

# LIMITATIONS OF CRISIS PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

in the ECOWAS region and civil society's  
contribution to their review and updating

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## SUMMARY

→ **ECOWAS has set up mechanisms to promote democracy and strengthen collective security within its borders. These mechanisms have produced mixed results since their creation at the end of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The military coups that have taken place in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger over the last three years have shown the limits of these mechanisms and the need to review them in order to adapt them to the ever changing political, security and geopolitical context in West Africa. This is a major challenge that ECOWAS will have to overcome successfully if it intends to preserve its central position as the organisation responsible for maintaining collective security in this part of the continent and promoting democracy for the well-being of its peoples. This document addresses this issue by focusing on the role that civil society should play in reviewing and updating the mechanisms for crisis prevention, management and resolution within ECOWAS, and by making recommendations to ensure that this review is successful.**

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## INTRODUCTION

On 26 July 2023, a putsch led by General Tchiani overthrew Mohamed Bazoum, the democratically elected President of Niger in 2021. This successful putsch was the 6<sup>th</sup> in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in three years. Faced with the disruption of the constitutional order in this country, ECOWAS reacted strongly by applying sanctions against Niger on several levels: diplomatic, political, economic and monetary. These sanctions are intended to isolate the junta and force it to return the democratically elected president to power. Meanwhile, ECOWAS has decided to deploy its standby force in readiness for military intervention in Niger if the diplomatic efforts underway are not successful. The determination of the regional organisation in dealing with this coup d'état and the reluctance of the mutineers to give in to pressure from ECOWAS offer little prospect of a peaceful solution to this crisis. However, many actors fear a military intervention with unpredictable consequences for Niger and the stability of the Sahel. In their opinion, the diplomatic and political option should be prioritised, even if for the moment this option is finding it difficult to make headway. Recent visits to Niger by traditional leaders and religious dignitaries from Nigeria justify their preference for a peaceful resolution to this crisis. But beyond these individual initiatives, the question is how to fit them into a consistent framework such as Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance additional to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security of ECOWAS? Are these mechanisms still relevant

for preventing and resolving conflicts and coups d'état in the ECOWAS region?

This analysis attempts to answer these questions and makes recommendations for strengthening the role of civil society in the mediation and crisis resolution process in Niger following the overthrow of the country's constitutional order.

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## 1. ECOWAS CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION MECHANISMS: FOUNDATIONS, SCOPE AND LIMITS

ECOWAS has set up mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution<sup>1</sup>. These mechanisms, which were drawn up at the time of the armed conflicts that affected the sub-region and the crises of governance in some countries, were intended to put an end to this cycle of instability and the undermining of the constitutional order in these countries, and offered a normative framework on which the organisation could rely on to provide coherent responses to prevent, manage and resolve them in the long term. But more importantly, they aim to strengthen ECOWAS's capacity for collective security and good governance with a view to maintaining peace and security in the sub-region in the event of a serious crisis, conflict or disruption of the constitutional order in one of its member States. ECOWAS derives these prerogatives from the United Nations Charter, in particular Chapter VIII, which confers on regional organisations the right to participate in the maintenance of collective security in the world in support of the Security Council.<sup>2</sup>

The implementation of these mechanisms has produced mixed results, with some successes such as ECOWAS's contribution to the return of peace to Liberia and Sierra Leone after long and violent civil wars, the stabilisation of Guinea Bissau following a series of coups d'état and the departure of President Yahya Jammeh in Gambia after the electoral crisis in that country in 2017.

However, they have not prevented coups in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and constitutional reforms to keep certain presidents in power beyond the number of terms provided for by law in several countries in the sub-region. Given the frequency of political crises and the worsening security situation in the Sahel, these mechanisms have shown their limitations. These include:

- Sanctions do not produce the expected results, in particular a return to constitutional order within a reasonable period of time, political transitions last longer than two years or are protracted;
- They have not prevented the recurrence of coups in the countries where they have been applied;
- These mechanisms are also characterised by their institutional unwieldiness;
- Civil society actors have had little involvement in their deployment;
- Over time, States have arrogated mediation to themselves, and civil society organisations have little involvement in the mediation and conflict and crisis resolution process;
- The Elder Council provided for in the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security is not functional;
- Traditional authorities and religious dignitaries are not very involved in the ECOWAS conflict resolution process, although in some countries they play an important role in social, political and religious life and retain an influence that can be useful in the event of a political crisis, as is currently the case in Niger.

Faced with this mixed record, more and more voices are calling for these mechanisms to be evaluated and amended in order to make them more effective, better adapted to the current context of the sub-region and also more inclusive, with greater involvement of civil society in the maintenance of peace and collective security within ECOWAS. It was in this context that the ECOWAS Conference of Heads of State and Government instructed the Commission to complete the review of the 2001 Additional Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These are: The Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance in addition to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter raises two important points in the architecture of global peace and security. The first is the issue of regionalism, which confers on regional organisations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, for example, the capacity to support the Security Council in its prerogatives in matters of collective security as defined by Chapters VI and VII.

<sup>3</sup> Final communiqué of the ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit of 28 January 2022. This review is underway, but remains limited among member States.

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## 2. THE ADVANTAGES OF INVOLVING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION OF POLITICAL CRISES AND CONFLICTS IN THE ECOWAS REGION

Given the recurrence of political crises and coups, and the limitations of the mechanisms in place within ECOWAS to resolve them, the sub-regional organisation would benefit from involving civil society more in the processes of preventing, managing and resolving them, for a number of reasons<sup>4</sup>:

- Recognise the importance of civil society in building an environment of peace and security within ECOWAS by mobilising communities, professional associations, youth organisations, etc. in the consolidation of democracy and the strengthening of social cohesion, which is not the sole prerogative of governments and the political elite;
- Involve women more in the process of conflict prevention, management and resolution, as stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions on the role of women in conflict management, as well as in all African Union resolutions in this area. It should be emphasised that women's organisations are very active in the ECOWAS region, particularly in conflict prevention and resolution<sup>5</sup>
- Take into consideration the expertise of civil society in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in the ECOWAS region. Civil society organisations have extensive expertise in the prevention and resolution of community, State and inter-State conflicts. They are organised in the form of networks and platforms that can help to strengthen collective security and democracy within ECOWAS;
- Recognise the importance of traditional authorities in some countries, like Nigeria, where chieftaincies

play a central role in social and political regulation, particularly in several northern States and beyond the country's borders, notably in Niger;

- Promote greater ownership of ECOWAS objectives and achievements by the people, which would help to break the image of ECOWAS as a group of Heads of State, disconnected from the realities of the people, and legitimise its peace and security initiatives in the sub-region.

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## 3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CRISIS PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION IN THE ECOWAS REGION

Strengthening the role of civil society in consolidating collective security and good governance in the ECOWAS region is a key challenge in enabling the organisation to overcome its current difficulties. It also makes it possible to renew the community integration process on new foundations. The recommendations below contribute to this strengthening and renewal:

- Activate the Elder Council and involve traditional authorities and credible and representative figures from civil society in its work;
- Involve civil society organisations in mediation under the aegis of ECOWAS to resolve crises in West Africa;
- Avoid the proliferation of peace initiatives by civil society organisations or personalities; they must be channelled to avoid duplication or counterproductive competition;
- Encourage "popular diplomacy" led by credible, representative figures with recognised legitimacy. These initiatives should form part of ECOWAS's diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in Niger;

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4 In this context, it is worth mentioning two initiatives led by Nigerian traditional and religious leaders for a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Niger. The former Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, a highly respected Tidjiane dignitary, led a strong delegation to Niamey on 9 August and met the military officers who overthrew President Bazoum. On 12 August, Sheik Abdulahi Bala Lau, a Wahhabi dignitary, met General Tchani, the head of the junta, and the prime minister appointed by the military. These two delegations declared that they were working towards a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Niger in conjunction with the current President of ECOWAS, Bola Tinubu, to whom they reported the results of their mediation in Niamey. For the moment, nothing has filtered through from the proposals they made for a return to constitutional order in Niger.

5 One example is the involvement of women's organisations in resolving the conflict in Casamance. In order to have a lasting influence on the resolution of this conflict, women's organisations decided to form a platform called the "Plateforme des Femmes pour la Paix en Casamance (PFPC)" (Platform of Women for Peace in Casamance), bringing together 170 women's associations in Casamance, with a view to supporting the process of negotiation and dialogue between the State of Senegal and the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC) in order to achieve lasting peace in this part of Senegal. Mention should also be made of the involvement of the Mano River Women's Peace Network in creating a framework for peace between Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia during the civil wars that struck the latter two countries. This network succeeded in bringing together Presidents Conté, Taylor and Kabbah around the same table in Rabat, Morocco, in February 2002, under the aegis of King Mohamed VI.

- Admit civil society representatives as observers at high-level ECOWAS meetings to gather their views on crises in the sub-region;
- Appoint civil society representatives as facilitators, emissaries or special envoys for the return to constitutional order in a member country in crisis or experiencing problems that could lead to political instability;
- Involve civil society organisations, including women's and youth organisations, in the process of revising and consolidating mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution, taking due account of their concerns and vision for the promotion of peace and democracy within the ECOWAS region.
- Set up an Observatory on Democracy, Peace and Security, made up of eminent independent figures from civil society. This Observatory should provide advice and make recommendations to ECOWAS Heads of State in these three areas with a view to preventing, managing and resolving crises and conflicts within ECOWAS.

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## CONCLUSION

The disruption of the constitutional order in Niger after those in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso shows once again that the construction of democracy in the ECOWAS region is in a very difficult phase. It also shows the dissension within ECOWAS to mobilise all the member States to support the decisions made and to strengthen the organisation's capacity to regulate and resolve crises in its region. In this context, a peaceful resolution to the political crisis in Niger is likely to be difficult. However, a window of opportunity has just opened with peace initiatives from leading figures in civil society. Can these initiatives succeed and avoid the use of force to re-establish constitutional order in Niger? The question is raised, and the recommendations contained in this analytical note could transform this window of opportunity into a genuine peace initiative with high-quality participation from civil society. In this context, civil society organisations would benefit from strengthening their capacities to have a lasting and qualitative impact on the prevention and resolution of all conflicts in this area. This will require training, advisory support, pooling of resources, advocacy and, above all, the development of platforms capable of federating a number of initiatives and led by well-structured networks or recognised figures with transformative leadership.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Serigne Bamba Gaye** is an expert and researcher on peace, security and governance issues in Africa. He has worked in Senegal, Canada and in several international organisations such as the UNDP and the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre. He holds a PhD in political science from Université Laval in Canada, a Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) in anthropology, a master's degree in philosophy and a bachelor's degree in sociology, among others. He is a lecturer in international relations at the Centre des Hautes Etudes de Défense et de Sécurité (CHEDS) in Dakar. He recently published two papers with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation: *Connexions entre groupes djihadistes et réseaux de contrebande et de trafics illicites au Sahel* and *Conflits entre agriculteurs et éleveurs dans un contexte de menaces asymétriques au Mali et au Burkina Faso* (*Connections between jihadist groups and smuggling as well as illicit trafficking networks in the Sahel and Conflicts between farmers and herders in a context of asymmetric threats in Mali and Burkina Faso*).

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