



Combating Transnational Crime: Evaluating the Role of ECOWAS in West African Security Architecture

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Abstract: Objectives: The main objective of this study is to evaluate the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in combating illicit activities within the region's security architecture. The study draws on Security Complex Theory to examine how the interconnected security concerns of West African states necessitate a collective regional response. **Methodology:** The study employs a qualitative research design using secondary data drawn from academic literature, official reports, and policy documents. **Main Results:** The findings indicate that, despite achieving notable successes—particularly in reducing maritime piracy and establishing robust policy frameworks—ECOWAS faces persistent challenges. These include inconsistent political commitment, limited resources, persistent corruption, the destabilizing impact of military coups, and the adaptive nature of criminal networks. **Conclusions:** The study concludes that inconsistent political commitment from member states, coupled with a lack of resources and persistent corruption within national institutions, significantly weakens ECOWAS's enforcement capacity. The recent wave of military coups and the subsequent withdrawal of key member states from ECOWAS pose a fundamental structural threat to regional cohesion and the principle of collective security. This situation creates dangerous vacuums that criminal networks are quick to exploit. **Recommendations:** The study recommends that ECOWAS strengthen political will, enhance institutional capacity, prioritize human security, combat corruption, and diversify international partnerships to build a more resilient West African security environment.

Keywords: Transnational Crime, ECOWAS, Human Trafficking, Drug Trafficking, Piracy, Arms Proliferation.

مكافحة الجريمة العابرة للحدود: تقييم دور المجموعة الاقتصادية لدول غرب أفريقيا (إيكواس)

في بنية الأمن في غرب أفريقيا

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المؤلف: تشكل الجريمة المنظمة العابرة للحدود تهديداً خطيراً للأمن غرب أفريقيا وحكومتها وتنميتهما. تقدم هذه الدراسة دور المجموعة الاقتصادية لدول غرب أفريقيا (إيكواس) في مكافحة هذه الأنشطة غير المشروعة ضمن البنية الأمنية للأمنية للمنطقة. **المنهج:** وتنسند الدراسة إلى نظرية المجمع الأمني لدراسة كيفية ترابط المخاوف الأمنية لدول غرب أفريقيا، مما يستلزم استجابة إقليمية جماعية. وتعتمد المنهجية على تصميم بحث نوعي يعتمد على بيانات ثانوية من الأدبيات الأكademية والتقارير الرسمية ووثائق السياسات. **أهمية النتائج:** وتحدد الدراسة الأشكال الرئيسية للجريمة المنظمة، وهي: تهريب المخدرات، والاتجار بالبشر، وانتشار الأسلحة، والقرصنة البحرية؛ وتفصل آثارها وتدخلات إيكواس المحددة. ورغم أن إيكواس حققت نجاحات ملحوظة، لا سيما في الحد من القرصنة البحرية ووضع إطار سياسات متينة، إلا أنها تواجه تحديات مستمرة. وتشمل هذه التحديات عدم اتساق الالتزام السياسي، ومحوبيـة الموارد، واستمرار الفساد، والتأثير المزعزع لاستقرار للانقلابات العسكرية، وطبيعة الشبكات الإجرامية القابلة للتکيف. **الاستنتاجات:** وتخالص الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من التقدم الذي أحرزته، فإن فعالية إيكواس تعيقها هذه العقبات العديدة. **النحوـيات:** توصي الدراسة، من بين أمور أخرى، بتعزيـز الإرادة السياسية، وتحسين الـقدرات المؤسـسية، وإعطاء الأولـوية للأمن الشـرقي، ومكافحة الفـساد، وتنوـيع الشـراكات الدولـية لـبناء بنـية أمنـية أـكثر مـرونة في غـرب أـفـريـقيـا.

الكلمات المفتاحـية: الجـريـمة العـابـرة للـحدـود، المـجمـوعـة الـاـقـتصـادـيـة لـدول غـرب أـفـريـقيـا (إـيكـواـس)، الـاتـجـار بـالـبـشـر، تـهـريـبـ المـخـدـرات، الـقرـصـنـة، اـنتـشارـ الأـسـلـحةـ.

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Introduction

The modern world, characterized by increasing interconnectedness, has facilitated global prosperity and cooperation. However, this very interconnectedness has also created fertile ground for complex global threats, among them transnational organized crime (TOC). Transnational crime refers to criminal activities that span multiple jurisdictions and are typically carried out by organized groups operating across national borders. These include, but are not limited to, drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, cybercrime, money laundering, and maritime piracy. As defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020), transnational organized crime (TOC) involves structured groups that aim to obtain financial or material benefits through illicit activities, often undermining governance, security, and development. TOC, by its nature, transcends national borders, undermines state sovereignty, erodes governance, and equally hinders sustainable development across continents. These illicit networks operate with alarming agility, and exploit globalized trade, communication and financial systems to expand their reach and impact (Campina & Rodrigues, 2023). They represent a fundamental challenge to the international order, often operating in the shadows but with profound and visible consequences for societies worldwide United Nations Office on Drug and Crime [UNODC], 2020).

West Africa, a sub-region of significant geopolitical importance, has unfortunately emerged as a critical hub and transit point for various forms of TOC. According to the UNODC (2020), the region accounts for nearly 30% of global cocaine seizures destined for Europe, highlighting its role as a key node in international drug trafficking networks. Its strategic location, coupled with socio-

economic vulnerabilities and governance deficits, makes it particularly susceptible to these illicit flows (UNOWAS, 2024; Marong et al., 2025). The region grapples with the trafficking of illicit drugs, the distasteful trade in human beings, the proliferation of illegal arms and the persistent problem of maritime piracy (UNODC, 2020; ECOWAS, 2022a; Idahosa et al., 2023). For instance, between 2014 and 2017, tramadol seizures increased tenfold across the region, signaling an alarming rise in pharmaceutical opioid abuse (ECOWAS, 2019). These criminal enterprises are not merely isolated incidents; they are deeply interconnected, forming a complex web that systematically weakens state institutions and fosters corruption (Chouinet-Cambas et al., 2025; Transparency International, 2024). In addition, transnational crimes often fuel conflicts and insurgencies, worsen instability and divert scarce resources from vital development initiatives (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute [UNICRI], 2025; UNODC, 2020; Siebels, 2020).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975, initially focused on promoting economic integration among its member states (ECOWAS, 2022a). However, the escalating wave of regional conflicts and security crises that swept across West Africa in the 1990s compelled ECOWAS to significantly broaden its mandate. This evolution, notably strengthened by the 1993 revision of the ECOWAS Treaty, transformed the organization from a purely economic bloc into a pivotal regional actor with a dedicated focus on peace and security matters (Ismail, 2015). According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2021), this expanded role has tasked ECOWAS with the critical responsibility of safeguarding stability,

promoting good governance and ensuring human security across its fifteen member states. It has developed key policies and institutional frameworks, including the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), to address these multifaceted challenges (Ismail, 2015).

This article undertakes an evaluation of ECOWAS's role in combating transnational crime within the broader West African security architecture. It begins by exploring the diverse and evolving forms of transnational crime impacting the region, providing a contemporary overview of their manifestations and consequences. Subsequently, the article examines ECOWAS's specific policies, protocols and interventions designed to counter these threats. A critical assessment of the organization's successes and the persistent challenges it faces in its efforts is then presented. For this study, a crime is classified as transnational based on the following criteria: (1) the criminal activity involves at least two countries (either as origin, transit, or destination); (2) the operation is conducted by organized networks rather than isolated individuals; (3) the crime exploits cross-border systems such as trade routes, financial institutions, or migration flows; and (4) the impact of the crime extends beyond national borders, affecting regional stability, governance, or development.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

To understand the dynamics of security in West Africa and the role of ECOWAS, this study employs the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). This theoretical framework was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, most notably articulated in their

seminal 2003 work, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Buzan, B., & Wæver, 2003). RSCT posits that international security is most effectively analyzed and understood from a regional perspective. It argues that states and other relevant actors within a specific geographical area form what are termed (security complexes". The defining characteristic of these complexes is that the security concerns of the constituent units are so deeply interlinked that they cannot be realistically analyzed or resolved in isolation from one another. A central premise of the theory is that threats tend to travel more easily over short distances than over long ones. This means that a state's primary security concerns are overwhelmingly generated in its immediate neighborhood, leading to intense security interdependence within a regional complex ((Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory also emphasizes that security is not merely an objective reality but a social construct. This means that shared history, cultural ties and collective perceptions significantly influence how actors within a region define, interpret and ultimately respond to threats.

The application of RSCT provides a robust and appropriate way for evaluating ECOWAS's role in West African security. West Africa functions as a regional security complex. The security of individual states within the region is strongly intertwined with that of their neighbors (Idahosa et al., 2023). Transnational crimes, such as drug trafficking, arms proliferation and terrorism, inherently disregard national borders. They flow seamlessly across the region, impacting multiple states and creating a web of shared vulnerabilities (UNODC, 2020). This inherent interdependence necessitates collective action and regional cooperation. It makes the role of a regional organization like ECOWAS central

to addressing these pervasive threats. The theory helps explain why a regional body, rather than individual state efforts, is indispensable for coordinating effective responses to threats that are by their very nature transnational and geographically concentrated.

However, a notable criticism of RSCT, particularly as it evolved from earlier security studies, lies in its potential overemphasis on military security and the state as the primary referent objects of security (Soltani et al., 2014). While RSCT has expanded to acknowledge other security sectors, including political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions, its foundational analytical framework often retains a strong focus on state survival and traditional military threats.

Methodology

Study design: This study employs a qualitative research design to evaluate the complex role of ECOWAS in combating transnational crime in West Africa. This approach is particularly suitable for understanding intricate social and political phenomena, such as the dynamics of transnational criminal networks and the manifold responses of regional organizations. It allows for an in-depth exploration of policies, strategies and their impacts, focusing on the underlying “why” and “how” questions rather than relying solely on statistical measurement (Turhan, 2019). The qualitative design enables a comprehensive and better evaluation of ECOWAS's role by interpreting narratives, analyzing policy frameworks and blending expert assessments.

Data source and collection: Data for this study is drawn exclusively from secondary sources. These sources are carefully selected to ensure both contemporary relevance and foundational understanding. They include:

Academic journals and scholarly articles, Official reports and publications from international organizations (such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], Policy documents, communiqués, and official statements from ECOWAS, and reports from reputable research institutions and non-governmental organizations: These sources often offer critical analyses, ground-level perspectives, and independent evaluations of security and development issues in West Africa. Data collection involved a systematic review of these diverse sources. Information pertinent to the various forms of transnational crime, their impacts on the region, and ECOWAS's specific interventions, reported successes and persistent challenges was meticulously identified and extracted.

Data analysis: The collected secondary data is analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis. The thematic analysis involves systematically identifying recurring patterns, key issues, and common challenges and successes within the collected textual data. It helps in categorizing and interpreting the diverse information related to transnational crime and ECOWAS's responses. For example, common themes such as “weak governance,” “porous borders,” “capacity building,” or “political will” are identified and explored across different crime types and intervention areas. This approach allows for the synthesis of broad trends and underlying factors. On the other hand, content analysis was employed to systematically examine the specific policies, initiatives, and reported impacts described in the documents. It involves coding and categorizing information to quantify certain aspects, such as the types of interventions undertaken, the reported number of piracy incidents, or

specific challenges articulated in official reports. This process allows for a structured evaluation of ECOWAS's stated objectives against reported outcomes and observed realities.

The overall analysis process also includes rigorous cross-referencing of information from multiple sources. This step is crucial for ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings and for identifying any contradictions, subtleties, or gaps in the reported data. This rigorous and different analytical approach supports the development of well-substantiated findings and actionable recommendations. It also provides a comprehensive understanding of ECOWAS's role in West African security.

Transnational crime and ECOWAS' responses

West Africa is grappling with arrays of transnational criminal activities, each posing unique threats to the region's stability and development. ECOWAS has responded to these challenges with various strategies and interventions. These are discussed below.

Drug trafficking and ECOWAS counter-narcotics efforts: Drug trafficking continues to be a deep transnational crime in West Africa, with significant implications for the region's security and economic well-being. West Africa has long served as a critical transit hub for illicit drugs, particularly cocaine originating from Latin America and destined for European markets (UNODC, 2020). More recently, however, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS] (2024) reports that the region is increasingly becoming a consumption area for various narcotics, a development that complicates counter-narcotics efforts. The illicit proceeds generated from drug trafficking distort legitimate economies, undermine legal businesses and promote opportunistic

relationships between criminal organizations and extremist groups, and by so doing, threatens the already fragile states across the region (Marong et al., 2025). Beyond cocaine, there is a growing and alarming phenomenon of the non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids, most notably tramadol. Reports indicate a staggering tenfold increase in tramadol seizures between 2014 and 2017 (ECOWAS, 2019); which highlights a rapidly escalating public health and security concern. The report also indicates that cannabis remains a widely used illicit drug in the region, with Nigeria accounting for a substantial proportion of reported seizures.

ECOWAS has acknowledged the severe threat posed by drug trafficking and has implemented strategic responses to counter it. A key framework guiding these efforts is the ECOWAS Regional Action Plan to Address the Growing Problem of Illicit Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime and Drug Abuse in West Africa and the Sahel. This plan receives strong backing from international partners, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) (Global Initiatives Against Transnational Organized Crime [GIATOC], 2022). A significant initiative supporting this regional plan is the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI). WACI is a joint program specifically designed to strengthen the human and institutional capacity of law enforcement officials in selected West African countries. The goal is to enable them to combat organized crime and drug trafficking more effectively. The initiative provides advisory services, essential equipment, technical assistance and specialized training (UNOWAS, 2024). This is hoped to enhance regional and international cooperation in counter-narcotics efforts.

In a concerted effort to foster evidence-based policy decisions, ECOWAS, in collaboration with UNODC, established the West African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (WENDU). The WENDU Report (2014-2017), published in 2018, and subsequent reports, provide crucial epidemiological data on drug use patterns and aggregate drug supply across West Africa (Basutu & Ogola Ongolo, 2024). This data is vital for informing and shaping effective drug policies and programs. Furthermore, ECOWAS has actively supported nine member states in developing their National Drug Control Master Plans, which serve as comprehensive operational frameworks for national drug prevention and control measures (ECOWAS, 2022b). Training programs for healthcare professionals and drug prevention educators have also been implemented across several member states, with the aim to improve treatment services for individuals with drug use disorders and to raise public awareness about the dangers of drug abuse (Bello, 2025).

Despite these commendable efforts, significant challenges continue to impede the full effectiveness of ECOWAS's counter-narcotics strategies. The WENDU Report itself highlights the inadequacy of effective drug treatment services and a persistent lack of motivation to treat those in need of rehabilitation (ECOWAS, 2019). It noted that while there has been an increase in drug seizures, the number of arrests for drug-related offenses has only marginally risen, which suggests potential gaps in enforcement capabilities or prosecution processes. The vast and porous borders across the region, coupled with volatile political situations in areas like the Sahel, continue to facilitate the unimpeded flow of illicit drugs.

Human trafficking and ECOWAS anti-trafficking initiatives: Human trafficking

remains a prevalent and deeply disturbing issue across West Africa. The region has over time, maintained the undignified position as a primary source and transit route for this illicit activity (Okunade & Shulika, 2021). This heinous crime deprives millions worldwide of their fundamental dignity and freedom. At the same time, it undermines national security, distorts legitimate markets and serves as a significant source of enrichment for transnational criminals and terrorist organizations (US Department of State, 2018). In West Africa, human trafficking frequently manifests as severe forms of child labor and modern slavery. Reports indicate that hundreds of thousands of children are trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor, with the overwhelming majority of these cases occurring within the African region itself (Mbaku, 2019). According to Okunade and Shulika (2021), the primary drivers of this vulnerability are widespread poverty and high unemployment levels, which render individuals susceptible to the exploitative promises of traffickers.

On their part, ECOWAS has demonstrated a strong commitment to combating human trafficking, recognizing its severe impact on human security and regional stability. A cornerstone of its efforts is the ECOWAS Plan of Action Against Trafficking of Persons (2018-2022). This plan's implementation period has been notably extended to 2028, signaling a sustained and long-term commitment to eradicating this scourge (ECOWAS, 2023). According to the report, the plan places significant emphasis on increasing collaboration, cooperation and partnership among member states, primarily facilitated through the ECOWAS Regional Network of National Focal Institutions Against Trafficking in Persons Plus (RNNI-TIP+). Furthermore, central to these initiatives

also, is to ensure the comprehensive welfare and successful reintegration of victims, which includes establishing clear referral pathways for rescued individuals to return to their families and reintegrate into society (ECOWAS, 2023).

Legislative efforts are also a central component of ECOWAS's strategy. There is a strong call for member states to enact laws that explicitly prohibit "out-of-court settlements" or "mediation" in cases involving violence against persons offenses. The goal of this measure is to ensure that perpetrators of human trafficking are adequately punished, thereby strengthening the rule of law (ECOWAS, 2023). Furthermore, Tombong (2023) posits that ECOWAS also actively supports the development of comprehensive information management systems designed to capture victim profiles, which is important for aiding effective referral and support pathways. The organization has successfully enhanced cooperation and coordination between various countries, such as Niger and Nigeria, and among Senegal, Mali, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. This has been achieved through facilitating bilateral engagements and the signing of operational Memoranda of Understanding (ECOWAS, 2022b).

However, significant challenges continue to impede effective anti-trafficking efforts. The uneven enforcement of migration policies across member states and the increasing vulnerability of migrants, both within and outside the region, remain persistent issues (Bensah, 2025) A huge and complex obstacle is the deep-rooted societal acceptance in some communities of practices that fuel voluntary trafficking. For instance, the widely held belief that sending children to learn a trade from an influential person is beneficial for their families in the long run can inadvertently

encourage and perpetuate child trafficking, and makes it harder to identify and combat. Despite legislative progress, concerns persist regarding the imposition of high minimum sentences for trafficking offenses (Okunade & Shulika, 2021). In some instances, these stringent penalties have reportedly led prosecutors and judges to prefer lesser charges, which carry lower sentences, thereby undermining the deterrent effect of strong anti-trafficking laws (Bensah, 2025). The scale and complexity of the problem, coupled with these deep-seated socio-cultural factors and prevalent economic drivers, means that efforts to combat human trafficking require sustained interventions that extend far beyond legal frameworks alone.

Arms proliferation and ECOWAS arms control measures: The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) represents a critical and escalating security challenge in West Africa. This illicit flow directly fuels conflicts, violent extremism and a wide array of criminal activities that include armed robbery, kidnapping and banditry (Sule et al., 2024). The region has witnessed an alarming increase in violence, with violent events surging particularly along porous border areas. According to UNODC (2020), the sources of these illicit arms are diverse and complex. They include diverted state stocks, where legitimately procured weapons are siphoned off to the black market, often through corrupt elements within the police and military. Additionally, Balogun (2024) contends that there is widespread craft production of sophisticated firearms within the region itself, contributing significantly to the illicit supply. Porous borders further facilitate the unimpeded movement of these weapons, frequently originating from conflict-affected areas such as Libya (Waziri, 2024) The presence of armed groups and criminal

networks that usually exploit governance deficits in remote border communities, worsen insecurity and contributes to the militarization of traditional trading routes.

ECOWAS has responded to this threat by establishing the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), which serves as the normative framework for arms control in the region (ECOWAS, 2021). Efforts to implement this convention include organizing annual meetings of National Commissions (NATCOMs) on Small Arms. These meetings aim to review activities, promote transparency and enhance information exchange among member states (ECOWAS, 2021). International partners, notably the European Union and the German Government, provide crucial support through projects such as the Organized Crime West Africa Response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T). This project specifically strengthens capacities to combat organized crime and SALW trafficking, offering technical assistance and training (Chouinet-Cambas et al., 2025). ECOWAS also actively advocates for the harmonization of national laws on arms control with international instruments like the Arms Trade Treaty, aiming for a consistent regional legal framework. Some member states, such as Côte d'Ivoire, have reported progress in community disarmament initiatives, as they successfully collected and destroyed thousands of weapons previously in illicit circulation (UN, 2024).

Nevertheless, significant and complex challenges continue to hinder effective arms proliferation control. Weak state security responses, characterized by a lack of adequate resources and institutional capacity, especially within NATCOMs, impede effective coordination at both regional and domestic levels (Mangan, F. & Nowak, 2019). The dense and concealed nature of the illicit arms

trade, which is often deeply intertwined with other criminal markets, makes it exceedingly difficult to quantify, track, and disrupt. Furthermore, according to Transparency International (2024), critical complicity arises from the involvement of corrupt elements within national security forces who actively divert state-controlled arms to the illicit market. This, coupled with the widespread craft production of firearms, significantly complicates efforts to control the supply side of the problem (Sule et al., 2024). Political will and consistent commitment from member states remain paramount challenges, as evidenced by the mixed success ECOWAS has experienced in upholding democratic norms and effectively addressing broader security challenges (Abe, 2025). The recent withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS also poses a substantial threat to regional security cooperation and collaborative arms control efforts.

In contrast, the challenge of small arms proliferation illustrates the limitations of RSCT when regional actors lack consensus on threat perception. While arms trafficking poses significant risks across West Africa, it is often viewed through national rather than regional lenses, especially where internal conflicts or governance deficits prevail. According to RSCT, this fragmentation in threat perception undermines the formation of unified regional strategies, explaining ECOWAS's uneven progress in curbing SALW proliferation despite institutional frameworks like the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms

Maritime piracy and ECOWAS maritime security operations

The Gulf of Guinea, which borders several ECOWAS member states, has historically been a global hotspot for maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea (International Chamber

of Commerce [ICC], 2019). These criminal acts, initially rooted in social tensions and economic exclusion in resource-rich areas like the Niger Delta, have evolved beyond mere petro-piracy to include the hijacking of ships primarily for the purpose of kidnapping crew members and demanding ransom (European Parliament, 2020). According to ICC (2019), the economic cost of piracy in West Africa was substantial, estimated at over €750 million in 2017. The proliferation of maritime crime is significantly worsened by weak law enforcement capabilities, prevalent corruption and unresolved domestic conflicts on land, which often provide safe havens and operational bases for pirate groups (European Parliament, 2020).

ECOWAS, in a concerted effort with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC), has taken decisive action to counter these threats through the Yaoundé Architecture, established in 2013 (Marangio, 2025). According to the report, this regional mechanism focuses on coordinating actions, developing harmonized legislation, and enhancing patrol and coordination capacities among states to improve security and navigation safety. ECOWAS's integrated maritime strategy, adopted in 2014, specifically aims to address transnational maritime security challenges and their impact on economic development in the region.

A significant success in this domain has been the reduction in maritime piracy incidents. According to reports, there were 49 recorded cases of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea in 2018. By 2023, this number had dropped to just two (Africa Defense Forum, 2024). This dramatic decline coincides with intensified ECOWAS-led operations, including coordinated naval exercises under the Yaoundé Architecture and joint missions

such as “Safe Domain III” in August 2024. The report noted that this substantial decline is largely attributed to the coordinated efforts by ECOWAS, its member states, and a broad coalition of international partners, including the European Union, UNODC, the United States, Denmark and Germany. Joint operations, such as “Safe Domain III” conducted in August 2024, exemplify this enhanced regional synergy. These exercises involve coordinated maritime and aerial surveillance, intervention training for operational units and vital information exchange among participating nations. The continued planning of such exercises, with “Operation Safe Domain IV” slated for March 2025, further underscores ECOWAS's ongoing commitment to securing its maritime domain

Despite the commendable decline in piracy, other illicit maritime activities persist and, in some cases, are thriving. The Gulf of Guinea's strategic geographical location continues to make it an ideal gateway for illegal trafficking routes towards Africa and Europe, including the flow of narcotics from Latin America (Marangio, 2025). Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a significant and pervasive threat. This accounts for up to 65% of total fish catches in the region (Marangio, 2025). Challenges also include weak rule-of-law and justice systems, which hinder the effective prosecution of suspected criminals. Difficulties in the handover of suspects to national jurisdictions and limited progress in integrating international maritime security legislation into domestic legal frameworks remain problematic. This creates an accountability gap. Furthermore, the increasing onshore security threats, particularly the spread of terrorism in coastal West African countries, divert already limited resources and attention from maritime security efforts (Siebels, 2020).

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea represents a shared regional threat that aligns closely with the concept of “security interdependence.” Because piracy directly impacts multiple coastal states and disrupts economic lifelines such as trade and fisheries, it has prompted strong collective action among ECOWAS member states. This regional alignment of interests has enabled coordinated operations like Safe Domain and fostered international support, reflecting the core tenet of RSCT that shared threats generate shared responses

Future trajectories: institutional reform and regional security cooperation

As ECOWAS navigates the evolving landscape of transnational threats, questions arise regarding its long-term institutional design and normative role in regional security governance. One proposition is whether ECOWAS should transition from a cooperative intergovernmental body into a more centralized transnational security organization. Such a transformation would entail deeper integration of defense and law enforcement capabilities, standardized legal frameworks across member states and greater autonomy from national governments in decision-making. While this shift could enhance operational coherence and rapid response capacity, it would also raise concerns over sovereignty, legitimacy and the ability of such an institution to remain democratically accountable.

Recent developments, particularly the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, underscore the fragility of regional consensus on collective security. These exits reflect broader disillusionment with multilateral institutions among military-led regimes, which often see regional bodies as tools of Western influence or obstacles to

domestic control. The implications for collective security are deep. For instance, weakened enforcement mechanisms, reduced intelligence sharing and diminished capacity to address cross-border threats such as terrorism and arms proliferation. If ECOWAS is to survive as a credible security actor, it must find ways to reconcile divergent political interests while reinforcing the benefits of cooperation.

Finally, the question of whether the ECOWAS model is transferable to other regions warrants careful consideration. While ECOWAS offers a unique blend of economic integration and security cooperation, its effectiveness has been uneven. It is constrained by inconsistent political will and resource limitations. Other regions facing similar challenges, such as Central Africa or Southeast Asia, could draw lessons from ECOWAS’s hybrid approach, but would need to tailor institutional designs to their own historical, political and cultural contexts. In essence, while the ECOWAS experience provides valuable insights, it is not a one-size-fits-all blueprint for regional security governance.

Conclusion

West Africa is confronted by arrays of transnational criminal activities which are drug trafficking, human trafficking, illicit arms proliferation and maritime piracy. These crimes are not isolated phenomena; they are deeply intertwined, undermining governance structures, hindering socio-economic development and fueling persistent instability across the region. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has undergone a significant evolution from its initial focus on economic integration to becoming a crucial regional security actor. Guided by the principles of Regional Security Complex Theory, which highlights the

inherent interconnectedness of security within geographical neighborhoods, ECOWAS has progressively developed a comprehensive security architecture and implemented various protocols and initiatives to combat these pervasive threats.

ECOWAS has achieved notable successes in its efforts. The significant reduction in maritime piracy incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, largely attributable to coordinated regional operations such as “Safe Domain” and robust international partnerships, stands as a compelling testament to the efficacy of collective action. The establishment of frameworks like the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI) and the West African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (WENDU) further demonstrates a clear commitment to evidence-based approaches, capacity building, and enhanced cooperation in counter-narcotics efforts. Similarly, the extension of the Plan of Action Against Trafficking of Persons and its explicit focus on victim welfare and reintegration reflect a commendable human-centric approach to combating modern slavery and protecting vulnerable populations.

However, despite these achievements, ECOWAS continues to face persistent and formidable challenges that impede the full effectiveness of its security interventions. Inconsistent political commitment from member states, coupled with lack of resources and persistent corruption within national institutions, significantly weaken enforcement capacities. The recent wave of military coups and the subsequent withdrawal of key member states from ECOWAS pose a fundamental structural threat to regional cohesion and the very principle of collective security. This creates dangerous vacuums that criminal networks are quick to exploit. Finally, essential socio-economic vulnerabilities like

widespread poverty and high unemployment, remain fertile ground for criminal recruitment. This highlights the need for holistic, human-security-focused interventions that address root causes rather than merely symptoms.

Recommendations

To bolster ECOWAS's capacity in effectively combating transnational crime and strengthening the overall West African security environment, the following recommendations are crucial:

- 1. It is important to strengthen political will and consistent commitment.* Member states must demonstrate unwavering and consistent political commitment to ECOWAS's security protocols and decisions. This requires adherence to democratic norms, upholding regional agreements, and actively resisting actions that fragment regional cohesion
- 2. There is a need to enhance resource mobilization and institutional capacity building.* ECOWAS and its member states must allocate sufficient and predictable financial and human resources to national security institutions. This includes national commissions responsible for arms control, financial intelligence units, law enforcement agencies, and judicial bodies.
- 3. It is crucial to foster greater inter-agency and cross-border cooperation:* member states should promote seamless information sharing and coordinated operations among national law enforcement, intelligence, and judicial bodies across borders. This should involve formalizing intelligence networks, harmonizing national legal frameworks to facilitate cross-border arrests and prosecutions.
- 4. Importantly, it is necessary to prioritize human security and address root causes.* There is a crucial need to move beyond purely

security-centric approaches by comprehensively addressing the underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities that fuel transnational crime. This necessitates sustained investment in poverty reduction programs, robust job creation initiatives (particularly for unemployed youth), improved access to education, and expanded social protection programs in vulnerable communities.

5. *Effort should also be geared towards combating corruption and strengthening governance.* At this point, it is necessary to implement robust and transparent anti-corruption measures within security, financial and judicial sectors to prevent the diversion of resources and eliminate complicity in criminal activities.

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- **Ethical Approval:** Though the study uses secondary data that avoids direct human subjects, ethical rigour is maintained by anonymizing victim identities in cited reports and ensuring data sources are publicly accessible and non-confidential.
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