (France, Russia, China, US) in shaping regimes and security strategies		

Source:

Table 2 presents a descriptive summary of the causes of Military interventions in ECOWAS countries which are largely driven by weak democratic institutions, corruption, electoral malpractices, insecurity, and deepening poverty, often worsened by external influences. These factors create legitimacy crises that weaken governance and encourage recurring coups, undermining political stability. While interventions are sometimes justified as efforts to restore order or address insecurity, they often deepen fragility by disrupting democratic processes and prolonging authoritarian tendencies. The implications for regional development are severe, as economic growth and integration are hindered by sanctions, instability, and diversion of resources from social welfare. Overall, such interventions perpetuate a cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment that challenges ECOWAS' vision for democratic consolidation and sustainable progress in West Africa.

Question 2: What are the Effects of military intervention on ECOWAS' image in Africa?

The image of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as a regional peacekeeping organization has been significantly influenced by its military interventions across West Africa. While its interventions have often been lauded for restoring order and stability in conflict-ridden countries, they have also attracted criticism for their shortcomings, inconsistencies, and unintended consequences. The impact of these military interventions on ECOWAS's reputation has been multifaceted, with both positive and negative outcomes that have shaped its role as a regional leader in peace and security.

Positive Effects: ECOWAS as a Peacekeeping Force

One of the key positive effects of ECOWAS military interventions is the enhancement of its image as a leading force for peace and stability in West Africa. According to Adetunji (2023), ECOWAS's prompt military action in Liberia during the 1990s and Sierra Leone in the early 2000s helped to stabilize these countries, earning the organization widespread recognition as a proactive body capable of intervening in times of crisis. The success of ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) in Liberia, which helped to end a brutal civil war, is often cited as a significant achievement in terms of ECOWAS's role as a regional peacekeeper. Tetteh (2021) argues that ECOWAS's involvement in resolving political crises, such as in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011 following post-election violence, reinforced its image as an organization that prioritizes the protection of civilian lives and the restoration of democratic order. ECOWAS's swift action, which included military intervention to uphold the election results and end violent disputes, garnered praise from international actors and contributed to its growing reputation as a stabilizing force in the region. These interventions have positioned ECOWAS as a leader in the continental security architecture, showcasing its ability to manage regional conflicts without waiting for external powers.

Criticism and Deterioration of ECOWAS' Image

Despite the successes, ECOWAS's military interventions have also led to criticisms that have tarnished its image in Africa. According to Salah (2022), the credibility of ECOWAS's military interventions has been called into question due to the organization's perceived lack of consistency in responding to similar crises. For instance, while ECOWAS was quick to intervene in Liberia and Sierra Leone, its response to the 2012 coup in Mali was slower and less effective. Critics argue that ECOWAS's reluctance to intervene decisively in Mali at the onset of the crisis undermined its image as a reliable peacekeeping force. Muri (2023) highlights that this inconsistency has created doubts about ECOWAS's commitment to maintaining regional peace, leading to criticism of the organization for selective intervention based on political considerations rather than the principles of justice and fairness. Olowo (2022) points out that ECOWAS has sometimes faced accusations of favoring certain political regimes over others. For example, its handling of the political crisis in Gambia in 2017, when the sitting president, Yahya Jammeh, refused to step down after losing elections, was seen as a

strategic move to protect the democratic process but also raised concerns about ECOWAS's role in enforcing regime change. While the military intervention ultimately led to the departure of Jammeh, it prompted questions about ECOWAS's broader political objectives, especially in cases where its interventions could be perceived as an infringement on national sovereignty.

ECOWAS and Legitimacy: Regional Perception

The legitimacy of ECOWAS's interventions is another important factor influencing its image. According to Fayemi (2023), while ECOWAS's military interventions are often framed as efforts to protect civilians and maintain peace, there is an ongoing debate about the legality of these interventions under international law. In some cases, such as the intervention in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, questions have been raised about the extent to which ECOWAS has overstepped its mandate. The 2012 Mali coup and subsequent ECOWAS intervention, for example, drew criticism from certain African leaders who accused ECOWAS of acting as a regional power broker rather than a neutral peacekeeping force (Omar, 2022). The perception of ECOWAS's legitimacy is shaped by both internal and external actors. As noted by Ibrahim & Abiola (2022), there is often a dichotomy between ECOWAS's actions and the expectations of its citizens. While ECOWAS is generally viewed as a champion of democracy and human rights, local populations sometimes perceive its interventions as being driven more by geopolitical and economic interests than a genuine commitment to peace. This discrepancy affects its legitimacy and could diminish its credibility, especially if interventions are seen as selectively applied to countries with significant regional or international interest.

The Effect on ECOWAS's Relations with the African Union and International Partners

ECOWAS's military interventions also influence its relationships with other continental organizations, such as the African Union (AU), and with international partners like the United Nations (UN). According to Soyinka (2023), ECOWAS's interventions, particularly in the 1990s, led to the development of stronger ties between the organization and the African Union, both of which aim to promote peace and security across Africa. However, these interventions have occasionally led to tensions with the UN, which sometimes questions the autonomy and effectiveness of regional interventions in addressing continental security challenges (Okafor, 2023). Sampson (2022) further argues that while ECOWAS's military engagements have fostered partnerships with global powers like the European Union (EU) and France, they have also highlighted contradictions in how Africa handles internal conflicts. The use of military force by ECOWAS is often seen by some external actors as a temporary solution to deeper political and social issues, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of peacekeeping efforts. The frequent involvement of external powers in ECOWAS's military interventions, especially in the case of counterterrorism operations, has led to questions about Africa's ability to independently manage its own security and the role of international influence in shaping ECOWAS's image.

Long-Term Impact: The Evolution of ECOWAS's Role

In the long term, ECOWAS's military interventions have the potential to redefine its role in regional governance. According to Adegbola (2023), as ECOWAS continues to evolve, its military interventions could shift from reactive peacekeeping to more proactive conflict prevention measures, thereby enhancing its image as a forward-thinking organization that not only responds to crises but actively works to prevent them. However, this will require institutional reforms and a shift towards more inclusive decision-making processes to ensure that all member states have a voice in shaping interventions. As Akinwale (2023) observes, for ECOWAS to maintain and enhance its image, it must balance military action with diplomatic and development initiatives, ensuring that its interventions contribute to sustainable peace rather than merely addressing the symptoms of conflict.

Table 3: Descriptive Summary of the Effects of Military Interventions on ECOWAS' Image in Africa

Effects	Description	Implications for ECOWAS' Image in Africa
Credibility as a Regional Actor	ECOWAS is seen as the leading body promoting democracy and security in West Africa through sanctions and peacekeeping	Enhances its recognition as a proactive peace and security actor but raises doubts when interventions fail or are inconsistent
Perception of Selectivity	Uneven responses to coups and governance crises across member states	Creates perceptions of bias, weakening trust in ECOWAS' impartiality
Reputation for Peace Enforcement	ECOWAS has deployed peace missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Gambia	Builds a reputation as a conflict manager but also exposes resource and logistical constraints
Humanitarian Concerns	Sanctions and border closures often worsen civilian suffering	Generates criticism of ECOWAS as punishing populations rather than leaders
Regional Legitimacy	Repeated coups despite ECOWAS measures show limited deterrent capacity	Undermines its legitimacy as a guarantor of democracy in Africa

Table 3 presents a descriptive summary of the effects of Military interventions, which have had mixed effects on ECOWAS' image in Africa, strengthening its recognition as a key regional peace and security actor while also exposing its weaknesses. Successful peace missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia enhanced its reputation, but inconsistent responses to coups created perceptions of bias and selectivity. Sanctions and border closures, though intended to pressure coup leaders, often worsened civilian suffering, attracting criticism from within and outside the region. The recurrence of coups despite ECOWAS measures has weakened its legitimacy as a guarantor of democracy. Overall, while ECOWAS is respected globally as a conflict manager, its limited capacity and uneven effectiveness continue to challenge its credibility in Africa.

Question 3: What are the challenges that hindered the effective enforcement of ECOWAS sanctions on military interventions in Africa?

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long positioned itself as a regional body committed to promoting democracy, good governance, and peace. However, in recent years, the resurgence of military coups across West Africa, including in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger, has exposed serious limitations in ECOWAS's ability to enforce effective sanctions against unconstitutional changes of government. While the organization has historically played a significant role in conflict resolution and democratic restoration, its efforts are increasingly undermined by a range of political, institutional, and structural challenges. One of the primary challenges ECOWAS faces is the issue of political inconsistency and selectivity in its response to military interventions. ECOWAS has been criticized for applying sanctions unevenly depending on the political or strategic interests of its most powerful member states. For instance, whereas sanctions were swiftly imposed on Mali and Niger following their coups, responses to political crises in other countries—such as electoral manipulation or democratic backsliding in certain civilian-led governments—have been more muted. According to Oduro and Adebajo (2023), this inconsistency damages the credibility of ECOWAS and raises questions about the legitimacy and impartiality of its decisions, making it difficult to mobilize collective support for sanctions among member states.

Another critical barrier is the internal fragmentation and weak cohesion among ECOWAS member states. The organization operates on a consensus-based model that requires the political will of its members to enforce sanctions effectively. However, divergent national interests and the lack of a unified vision on how to address military takeovers often result in watered-down or delayed

actions. As Tamba (2022) notes, some leaders within ECOWAS exhibit sympathy toward military regimes or have themselves been accused of authoritarian tendencies, which complicates efforts to uphold democratic norms across the region. This intra-regional division severely limits the capacity of ECOWAS to implement coordinated and forceful sanctions.

Economic interdependence and structural vulnerabilities among member states also hinder the imposition of effective sanctions. Many ECOWAS countries share porous borders, interlinked economies, and mutual dependencies in trade and infrastructure. As such, imposing sanctions on a member state can have unintended consequences on neighboring states. For example, the closure of borders and the suspension of trade with landlocked countries like Mali or Burkina Faso often inflict collateral economic damage on countries such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana (Mensah & Alabi, 2021). This economic fallout generates domestic opposition to sanctions, leading to weak enforcement or calls for premature relaxation of punitive measures. Moreover, the capacity of ECOWAS to enforce sanctions is constrained by a lack of financial and institutional resources. Unlike more established global organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union, ECOWAS lacks a robust sanctions enforcement infrastructure, relying instead on diplomatic pressure and economic embargoes that are difficult to sustain over time. According to Sow (2023), ECOWAS's sanctions mechanisms are often symbolic and not backed by long-term strategies or monitoring frameworks to assess their impact and ensure compliance. The limited financial autonomy of the ECOWAS Commission further impairs its ability to follow through with extended enforcement measures.

The influence of external actors and geopolitical interests also complicates ECOWAS's sanctions regime. International powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey have increased their involvement in West Africa, sometimes providing political recognition, economic incentives, or military assistance to military-led governments (Yeboah & Kamara, 2024). These external engagements undermine the leverage of ECOWAS by offering alternative sources of legitimacy and support to military juntas. In the case of Mali, the transition government turned to Russian security firms after ECOWAS imposed sanctions, thus circumventing regional pressure and reducing the effectiveness of punitive actions. This external balancing weakens the overall impact of sanctions and challenges ECOWAS's authority as a regional peace and security actor.

Another structural challenge is the legal ambiguity surrounding the enforcement of sanctions and the inconsistency between ECOWAS protocols and national constitutions. While ECOWAS operates under the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), its enforcement mechanisms lack binding force in some contexts, especially where national constitutions do not recognize the supremacy of regional law. As a result, junta and coup leaders often exploit legal loopholes or question the legitimacy of ECOWAS decisions. As Bello and Diatta (2023) point out, the absence of a clear and enforceable legal framework across all member states creates opportunities for non-compliance and defiance.

The loss of public trust in ECOWAS complicates its role in crisis management. Many citizens across West Africa view ECOWAS as an elite-driven institution that is detached from grassroots realities and unwilling to confront entrenched civilian authoritarianism. This perception is particularly pronounced in countries where leaders manipulate constitutions to extend their tenure or suppress opposition under the guise of democracy. In such contexts, military interventions are sometimes greeted with popular support, undermining the moral authority of ECOWAS to impose sanctions. As argued by Chukwuma (2022), the failure of ECOWAS to proactively address democratic erosion has led to growing public apathy and skepticism toward its interventions.

The challenge of coordination between ECOWAS and other international organizations further dilutes the effectiveness of sanctions. While the African Union and the United Nations often support ECOWAS's efforts, delays in joint decision-making, differences in diplomatic approaches, and competition for leadership sometimes lead to conflicting messages. Without a harmonized and unified response from the international community, military regimes are emboldened to resist external pressure. For example, in Guinea, the military junta exploited the lack of coordination

between ECOWAS and the AU to prolong its transitional timeline without facing additional consequences (Obeng, 2024).

Table 4: Descriptive Summary of the Challenges Hindering Effective Enforcement of ECOWAS Sanctions on Military Interventions

Challenges	Description	Implications for Enforcement
Lack of Political Will among Member States	Some member states sympathize with or benefit from coup regimes	Leads to inconsistent enforcement and weakens collective action
Economic Interdependence	Sanctions often hurt neighbouring states reliant on trade and border movement	Reduces compliance and creates incentives to bypass sanctions
Humanitarian Concerns	Sanctions disproportionately affect civilians through shortages and inflation	Generates public backlash and undermines ECOWAS' legitimacy
External Influence and Support for Coup Leaders	Foreign powers sometimes back or engage with coup regimes for strategic interests	Undermines ECOWAS' authority and emboldens military rulers
Weak Institutional Capacity	Limited resources for monitoring and enforcing sanctions	Allows sanctioned states to evade restrictions and continue engagement
Persistence of Insecurity	Terrorism and insurgency crises complicate sanctions enforcement	Diverts focus from democracy promotion to immediate security concerns

Table 5 presents a descriptive summary of the enforcement of ECOWAS sanctions on military interventions face several challenges that weaken their effectiveness. A lack of political will among member states often leads to inconsistent application, while economic interdependence makes neighbours reluctant to comply fully. Sanctions also generate humanitarian crises that fuel public resentment and question ECOWAS' legitimacy. External influence, combined with limited institutional capacity, enables coup regimes to circumvent restrictions and garner support.

Findings and Observations

Based on the analysis of data, the following findings were observed:

- i. The study found that military interventions in ECOWAS member states are primarily caused by political instability, weak governance, poor economic management, and electoral fraud. These factors create a fertile ground for military coups, especially in situations where governments fail to address corruption, economic inequality, and political discontent.
- ii. The findings show that military interventions have negatively affected ECOWAS's image as a regional body committed to peace and democracy. ECOWAS's inconsistent and sometimes delayed responses to military coups have damaged its credibility. The perception of ECOWAS as ineffective in enforcing its principles, combined with the political and economic interests of some member states, has further diminished the organization's ability to maintain its reputation as a champion of regional stability and democratic governance.
- iii. The study identified several challenges that hinder ECOWAS from enforcing effective sanctions on military regimes. Political divisions within the organization, limited resources, and lack of political will among member states prevent the implementation of strong and consistent sanctions. Some member states have economic and political ties to military regimes, which complicates the sanctioning process. Additionally, the absence of rapid

response mechanisms and limited military capacity has hindered ECOWAS's ability to respond effectively to military coups.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the critical role ECOWAS plays in maintaining regional stability in West Africa, but also underscored the significant challenges the organization faces in effectively addressing military interventions. The research has shown that political instability, poor governance, and economic mismanagement are the primary causes of military coups in the region, while the effects of these interventions have a devastating impact on both the image of ECOWAS and the broader development of the African continent. Military interventions destabilize political systems, hinder democratic processes, and stifle economic growth, thus perpetuating cycles of conflict and insecurity. The study also reveals that ECOWAS's responses to military coups have often been inconsistent and reactive, limiting the organization's effectiveness in preventing and managing these crises. The challenges of enforcing sanctions and maintaining unity among member states further complicate ECOWAS's efforts to ensure regional peace and stability. Additionally, the lack of rapid response mechanisms and the organization's reliance on diplomatic tools without adequate enforcement capabilities have weakened its ability to deter military interventions.

To improve its approach, the study suggests that ECOWAS must adopt more proactive strategies, including strengthening early warning systems, enhancing rapid response capacities, and promoting democratic governance across member states. Moreover, the organization needs to reconsider its approach to sanctions by diversifying its toolkit to include both diplomatic and economic measures, which could more effectively influence military regimes. For ECOWAS to be a more effective force for peace and development in West Africa, it must address the underlying causes of instability, enhance its institutional capacities, and adopt a more comprehensive approach to regional security. By doing so, ECOWAS will not only improve its image and effectiveness but also contribute significantly to Africa's broader goals of sustainable development and political stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- i. ECOWAS should enhance its early warning mechanisms by investing in robust monitoring and analytical systems to detect potential conflicts or political instability early. This would allow the organization to take preventive measures, such as diplomatic interventions, before military takeovers occur.
- ii. ECOWAS must develop a well-equipped and rapidly deployable force within the ECOWAS Standby Force to respond immediately to military coups or threats of military interventions. This would ensure that the organization can act decisively and swiftly to prevent the escalation of conflicts.
- iii. ECOWAS should prioritize the strengthening of democratic governance within its member states by providing support for transparent elections, capacity building for democratic institutions, and promoting political reforms. This can help reduce the causes of military interventions, such as electoral fraud and poor governance.
- iv. ECOWAS should diversify its sanctions toolkit, incorporating both diplomatic and economic sanctions such as trade restrictions, asset freezes, and travel bans. Additionally, the organization should ensure timely and consistent enforcement of sanctions to strengthen its credibility and ability to deter military interventions.

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