The Role of CSOs in Promoting Human Rights Protection, Mass Atrocities Prevention, and Civilian Protection in Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

The West Africa region is arguably the most turbulent region in Africa; from the civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone to the political disputes in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and recently Mali; the region has hosted the highest numbers of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions with mixed results. While the responsibility of peace, security and ensuring human protection resides with governments, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have demonstrated their capacity to complement government's efforts in peace and security; and political leadership across the world has come to realise the strength of CSOs in anticipating, preventing and resolving conflicts because of their in-depth knowledge of context and expertise in working closely with communities. This paper assesses the contributions of CSOs towards the promotion of human rights protection, mass atrocities prevention and civilian protection in conflict-affected areas in West Africa; and argues for continued involvement of CSOs in human protection.

Within the last two decades, the Economic Community of West African States Commission and its member states have grappled with measures to ensure human protection occasioned by plethora of violent conflicts, which have sapped enormous energy and resources, meant for economic development and regional integration. Member States of the ECOWAS have come to the realisation

that economic prosperity, cooperation and integration can only be achieved in an environment that is peaceful, stable and secure.[1] In other words, peace and security are prerequisites for sustainable economic development and human security advancement in the short term, whereas in the long term human-centred economic development that will eradicate extreme poverty is a pre-requisite for durable peace.

The protracted secessionist conflict in the Casamance region of Southern Senegal from 1982 to date, the prolonged civil wars in Liberia (1989–2003) and Sierra Leone (1990–2001), the armed violence and political instability in Guinea Bissau (1997–1998, 2004–2005 and currently), the armed rebellion in Cote d'Ivoire (2002–2006 and 2011 to 2012), the militant unrest in Nigeria especially in the Niger Delta and Jos, as well as the recent cases of violent extremism by members of the Islamic sect, Boko Haram, have catapulted CSOs in West Africa into the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding to transform armed and destructive conflicts in order to support state efforts towards the protection of citizens from mass atrocities. The region has hosted the highest numbers of the United Nations peacekeeping missions with the mixed results of civilian casualties, human rights abuses and all forms of atrocities.

The 2014 UNDP Human Development Report, recognizes the current context of peace and security in West Africa as interwoven and complex especially as the region comprises of the poorest countries in the world with a large population living below the poverty line.[2] The economic potential of the region is undermined by instability and violent conflict. The region is still grappling with the devastating effects of these conflicts aforementioned coupled and further complicated by insecure borders, socio-economic problems, youth unemployment, systematic ethnic discrimination/exclusion, non-respect for human rights, and disputes over political participation, land and other natural resource allocation.

In addition to these, violent extremism has become manifest and spreading since the crisis that engulfed Libya in 2011 leading to the end of the Gadhafi regime. The violent implosion in Libya accelerated the proliferation of weapons with trained and well-equipped but illegally armed Tuareg rebels overrunning

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1   Cheick Oumar Diarra, 'ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism on Conflict Prevention', Paper delivered at a Consultative Meeting organised on Human Security Mechanism for EAC and GIL, Nairobi, 24–28 February 2002.

2   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'Human Development Report', 24 July 2014, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf, accessed 8 March 2016.

the northern half of Mali in early 2012.[3] Preceding these events, Boko Haram was already pillaging the northeastern region of Nigeria since 2009. The armed insurgency of the Tuareg rebels exposed the security vulnerability of the Sahelian region of West Africa. Extremist jihadists immediately exploited the security vacuum that was created, recruiting vulnerable youths, mostly the unemployed and former combatants. The attempts by these extremist insurgent groups to expand southwards and take hold of the whole of Mali with clear intentions to spread across the entire Sahel belt from the west in Mauritania and link up with Al Shabaab in the Horn of Africa exposed the real security nightmare and emerging threat confronting West Africa.[4]

Interconnected with the spread of violent extremism is the increase trade and trafficking of illicit drugs and money laundering. Across the region, the impact of climate change and the management and exploitation of natural resources is adding a strain to the peace and security environment of the region and on a daily basis raising questions about the capacities of the states in the region to protect their citizens against mass atrocities.

Democratic transitions remain a challenge to peace and stability across West Africa. It is estimated that more than 10,000 of its citizens have lost their lives in political crises in the last decade. Elections have been marred by spates of violence, with electoral periods often occasioning great fear for life and property among the populace. Regrettably, a few leaders as seen in Burkina Faso in 2014 still nurtured the possibility of long-term rule even if that means manipulating and influencing constitutional changes to extend their stay in power beyond the limited term mandates in constitutions.[5] Such practice is exacerbating the crisis of political stability, undermining good governance and breeding extremist groups.

To this end, ECOWAS has driven a paradigm shift from unilateral and state-centric action, to a multi-stakeholders participation of civil society. The role of CSOs in promoting human protection in conflict areas has become increasingly important as ECOWAS and governments in the sub region seek integrative approaches to address insecurity and instability under its vision 2020 – transitioning from ECOWAS of the states to ECOWAS of the people. The policy

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3   Unpublished report on Countering Violent Extremism, Workshop organised by WANEP, Accra, Ghana May 2015.
4   Report on Workshop to Develop Early Warning Indicators to Monitor Violent Extremism in West Africa, Lagos - Nigeria, 21–23 October 2014.
5   West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 'Transitions and Tensions in West Africa: Building on the Strength and Bridging the Gap in the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance', *WANEP Policy Brief*, November 2014.

framework undergirding the operationalisation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), namely the protection responsibilities of the state, international assistance and capacity building to help states fulfil their national obligations and, thirdly, the commitment to timely and decisive collective action to cases of manifest failure in ways that are consistent with the UN charter all resonate very well with the regional experiences of ECOWAS.

For the purpose of this article, 'human protection refers to protection of civilians from human rights abuses, inside and outside of armed conflicts, with a particular focus on mass atrocity crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.'[6] Against this background, this article attempts to provide insights on the role of CSOs in promoting human protection in West Africa in collaboration with ECOWAS and other state actors, the imperatives of collaboration for peace and security in a region enmeshed in violent conflicts, as well to proffer options for collaborative actions and engagement. Hence, this article contributes to the special issue of regional approaches to human protection by highlighting the role of CSOs via early warning systems that can enhance sub-regional frameworks to promote human protection.

The article is organised into four sections. Section one provides insights on the evolution of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Architecture, informed by the violent conflicts that plagued the region and the imperatives for R2P. Section two is on the operationalisation of ECOWAS' Early Warning System for Conflict Prevention. Section three highlights the role of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in the operationalisation and sustenance of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism (ECOWARN). Section four presents the challenges encountered by CSOs in the promotion of human protection as well as proffers strategic recommendations with a view to enhancing the role of CSOs in human protection. The article concludes by presenting key contributions of CSOs to the protection of civilian populations.

Evolution of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Architecture and the Imperatives for R2P

The ECOWAS mechanisms and protocols of 1978 on *Non-Aggression* and the 1981 protocol on *Mutual Assistance in Defence* aimed at defending national sovereignty and protecting member states from external aggression were found to be inadequate. There was therefore the need to develop a new legal framework,

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6   See Charles T. Hunt, 'African Regionalism and Human Protection Norms: An Overview', in this issue.

the absence of which often caused disagreements among West African governments on how to intervene and manage crises in the sub-region. An important lesson for the sub-region was to prioritise conflict prevention in the same way as economic development and integration. This realisation provided the legal basis for the ECOWAS declaration of political principles of 1991 and the ECOWAS revised treaty of 1993. The ECOWAS protocol relating to the mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security was signed in 1999. Following closely was the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001. Another important interrelated commitment was the declaration of a sub-regional approach to Peace and Security in 2003. Of significance to compliment these were the 2006 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and other related materials as well as the 2008 Conflict Prevention Framework.[7]

In December 1989, Liberia imploded into an internecine civil war marking the beginning of serious threats to peace and stability across West Africa. The Liberian civil war was vicious and prolonged (1989–1999), with a re-escalation in 2003. Sierra Leone was the next to implode with the most atrocious civil war of the sub-region from 1997 to 2000. From 1997 to 1999, both countries, close neighbours were engulfed in war.[8] In 1998 and again in 2003, Guinea Bissau was on the brink of total state collapse and since then continues to be a fragile state, experiencing a coup d'état in 2012. What started as an attempted coup d'état in Cote d'Ivoire in 2002 ended up as a rebellion. While fighting ended in 2004, the country remained divided between north and south and, despite an elaborate mediation process that was to culminate in a peaceful transition in 2008, violence and a semblance of an ethnic cleansing characterised the post-elections crisis, largely as a result of the refusal of the former President, Laurent Gbagbo, to step down from power after he lost the 28 November 2010 run-off elections.

In these armed conflicts, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the authority of Heads of State of ECOWAS deployed the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to intervene with military force and enforce peace. The ECOWAS interventions precipitated United Nations Peacekeeping interventions and the sub-region subsequently hosted three major Peacekeeping interventions.[9]

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7   ECOWAS Protocols, http://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-law/find-legislation/, accessed 8 March 2016.

8   The Former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was sentenced to 50 years in prison in May 2012 by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for his role in atrocities committed during the civil war.

9   ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) Peacekeeping Missions in Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

West Africa's civil wars resulted in the weakening of the states directly consumed by the wars, while for the entire sub-region, the threats to regional peace and stability increased. Small and light weapons trafficking augmented dramatically due to the porous borders of the countries of the sub region while for the first time, children as young as eight years were recruited to fight in these wars. West African states caught in civil wars became vulnerable to the illicit trade in drugs and money laundering. In a very short period, West Africa became a major transit hub for drugs to Europe and North America. A sudden increase in human trafficking, refugees and internally displaced persons were all consequences of these wars. Another major consequence particularly for Liberia and Sierra Leone was the intensity of the wars around the control of natural resources such as diamonds and timber, which further exacerbated and fuelled the wars. By 2004, the UN human development report ranked 11 out of the 15 member states of ECOWAS in the category of the world's most poor countries - a trend that has continued with the 2014 report.[10]

In this setting of a West African political context in which armed and violent conflicts had become a direct threat to the overall vision of ECOWAS for sub-regional integration and enhancing development and promoting human security, a new political will emerged in 1999 via the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, with a new sense of purpose for collective ownership of intervention in crises with an emphasis on prevention along the lines of the principles and three pillars of the responsibility to protect. The overall ECOWAS vision, which seeks to create an 'ECOWAS of Peoples - a borderless, prosperous and cohesive region where people have the capacity to access and harness its enormous resources through the creation of opportunities for sustainable development and environmental preservation',[11] could not be attained amidst political uncertainty, armed conflicts and the absence of a cohesive political framework to prevent conflicts. An emerging West African political will was informed by the challenges, experiences and lessons learnt from crisis intervention in the region. The principles of the R2P have been consciously harnessed in West Africa via the various ECOWAS normative frameworks as encapsulated in its Peace and Security Architecture. To this end, the conflict prevention mechanism of ECOWAS draws inspiration from the 2001 report of the UN Secretary General:

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10   UNDP, 'Human Development Report'.

11   To reaffirm their commitment to improve the West Africa Integration process and enhance its effectiveness, the Authority of Heads of State and Government adopted a resolution in June 2007 and introduced the transformational ECOWAS Vision 2020.

> There is no higher goal, no deeper commitment and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict. The prevention of conflict begins and ends with the promotion of human security and human development. Ensuring human Security is, in the broadest sense, the cardinal mission of the United Nations. Genuine and lasting prevention is the means to achieve that mission.[12]

The West African experience underscores the relevance of prevention to give meaning to the operationalisation of the responsibility to protect. Any intervention on the basis of the principles of the responsibility to protect that is reactive rather than preventive is bound to meet challenges in which new problems could be generated as a result of such reactive intervention. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Libya in 2011 provides a good example of a situation in which the African Union (AU) refrained from condemning the use of armed forces and weapons of the state disproportionately against the civilian population. The AU initiative to develop a road map for peace through a cessation of hostilities did not subsequently receive the support of the People's National Council based in Benghazi since they felt AU was not resolute with its stance during the crisis. On the other hand, there is an international concern by some member states of the United Nations as to whether NATO exceeded the terms of the mandate of Security Council Resolution 1973, which approved a no-fly zone over Libya authorising all necessary measures to protect civilians. The definition and application of 'all necessary measures' therefore became a subject of controversy in the protection of citizens, with each side of the divide defining it to suit their purpose and situation.

These on-going developments demonstrate very clearly that, although member states of the United Nations support the goals of the responsibility to protect, there is less support and unanimity on how to achieve its goals. Recent experiences of intervention such as in Cote d'Ivoire provide more than enough justification for a renewal of emphasis on preventive measures and on the ways to help states to meet their responsibility to protect obligations and responsibilities.

In the example of Cote d'Ivoire, ECOWAS was unambiguous in its intervention approach because what was needed was to refer to the relevant ECOWAS protocols and make decisions at the level of the Authority of Head of States and Governments. In this regard, the ECOWAS Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Cote d'Ivoire of 7th December

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12   Kofi Annan, 'Prevention of Armed Conflict', *Report of the Secretary General to the United Nations General Assembly*, A/55/985–S/2001/574, 7 June 2001.

2010 simply reaffirmed the ECOWAS commitment to the relevant provisions and principles of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.[13] Though the decisions taken were an intervention in a post-election crisis, the guideline and legal basis for intervention had been earlier established in the relevant protocols minimising the ambiguity of approach to be taken. Whereas at the level of the African Union, at least two member states declared support for the incumbent President of Cote d'Ivoire at the time, such a scenario was not plausible at the ECOWAS level as member states were bound to the collective decisions of the Authority regardless of any remote affinity to the incumbent President who had refused to step down. In Cote d'Ivoire, despite the post-conflict reconstruction, there are still factors that raise concerns. For instance, the ex-rebels have not been brought to justice. While ECOWAS and indeed, WANEP, have a role to play in supporting countries in post-conflict era in reconciliation and justice, without the leadership of the UN and the international community, ECOWAS has, in some cases, been unable to take full control of responses to conflicts in the region. Although, this may fall outside the mandate of WANEP, it has implications for its work as a partner in executing conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In that, WANEP's work continues to be challenged as incomplete if violent conflicts persist.

The ECOWAS experience provides a useful lesson: that for the operationalisation of the responsibility to protect to be successful, a sub-regional response is required. In this regard, it has to be context specific and dependent on national and sub-regional ownership and capacities. International actors, including the UN system, should focus on strengthening such ownership, and be willing to let governments and regional economic communities in partnership with relevant CSOs take the lead in their own development process. Alongside the ECOWAS framework, many States have started the development of national architectures or infrastructures for peace. For instance, Ghana has an elaborate and well-respected National Peace Council, which is a state institution backed by an Act of Parliament with the mandate to provide dialogue and mediation services. During the contestation over the collation of results in the General Elections of 2008 and 2012, the National Peace Council with resource support from Civil Society facilitated an inter-party political dialogue that produced a very peaceful transition in which the winner of the Presidential elections won by a margin of only 0.46 %.[14]

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13   ECOWAS, 'Final Communiqué of the Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Cote d'Ivoire', Abuja, 7th December 2010.

14   Emmanuel Bombande, 'Building Peace through Inter-Party Political Dialogue and Strengthening the Democratic State: The Ghana Experience', WANEP, 2011.

Such institutional building of national capacities for political dialogue and peace is absolutely critical to the operationalisation of the responsibility to protect. Such institutional capacity building takes a long time and requires sustained commitment by the international community and the commitment of ECOWAS to such processes gave birth to the 2014 approval of the Authority of Heads of States and Government to the establishment of national early warning and response mechanisms for each of the member states. It is therefore important to move beyond the Centre at international level to focus on supporting local and regional governments. Building on national structures that already exist is more appropriate and adds more value than establishing entirely new structures at the national level on the responsibility to protect. The following section looks at the specific example of the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN).

ECOWAS Early Warning System for Conflict Prevention

It is important to highlight that two of the protocols, the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, sought to address in a holistic manner the compelling nature, dynamics, and effects of conflicts in the sub region. While the 1999 protocol concentrated on how to deal with the immediate causes of conflicts, the 2001 protocol put the emphasis on addressing the structural causes of conflicts. They complimented one another and clearly set out the responsibilities of West African leaders to act collectively within the context of the legal obligations outlined in the protocols to protect populations whether citizens or non-residents in the member states of the sub-region from war crimes and crimes against humanity.[15]

The emphasis on prevention provided a focus on the ECOWAS Early Warning System under Chapter IV of the 1999 Mechanism on Conflict Prevention. The system comprises an Early Warning Directorate located in the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja with four Observation and Monitoring Zones. Established and now actively functioning with an interface and partnership with

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15   These ECOWAS protocols have been elaborated in detail to cover all areas. Systematic violations of the basic rights and freedom of individuals or groups in a member state by either a regime or non-state actors with grave consequences and the potential of genocide and other crimes against humanity (Article 25d).

Civil Society Organisations,[16] the Early Warning System collects data and promotes the exchange of information on human security and collaboration among member states on early warning and response. The principles of timeliness, transparency, accessibility, cooperation and partnerships with other stakeholders undergird the operationalisation of ECOWARN. The reports generated provide qualitative and quantitative analysis informed by intuitive knowledge of the conflict terrain on the overall situation of the sub-region, country by country political, social and economic risks as well as thematic issues on a week-by-week basis.[17]

The partnership between WANEP and ECOWAS is embedded in normative and legal frameworks such as the 1993 Revised Treaty of ECOWAS, specifically Article 58, which provides for the establishment of a Peace and Security Architecture. These normative frameworks include the 1999 Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, which establishes the framework for the setting up of a sub-regional peace and security observation system. The Early Warning System was definite in its provision for the role of CSOs within the peace architecture.[18]

The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, the 2003 Declaration on a Sub-regional Approach to Peace and Security, which called for the operationalisation of the Early Warning Mechanism in view of growing intra-state conflicts, as well as the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Frameworks, all gave credence to the partnership between ECOWAS and WANEP. The next section deals specially with the role of WANEP in the operationalisation of ECOWARN.

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is a leading regional peacebuilding organisation founded in 1998 in response to civil wars that plagued West Africa in the 1990s. Over the years, WANEP has succeeded in establishing strong national networks in every Member State of ECOWAS with over 500 member organisations across West Africa. WANEP places special focus on collaborative approaches to conflict prevention, and peacebuilding, working with diverse actors from civil society, governments, intergovernmental bodies, women groups and other partners in a bid to establish a platform for dialogue, experience sharing and learning, thereby complementing

16   The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is lead agency and coordinates the Civil Society Interface for the collection and analysis of data in the operationalisation of ECOWARN.

17   The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism (ECOWARN).

18   ECOWAS, 'Protocol Relating to the Mechanism of Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution and Security, Lome, 10 December 1999, Chapter IV.

efforts at ensuring sustainable peace and development in West Africa and beyond.

At the continental level, WANEP is a member of the Peace and Security cluster of the African Union's (AU) Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), representing West Africa. At international level, WANEP has a Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and is the West Africa Regional Representative of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). At these platforms, WANEP contributes to peace dialogues, and development agenda, and has become a key voice to advocate for the community at the regional and international levels. WANEP has also influenced peace and security policies and debates in an attempt to complement government efforts in ensuring state and human security and regional development.

In recent years, WANEP and its CSO member organisations have demonstrated their competence and dexterity in facilitating and negotiating peace in the region through the utilisation of early warning data. For instance, WANEP supported ECOWAS to broker peace deals in many West African countries as well as championed the ECOWAS policy on the establishment of peace education in West African schools, including developing resource materials to guide its implementation. Furthermore, WANEP helped in the design and establishment of a national architecture for peace through the Ghana National Peace Council and supported its election dispute agenda during its last elections in 2012. WANEP is also working with other ECOWAS member states, the UN, AU and ECOWAS to establish National Infrastructures for Peace in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire and Niger.

In this regard, WANEP recognises that the need for an effective multi-tiered, multi-national and multi-sectoral early warning platform that enhances human security, peace and development is critical to preventing violent conflicts and humanitarian crises. This appreciation is even more important in the context of globalisation and the need to prevent or mitigate the impact of violent conflicts on the socio-economic development of any nation. Central to this process is the need for adequate baseline information that captures the context specific causal factors and proximate conditions of conflicts to facilitate informed conflict prevention or mitigation interventions. To ensure the credibility and efficiency of this information, an organised platform for monitoring, reporting and analysis is key to strategic planning and response by relevant institutions and stakeholders in any given society or country.[19]

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19   WANEP, 'National Early Warning Systems (NEWS) in West Africa', *WANEP Concept Paper*, July 2009.

The early warning system has been developed as a response to this challenge, providing for a broad participatory approach to conflict prevention and mitigation. Prevention and mitigation of destructive conflicts is the key objective of an effective early warning system. As countries and societies continually face new human security challenges and threats from conflicts, early warning and early response has gained wider appreciation and relevance as the core element for peace, security and long term social and economic development.[20]

Since 2000, WANEP has been committed to institutionalisation of the Early Warning system in West Africa through its program called WARN (West Africa Early Warning and Response Network). The role of civil society organisations in conflict prevention, management and transformation became increasingly important as member states sought integrated approaches to address insecurity and instability in the region. As a peacebuilding Network with over 500 members from grassroots to national levels WANEP has already recognised this importance and therefore developed the concept of 'proventive' Peacebuilding as a strategy for proactive response to destabilising conflicts through its WARN program.[21] Its emerging success and impact in this area through its Networks already established across West Africa positioned it as the obvious choice for partnership with ECOWAS.

Thus, in 2003, ECOWAS signed a Memorandum Of Understanding with WANEP to implement the ECOWAS Early Warning System otherwise referred as 'ECOWARN' to provide up to date reporting, analysis and communication to respective regional interveners in order to plan, prevent or mitigate the impact of violent conflicts in the sub-region.

ECOWARN is a regional initiative with the primary aim of monitoring incidents that are capable of inciting violence in West Africa via the collection and analysis of information. ECOWARN operates via an online database reporting system that is designed to capture data through a network of monitors. The monitors are representatives of governments in each of the member states and community-based monitors (CBM) managed by WANEP. In order to operationalise ECOWARN (see Figure 1), the region is divided into four zonal bureaus: Zone 1 (Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Senegal with the headquarters in Banjul, Gambia); Zone 2 (Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger with the capital in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso); Zone 3 (Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone with the headquarters in Monrovia, Liberia); and Zone 4 (Benin, Nigeria and Togo with the headquarters in Cotonou, Benin).
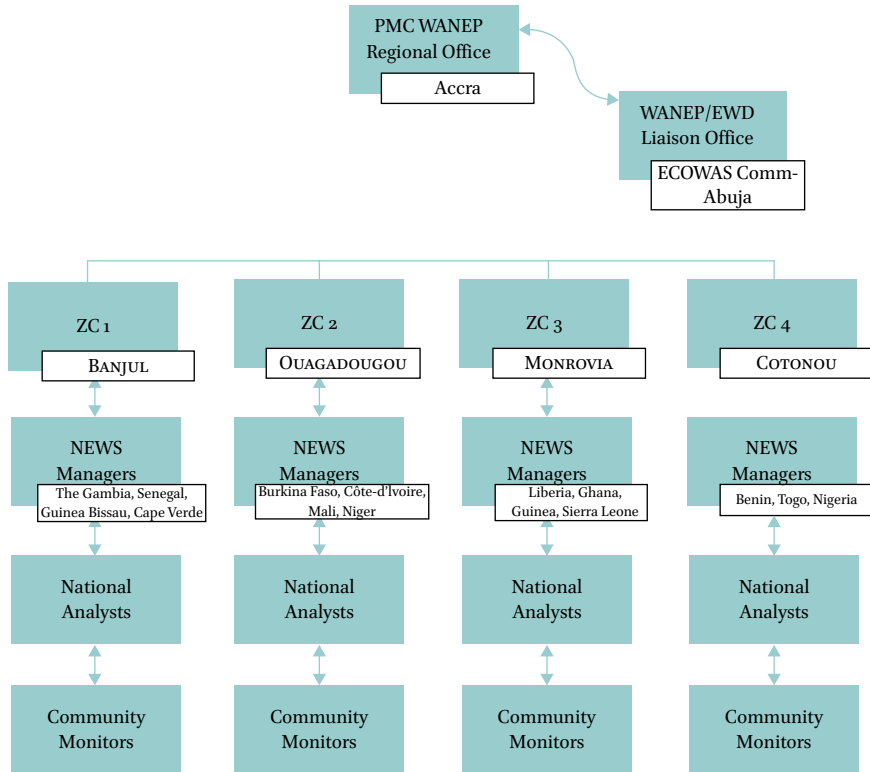
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20   *ibid.*

21   *ibid.*

FIGURE 1   WANEP'S NEWS *Operating Structure in Support of* ECOWARN

The unique relationship between governments and civil society created through this partnership gave rise to the first platform that integrated the efforts of State and Non State Actors within a regional institution towards early reporting and response to proximate conditions in the sub region. ECOWARN has incrementally gained credibility and recognition through the pool of data, which is submitted into the system by reporters from WANEP National offices across the sub region as well as analysis provided by zonal coordinators in the four ECOWAS hubs of West Africa. Despite the giant strides already achieved in improving peace and security in the sub region, the system is still inhibited by the poor quality of the national platforms for Early Warning, which are critical to effective capture and input of the requisite data.

Though WANEP through its national networks already have local Peace-building organisations that constitute the core of the Network in each country, the lack of functional early warning systems at the national level limits the effectiveness of holistic data reported into the system and invariably the quality

of analysis developed and utilised to formulate responses in the sub-region. In each country, a WANEP early warning reporter is burdened with the task of regular monitoring of entire regions and provinces in a country and therefore struggle to provide adequate coverage and report all issues within their country. This challenge has often been expressed by focal reporters. In realisation of this challenge, WANEP took steps to design and develop a National Early Warning System that captures the contextual issues in each of the ECOWAS member States that facilitates real time reporting and additional support for the focal point who feeds the relevant information into the ECOWARN system.

The novelty of the National Early Warning System (NEWS) is the improved reporting derived directly from emerging issues and proximate conditions from communities which are otherwise not reflected in media reports. It therefore provides focal points with a clearer understanding of the dimensions, trends, dynamics and connectors of conflicts in local communities towards a better national reporting of prevalent risk factors in each of the countries. The development and operations of the National Early Warning System has provided the mechanism for understanding and monitoring of local drivers of violent conflicts, especially as it relates to mass atrocities. The advantage of NEWS is that it is a step down from the broader ECOWARN system to the communities and forms a tripartite bridge for communication and response from the grassroots through to the national and up to the sub regional level.

The objectives of NEWS are to develop a pool of Conflict Monitors and Analysts across West Africa and link them to the ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism at the various member states as well as the WANEP Peace Monitoring Centre in order to support the ECOWAS Commission's Situation Room at the Early Warning Directorate (EWD). It also seeks to build the capacity of civil society organisations to alert, mitigate, prevent and/or resolve violent conflicts at local levels and provide the state with the necessary support to do same.

Other objectives include consolidation of the institutional capacity of WANEP in conflict prevention and collaboration with other inter-governmental bodies such as the AU, UN (including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)), and other relevant partners to coordinate early warning and response efforts, as well as to foster collaborative relationships with/between civil society, think tanks, existing national, sub-regional/ regional and international early warning, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding organisations. NEWS is also designed to share early warning reports, policy briefs, preventive instruments, mechanisms, tools, and strategies with partners, stakeholders, policy makers/actors, potential interveners, as well as promote pro-active/preemptive and integrated approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Outputs of NEWS

Outputs of NEWS include *Weekly Highlights, Monthly Bulletin, Situation Tracking, Policy Brief* and *Annual Risk Index.* These publications are described in more detail below.

Weekly Highlights is a weekly report from the National Early Warning System that documents prioritised incidents critical to peace and security. It identifies and captures incidences that have further implications including threats to security or opportunities for peace across national networks of WANEP. The highlights are categorised under four basic thematic areas of Humanitarian, Political, Socio-economic and Environmental risks. It is generated from the incidence reports from data uploaded by early warning monitors. Additional information is derived from media reports and primary observation.

Monthly Bulletin publication presents a brief graphic analysis and description of highest proximate conditions emerging from its early warning reports. These reports are derived from the Network's online EW system, which facilitates the generation of data from monitors and reporters. The bulletin reflects data from incidence and situation reports of the EW system.

Policy Brief is a strong policy advocacy tool, which includes analyses of issues, identifies causes, accelerating and intervening factors, and envisages possible scenarios. The aim is to enhance the ability of decision makers to make strategic decisions on the basis of improved knowledge of the environment of operations, options available for response or action and finally, the implications of each decision or option made.

Situation Tracking tracks the government's and other actors' responses to conflicts or threats to human security in order to highlight the emerging issues and gaps in the response. It provides recommendations for better and more appropriate and effective intervention.

Annual Risk Index is comprised of data submitted into the NEWS platform for a period of one year which is interpreted with the help of a statistician into graphs and figures to clearly highlight the trends and progression of proximate condition of conflict and human security in the West Africa sub region. It also provides a comparative analysis of the situation in different ECOWAS member states with emphases on the underlying factors that make one state less prone to conflict and security threats.

The ECOWAS and WANEP partnership is arguably the first civil society and intergovernmental partnership not only in West Africa but Africa generally for the purposes of conceptualising, designing and operationalising a region-wide early warning network to collect and report human security threats. This culminated in the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with ECOWAS in 2003. Since then, the MOU have been consistently renewed and

most recently for another 5 years, ending in 2019. Key issues in the MOU include mutual collaboration in the operationalisation of early warning systems (database of indicators for peace, conflict and human security in West Africa); joint trainings in data collection, collation and analyses; WANEP's establishment and maintenance of a functional Liaison Office at the Early Warning Department, EWD of the ECOWAS Commission; collaboration in production of strategic reports; and mutual exchange of technical support (views and studies) and joint mediation, research, analysis and other forms of intervention related to early warning and response. This experience of collaboration between WANEP and ECOWAS has been highlighted as the best practice of building alliances with CSOs in conflict prevention; and is a referral point currently being examined by other regional economic communities such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Over the years, NEWS has proven to be viable, cost effective and real time and has continued to enhance information source, strength and potency of the ECOWARN system. In that way, a sub-regional system with various levels of response and impact is achieved for sustainable peace, security and development of the sub region. Therefore, the ultimate goal of ECOWARN and WARN is the development of an effective and efficient early warning and conflict management system that is capable of preventing and mitigating violent conflicts in West Africa.

The Dilemma and Challenges of CSOs

In practice, practitioners tend to sing their praises about the value and impact of their work, while academics and other researchers tend to magnify the shortcomings of CSOs. For example, in analysing the activities of CSO globally, Frerks noted eight sets of challenges that tend to undermine the value of the activities of CSOs especially in the field of peacebuilding, namely: i) the 'rotten apples' and the problem of staying impartial during or after conflict, ii) representation or the problem of the democratic deficit, iii) the issue of quality and the question of institutional strengthening and partnering, iv) the nature of peacebuilding, v) transparency and accountability, vi) measurability of impact, macro issues and power elites, vii) sustainability and viii) 'securitisation' of development.[22] In looking at the West African context of civil society's role

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22   George Frerks, 'The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding' in Sol Iglesias (ed.), *The Role of Civil Society in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding* (Utrecht: European Centre for Conflict Prevention, 2006).

in conflict prevention, Ekiyor highlighted the many valuable contributions of West African CSOs yet zeroing on six areas of concerns: i) state-civil society relations, ii) narrow focus on NGOs, iii) weak and underfunded coordination mechanisms, iv) limited conflict prevention skills, v) lack of policy influence and vi) lack of documentation.[23]

It appears that the challenges and constraints of CSOs in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, especially in developing countries notably West African countries, are legion. The following sections argue that the causes are both endogenous and exogenous.

Endogenous Factors

In the 1990s, the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone created complex political emergencies (CPE). The situation was characterised by gross human rights violations, violence against civilians and massive displacement of persons. CSOs in West Africa were largely ill-prepared to effectively and professionally address the emerging phenomenon of CPE, which presented national NGOs with new challenges and dilemmas regarding the effectiveness of the NGOs' work and their responsibility and mandate in terms of neutrality and addressing causes of violent conflict.

Weak coordination and collaboration among other CSOs often leads to duplication of efforts and lack of synergy for results. This is due to some extent the adversarial relationship between organisation over funding opportunities rather than collaboration for the collective promotion of human security and general tenets of responsibility to protect. The weak capacity and inadequate resources undermined the efforts of CSOs particularly CBOs to professionalise. International organisations had to source for funds, work and speak on behalf of CSOs in West Africa. Moreover, there was under-utilisation of Indigenous structures and institutions at both track I and track II levels as conflict resolution approaches. Because of these institutional weaknesses, CSOs are exposed to abuse and violent attacks. It renders the environment in which West African CSOs work very volatile and insecure.

Though much has been achieved in terms of improving coordination among CSOs, and while WANEP in the past 10 years has tried to coordinate peacebuilding activities in the sub region, there are still some gaps to be addressed.

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23   Thelma Ekiyor, 'The Role of Civil Society in Conflict Prevention: West African experiences', *United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research* (*UNIDIR*) *Disarmament Forum: The complex dynamics of small arms in West Africa*, 4: 27–34 (2008), pp. 32–33.

Exogenous Factors

A large portion of funding for conflict resolution and peacebuilding comes from external partners such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) etc. The funds are usually short-term in duration and limited in scope considering that foreign partners are suspicious of CSOs in West Africa. With limited funds, external partners demand results in very short and unrealistic timeframes especially given the complex nature of conflicts in the region.

On the other hand, there is little support for peacebuilding from the private and business sector in West Africa. Business operators and investors are hardly playing their contributing role to promote peacebuilding in West Africa. Their contributions in the peace process have not been significant towards the consolidation of peace and security in the region.[24]

Given the fragility of states in West Africa and porosity of their borders, cross-border crimes, banditry and violent conflicts pose a challenge to CSOs. Other challenges include:

Insufficient Funding: This has also inhibited the contributions of CSOs to the promotion of principles of responsibility to protect in the region, with emphasis on undertaking conflict prevention and management initiatives to ensure human protection.

Unskilled Workforce: While there is growth in the number of peacebuilding practitioners in the region, there is still a shortage of skilled personnel. To some extent, this leaves a gap and in some instances the situation can be exacerbated, especially when personnel intervene in conflict situations without requisite skills.

Relationship between State and CSOs: in comparison to other Regional Economic Communities in Africa, ECOWAS has demonstrated impeccable leadership through its well thought out normative frameworks and in its involvement of CSOs as stated in the 1999 Mechanism. However, some member states still perceive issues of security including R2P as the sole responsibility of the state. To this end, many governments are also suspicious of CSOs and see their activities as being tantamount to opposition.

Specifically the challenge of WANEP as a CSO network in the promotion of human protection is that many state institutions and security apparatuses in the region are unable or slow to confront emerging threats to peace, due to lack of resources and in some cases, lack of political will. This affects the

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24   Chukwuemeka B Eze and Takwa Z. Sufion, 'Business for Peace: Developing Partnership Between Business Investment and Peacebuilding', *WANEP Concept note* (Accra: WANEP, June 2012).

effectiveness of WANEP. In addition, corrupt and ineffective governance mechanisms in some member states of the region undermine the gains of WANEP and ECOWAS in ensuring human security and development.

In addition, WANEP and ECOWAS as partners in peacebuilding have not been able to adequately act on early warning data. As in the case of Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, (and most recently Mali) ECOWAS was unable to respond swiftly and precisely enough to avert violence in these countries even though early warning information and data was available. This weak link between early warning and early response continues to threaten the sustained effectiveness of WANEP, as collecting, analysing and reporting conflict early warning information is meaningless, unless it is properly connected to early response mechanisms. This has been the primary weakness of the Early Warning System since its inception.

Another limitation of WANEP and ECOWAS in the promotion of human protection is the concentration of response structures in ECOWAS hierarchy. This leads to bureaucracy and slow response to the early warning alerts and also limits the use of local peace and security structures as the immediate response agents.

Recommendations

In charting a path for civil society, the notion and practice of responsibility to protect has to be redefined. This would entail an expansion of the responsibility to protect concept beyond its current state-centric focus to embrace 'endogenous' insistence on good governance and a renewed international commitment to greater egalitarianism in global decision-making. In this regard, emphasis on multi-disciplinary approaches involving a range of governmental and non-governmental actors and on understanding their respective roles, and reliance on broad partnership (including local communities, civil society, media, the private sector, humanitarian organisations and others), is key. The need to foster confidence-building measures in relations between Governments, civil society organisations, law enforcement agencies and the general population in the implementation and adherence to the principles of R2P is very necessary in order to promote and ensure human protection.

Specifically, the under listed are recommended for ECOWAS, Member states and CSOS to prevent and mitigate violent conflicts:

1.   ECOWAS Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) should create joint situation rooms at PAPS to ensure that early warning responses are corroborated and delivered in a synergetic manner.

2.   Ensure mechanisms for coordination and collaboration amongst directorates in PAPS; between PAPS and Peace Fund as well as PAPS and other Directorates such as Humanitarian Affairs and Gender.

3.   Expansion of partnership with relevant CSOs to include other directorates of the ECOWAS Commission.

4.   Annual contributions of ECOWAS from its Peace Funds and other sources to regional CSOs with formal partnership to fund conflict prevention and mitigation initiatives.

5.   Organisation of an annual meeting between the ECOWAS Commission and CSOs and expansion of such meetings across the continent.

6.   Review of the ECOWARN indicators to ensure it captures the current dynamics including violent extremism and mass atrocities, in particular.

7.   Member States should engage their parliaments and CSOs to domesticate the ECPF as well as other strategic documents of ECOWAS. In this regard, CSOs should engage with relevant parliamentary sub committees and organise workshop to facilitate the ratification and operationalisation of the diverse ECOWAS protocols on peace and security.

8.   Regional organisations should serve as an entry point for engaging national governments on R2P, to erase the perception that the international community could use R2P to effect regime change.

9.   Ensure confidence building in the implementation of R2P that would involve carrying member states along through their focal points for data gathering and analysis; and preventive diplomacy.

10.   CSOs should increase capacity building on responsibility to protect, all aspects of conflict prevention and popularise the principles of responsibility to protect.

11.   CSOs should collaborate with relevant national and community stakeholders to ensure synergy and maximise results.

12.   CSOs involved in conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding should intensify its advocacy and insistence on the preventive pillar of R2P since it is cheaper and less complex.

13.   CSOs should be engaged in the development and operationalisation of the National Early Warning Mechanisms and the establishment of Peace Architectures as aptly couched in the policy document on the establishment of national early warning mechanisms and national peace architectures, which was adopted by Authority of Heads of State and Government in Abidjan and Accra in 2013 and 2014.[25]

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25   Communiqués on adoption for the establishment of: (1) National Peace Architectures (see: 'Forty second ordinary session of the ECOWAS authority of heads of state and

Conclusion

Overall, there have been significant contributions of CSOs in promoting human rights, mass atrocities prevention and civilian protection in conflict areas in West Africa. Responses to conflict by ECOWAS in partnership with CSOs are increasing in speed and effectiveness, thereby reducing the risk of mass atrocities and civilian casualties. CSOs are increasingly involved in early warning and, because they are aware of events as they unfold, they can make important contributions. They can act swiftly and flexibly to respond to conditions as needed, often using innovative and non-coercive strategies and quality processes informed by their knowledge of context and conflict dynamics to address problems. CSOs can act when, for various reasons, official actors are immobilised (often related to mandates, lack of political will or the implications conveyed by their official status). Therefore, they have comparative advantages and can augment current institutional mechanisms/approaches.

The partnership between WANEP and ECOWAS examined in this article presents a great opportunity for learning and mutual understanding about partnership between CSOs and Inter-Governmental organisations. The unique arrangement has attracted a lot of attention from the international community and, more so, has become a catalyst for a paradigm shift in government-civil society relationship across the continent. It is an opportunity to invest in a unique relationship as an example of a solid foundation for future peacebuilding and peace support operations in Africa.

The challenges posed by the threat of violent and armed conflicts in West Africa remain a critical factor for regional stability, peace and economic development. However, WANEP and other Civil Society Groups continue to engage and support National Governments, ECOWAS, the African Union and other international partners in the search for sustainable peace and improved human protection. The ECOWAS experience and framework provides a good example of how to anchor the R2P around Regional Inter-Governmental Organisations with the participation of national governments and the civil society. Binding commitments and political principles on how to prevent armed conflicts and prevent mass atrocities are much more easily negotiated at regional levels.

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government', ECOWAS Communiqué, Yamoussoukro, February 2013, http://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/42nd-ECOWAS-Summit-Yamoussoukro-27-28-Feb-20131.pdf, accessed 8 March 2016; and (2) National Early Warning Mechanisms (see: 'Forty-fifth ordinary session of the authority of ECOWAS heads of state and government', ECOWAS Communiqué, Accra, July 2014, http://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/45th-ECOWAS-Summit-Ghana-10-Dec-20141.pdf, accessed 8 March 2016.