



ODUMUNC 2025 Issue Brief

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
Leading Multilateral Actors	5
Current Issues	6
Causes of Migration in West Africa	8
Foreign Pressure on ECOWAS Member States	8
The Role of the United Nations	10
ECOWAS Member State Positions	11
What the UN Cannot Do	12
Some Possible Proposals for Action	13
Map of ECOWAS Member States	14
Bibliography	14

Introduction

International migration occurs when people cross state boundaries and stay in the host state for some minimum length of time.¹ Migration is very rampant in the West African region, where people move to Europe and the other Western

countries, but also from one ECOWAS country to the other within the region. An estimated 4 million people are migrants within the ECOWAS region.² The number that have reached other parts of Africa, Europe or the Middle East is unknown.

The combined population of ECOWAS countries, at 425 million, is almost the same as the population of the European Union, and many of its people are desperately poor, motivated to find a better life. International migration in West Africa is a multifaceted issue that is driven by various factors such as economic opportunities, political instability, environmental challenges, and social dynamics.



The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) seeks to address migration in the region, aiming to manage the flows while ensuring regional integration, peace, and sustainable development. The regional policies

¹ Wikipedia 2024. "International Migration." Wikipedia, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_migration.

² 'Migration data in Western Africa', Migration Data Portal, 31 May 2023,

<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/western-africa>

The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration

of the ECOWAS have become relevant as migration patterns evolve, with both intra-regional and inter-continental movement. These movements are affecting the member states of ECOWAS socially and economically. For example, the movement tends to take away the skilled labor, thereby depriving the states of quality human resources.

Recently, the role of ECOWAS in international migration challenges has become very important and got the attention of the global world as migration increases due to ongoing conflicts, climate change, and the desire for better opportunities. Facilitating free movement of people, promoting security, and making sure the rights of the migrants are protected are the strategic focus of the ECOWAS.

However, these efforts notwithstanding, there are several challenges, including the uneven enforcement of migration policies among the member states and the increasing vulnerability of migrants within and outside the region. Also, external factors such as external migration policies and the impact of global crises challenge the ECOWAS' ability to effectively manage migration in the region.

This issue brief will reflect on the current issues surrounding ECOWAS's role in international migration, identify key actors involved in the management of migration, and discuss the ways in which the United Nations (UN) has supported efforts in the region. The issue brief explores UN resolutions that are related to migration and demonstrates the limitations of the UN in the region. The position of some countries and regional blocs will be explored, as well as proposals for actionable steps to enhance the role of ECOWAS in addressing international migration challenges. By understanding these dynamics, the issue brief seeks to present an overview of the critical role that ECOWAS plays in shaping the future of migration in West Africa.



Migration routes through Niger

Background

Migration in the ECOWAS region is a complex issue driven by a variety of economic, political, and environmental factors. The ECOWAS, which is made up of fifteen member states, has seen significant intra-regional migration and



Migrants from West Africa arriving in Europe

external migration to destinations such as Europe and the Middle East. Within the ECOWAS region, there have been high levels of movement of people, where people move to other member states to search for better



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



economic opportunities, security, and improved living conditions.

Most of these migrants move between neighboring countries for trade, agricultural labor, and other informal sector jobs.³ In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that about 18 million migrants were living in West Africa, with significant intra-regional migration.⁴ The destination countries for these migrants within the region are Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Togo, Benin, Niger, and the Gambia.⁵

It is worth noting that the largest migration flows occur within the West African region itself, influenced by the search for economic opportunities and security. It was estimated that as of mid-2020, 90% of the 7.4 million migrants living in West Africa were from other countries within the region.⁶ Intraregional migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa comprised over two-thirds of all international migration from the region.⁷ The ECOWAS countries are known for a long tradition of migration within the region, where people often travel by land, using informal

routes to cross borders influenced by economic necessities and cultural ties.

However, there is also a significant trend of migration to Europe among countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, etc. These countries are known for having strong representation in the European countries, especially in France, Spain, and Italy. The migrants usually pass through North Africa, where migrants use the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean through dangerous routes to arrive at their destinations. The economic hardship, unemployment, and increasing conflict and instability in parts of West Africa compel the migrants to undertake such a dangerous adventure. According to the existing data, more than 180,000 migrants from West Africa use the Mediterranean route in Europe, Italy, and Malta.⁸

³ Leonie Jegen and Franzisca Zanker 2022, "ECOWAS: Migration and the Externalization of the European Border," Migration Control.info, 12 June 2022, <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/wiki-entry-the-economic-community-of-west-african-states/>.

⁴ IOM, n.d., "Migration and Migrants: Regional Dimensions and Developments," World Migration Report, n.d., <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-3/africa>.

⁵ Migration data portal 2023, op.cit.; Geertrui Lanneau 2015, "Migration and Development Policies And Strategies In The Ecowas Region: The Role Of Data," IOM, September 2015,

⁶ Migration data portal 2023, op.cit.

⁷ World Bank Group 2020, "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens Migration and Development Brief 32," KNOMAD, April 2020,

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/365941590632982768-0090022020/original/05292020reportCOVID19CrisisThroughaMigrationLens.pdf>.

⁸ ANSA and InfoMigrants 2021, "The Main Migration Routes to the European Union," InfoMigrants, 11 November 2021,

<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/36391/the-main-migration-routes-to-the-european-union>; Sabbat Giulio 2021, "Recent Migration Flows to the EU - European Parliament," European Parliament, June 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATA/G/2021/649329/EPRS_ATA\(2021\)649329_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATA/G/2021/649329/EPRS_ATA(2021)649329_EN.pdf) ;

IOM, n.d., "Migration and Migrants: Regional Dimensions and Developments," World Migration Report, n.d., <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-3/africa>.

The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



Heads of Government of ECOWAS Member States

One of the achievements ECOWAS can boast of is the protocol on free movement of persons, goods, and services. This protocol was adopted in 1979 to promote integration and allow citizens of the member states to move freely within the region. Thus, the protocol allows ECOWAS citizens to travel across the member states without visas or entry permits, thereby promoting economic cooperation and social cohesion. This freedom of movement was enhanced over time by various policies and initiatives, including the introduction of the ECOWAS passport in December 2000, geared

towards encouraging regional trade, investment, and development.⁹

The countries that implemented these Common Approach policies made significant strides, while others face challenges due to weak institutions, divergent national interest, and infrastructure issues.¹⁰ However, three countries (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) recently withdrew from the ECOWAS, and this decision may pose a challenge to these countries in terms of the free movement protocols.¹¹

In 2020, ECOWAS introduced a biometric identity card in its efforts to facilitate easier movement within the region. This was done to further streamline cross-border travel, ensuring that citizens can move freely while also providing enhanced security and data collection for member states.¹² However, the implementation of this protocol has not been even since some countries in the region have been reluctant to fully open their borders, citing concerns over security and economic imbalances. Also, tensions emerged due to unequal economic development, where wealthier countries are attracting migrants seeking better job opportunities, leaving the poorer states to struggle.¹³

⁹Economic Commission for Africa n.d., "ECOWAS - Free Movement of Persons," United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, n.d., <https://archive.uneca.org/pages/ecowas-free-movement-persons>; ECOWAS 2019, "40 Years of Free Movement in ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)," ECOWAS CEDEAO, 29 May 2019, <https://www.ecowas.int/40-years-of-free-movement-in-ecowas/>.

¹⁰ Franzisca Zanker 2022, "Free Movement in West Africa: Necessity and Challenges," African Liberty, 10 October 2022, <https://www.africanliberty.org/2022/10/10/free-movement-in-west-africa/>.

¹¹ Franzisca Zanker, Amanda Bisong, and Leonie Jegen 2024, "Free Movement in West Africa: Three

Countries Leaving ECOWAS Could Face Migration Hurdles," The Conversation, 21 February 2024, <https://theconversation.com/free-movement-in-west-africa-three-countries-leaving-ecowas-could-face-migration-hurdles-222826>.

¹²IOM UN MIGRATION 2015, "West Africa Moves Towards Biometric Identity Cards," NEWS GLOBAL, 24 February 2015, <https://www.iom.int/news/west-africa-moves-towards-biometric-identity-cards>.

¹³Leonie Jegen and Franzisca Zanker, 2022. "ECOWAS: Migration and the Externalization of the European Border," Migration Control.info, 12 June 2022, <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/wiki-entry-the-economic-community-of-west-african-states/>.

The interplay between migration, economic integration, and security challenges the work of ECOWAS in promoting free movement within the region and external destinations like Europe. Addressing these challenges demands a balanced

approach that considers economic, social, and security concerns as well as stronger commitment from ECOWAS and the international community.



Some migration routes between ECOWAS Member States

Leading Multilateral Actors

African Union (AU): The AU'S Migration Policy Framework emphasizes continental integration and supports free movement across the African continent, which aligns with the

goals of ECOWAS.¹⁴ The AU emphasizes continental integration and the need for free movement across the African continent. The AU's Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2018) supports free movement and cross-border mobility across African states, which aligns with

¹⁴ Ibid



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



ECOWAS' goals. However, it advocates for greater unity among African countries to manage migration in a way that benefits the continent.¹⁵

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): The ECOWAS facilitates free movement of people, goods, and services within the region through the Free Movement Protocol, thereby promoting regional integration.¹⁶

European Union (EU): Europe is a major destination for African migrants: therefore, the EU influences migration through bilateral agreements, development aid, and border control initiatives.¹⁷

National Governments: The individual member states, such as Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire, implement and enforce migration policies at the national level. The national policies shape migration flows and determine engagement with regional and international frameworks.¹⁸

Non-State Actors: The civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media, and diaspora organizations play an important role in shaping migration

policies and advocate for the rights of migrants.¹⁹

United Nations (UN): The UN, through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), supports migration management and provides policy guidance and humanitarian aid.²⁰ Also, through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it ensures the protection of refugees and displaced persons, especially in conflict-affected regions like the Sahel.²¹

Current Issues

Economic and Social Impact: Migration within and from the ECOWAS region has some implications socially and economically. Even though migration can contribute to economic development through remittances and labor mobility, it also strains resources and infrastructure in both origin and destination countries. The competition for resources due to migration can result in conflict.²²

Human Rights Concerns: ECOWAS has been criticized for its handling of human rights issues, particularly in relation to migration. The bloc's

¹⁵ African Union 2018, Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018 – 2030), May 2018,

<https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/35956-doc-au-mpfa-executive-summary-eng.pdf>.

¹⁶ Joseph Kofi Teye 2021, Critical migration policy narratives from West Africa, 25 February 2021, https://southsouth.contentfiles.net/media/documents/International_Migration_-_2022_-_Teye_-_Critical_migration_policy_narratives_f_iLWx17c.pdf.

¹⁷ Mehari Taddele Maru 2022, "The Future of African Migration and Mobility, Continent on the Move, or Contained?" European Union Institute for Security Studies, 31 August 2022, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/future-african-migration-and-mobility>.

¹⁸ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2025, Regional cooperation: Key to migration management in West

Africa, January 9, 2025,

<https://vu.nl/en/news/2025/regional-cooperation-key-to-migration-management-in-west-africa>.

¹⁹ Amanda Bisong 2019, "Acting Together": How Nonstate Actors Shape Migration Policies In West Africa" (Legon: MIASA, November 2019).

https://miasa.ug.edu.gh/wp-content/uploads/191127-MIASA-WP_20192-Bisong.pdf.

²⁰ IOM n.d., "Homepage," International Organization for Migration, n.d., <https://www.iom.int/>.

²¹ UNHCR n.d., "About UNHCR," UNHCR, n.d., <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr>.

²² Franzisca Zanker, Amanda Bisong, and Leonie Jegen 2024, "Free Movement in West Africa: Three Countries Leaving ECOWAS Could Face Migration Hurdles," The Conversation, 21 February 2024, <https://theconversation.com/free-movement-in-west-africa-three-countries-leaving-ecowas-could-face-migration-hurdles-222826>.

The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration

sanctions and political pressure on member states have been seen as exacerbating humanitarian crises and impacting the rights of migrants. Sanctions on the movement of some member countries and other concerns infringe on the rights of citizens. This led to the withdrawal by the three member countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger).²³

Internal Displacement and Climate Change:

Internal displacement is another critical issue facing the ECOWAS. The IOM reported a steady increase in internally displaced persons within the region, particularly due to conflict, violence, and climate change. ECOWAS has demonstrated commitment to addressing displacement through frameworks and disaster response strategies, but this remains a growing challenge as environmental degradation, such as desertification and flooding, continues to drive



Migrants from Africa cross the Mediterranean

people from rural areas to cities or across borders. This, as a result, increases the already existing burden on urban areas and competition for scarce resources.²⁴

Member States Withdrawal: Not too long ago, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso announced their decision to withdraw from ECOWAS, citing dissatisfaction with the handling of regional issues and sanctions. This decision by the three countries raised concerns about the future of regional mobility and migration management.²⁵

Migration and Counterterrorism: Violent extremism and terrorism in parts of West Africa, especially in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have been on the rise. This is raising security concerns in the region. Governments in the region are increasingly seeing migration as a potential threat, associating migration with insurgency, trafficking, and terrorism. This tension between facilitating free movement and addressing security concerns poses a challenge for ECOWAS. For example, some member states have implemented extreme border controls, which undermines the principle of free movement.²⁶

Migration to Europe: Citizens from West Africa moving to Europe, especially the youth, due to lack of opportunities at home, is becoming a challenge. The EU's migration policies, including external border controls, have impacted the West African migration flows. Efforts are being made to curb migration at the Frontex and EU borders in North Africa. These policies led to increased returns and deportation of migrants from European countries, complicating the efforts of

²³Uchenna Igwe 2019, "ECOWAS Crisis Deepens Human Rights Concerns in West Africa," FairPlanet, 19 March 2024,

<https://www.fairplanet.org/story/ecowas-niger-humanitarian-crisis-migration/>.

²⁴Elizabeth Ferris and Chareen Stark, 2012. Internal displacement in West Africa: A Snapshot - Brookings, January 2012, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/01_ecowas_ferris_stark.pdf.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Franzisca Zanker, Amanda Bisong, and Leonie Jegen 2024, "Free Movement in West Africa: Three

Countries Leaving ECOWAS Could Face Migration Hurdles," The Conversation, 21 February 2024, <https://theconversation.com/free-movement-in-west-africa-three-countries-leaving-ecowas-could-face-migration-hurdles-222826>; Leonie Jegen and Franzisca Zanker, 2022. "ECOWAS: Migration and the Externalization of the European Border," Migration Control.info, 12 June 2022, <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/wiki-entry-the-economic-community-of-west-african-states/>.



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



ECOWAS to protect the rights of its citizens abroad..²⁷

Causes of Migration in West Africa

Economic Factors: Economic hardship and the search for better job opportunities are the most significant drivers of migration in West Africa. Poverty, unemployment, and low wages compel young people, especially, to take the risk of traveling through the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean in search of greener pastures as well as within the region..²⁸

Environmental Factors: Environmental changes, including climate change, natural disasters, and environmental degradation, drive the migration in West Africa. Droughts, floods, and other environmental challenges lead to loss of livelihoods, thereby forcing people to move in search of more stable conditions in other countries..²⁹

Health Crises: Health emergencies, particularly the outbreak of infectious diseases, also compel people to migrate in search of safer conditions. For instance, the outbreak of Ebola virus in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone between 2014 and 2016 compelled a lot of people to flee their homes, both within the region and internationally. These health crises can stretch healthcare systems thereby making migration a

survival strategy, especially for those in areas with inadequate medical infrastructure..³⁰

Political Factors: Political instability, violence, and conflict are behind forced migration in the region. In the regions affected by violence, citizens are compelled to flee to safer areas. This often involves crossing international borders to seek asylum or refuge. Also, poor governance, corruption, and human rights abuse drive people to migrate..³¹

Social Factors: Family reunification and education also play a crucial role in migration decisions. Many migrants move to join family members who have already settled in other countries. This creates a cycle of migration where established diaspora communities pull subsequent generations to migrate. Also, in the pursuit of access to better educational opportunities, many West Africans migrate within or outside the region to satisfy their hunger for better educational opportunities..³²

Foreign Pressure on ECOWAS Member States

Foreign governments and the EU have been pressing ECOWAS and its member states to take more decisive action on migration issues, especially regarding irregular migration flows from West Africa to Europe. As migration trends toward Europe, especially, governments and international organizations have put pressure on

²⁷ETIAS, 2025 “Western African Migration Rises as Other EU Routes Decline,” ETIAS.COM, 2 January 2025, <https://etias.com/articles/western-african-migration-rises-as-other-eu-routes-decline>.

²⁸ Migration data portal 2023, “Migration Data in Western Africa,” Migration data portal, 31 May 2023, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/western-africa>.

²⁹Joseph Kofi Teye 2022, “Migration in West Africa: An Introduction,” SpringerLink, 5 July 2022,

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-97322-3_1.

³⁰United Nations 2015, “Powerful Effects of Ebola Outbreak Felt Outside Worst-Affected Countries, UN Report Finds,” United Nations, 12 March 2015, <https://ebolaresponse.un.org/powerful-effects-ebola-outbreak-felt-outside-worst-affected-countries-un-report-finds>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Migration data portal 2023, op.cit.

ECOWAS to adopt more effective migration management strategies.³³

The EU has made migration control a central element of its relationship with West African countries. For example, the EU has pledged through the **Valletta Summit 2015** to fund and



The flags of UN Member States

assist in addressing the root causes of migration, including poverty, conflict, and weak governance, while enhancing border management and deportations.^{34 35} Again, the EU has been involved in the *“Support to Free Movement of*

Persons and Migration in West Africa (FMM West Africa)” project to harmonize migration data management in the region.³⁶ However, the EU policies also focus on border control and deterrence of irregular migration.

Another way through which foreign governments and the EU put pressure on ECOWAS in managing migration is through bilateral agreements and aid conditionalities. Some European countries have entered into agreements with ECOWAS member states to assist in managing migration.³⁷ These agreements usually come with conditions tied to development aid, such as the EU **Emergency Trust Fund for Africa**.³⁸ This focuses on stabilizing the region by addressing migration drivers like poverty, joblessness, and conflict.³⁹

The external pressure made ECOWAS take a more prominent role in addressing migration management, but ECOWAS is challenged as it faces a tension between respecting the sovereignty of member states and responding to the external pressure. Member states often feel reluctant to fully comply with some of the demands of the EU, particularly when the

³³Rahmane Idrissa n.d., The impact of EU Migration Policy on West African integration, n.d., <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/15284.pdf>.

³⁴European Union 2015, “Valletta Summit on Migration, 11-12/11/2015 - Consilium,” European Union Council, 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-12/>.

³⁵Franziska Zanker 2022, “Free Movement in West Africa: Necessity and Challenges,” African Liberty, 10 October 2022, <https://www.africanliberty.org/2022/10/10/free-movement-in-west-africa/>.

³⁶IOM GMDAC 2018, Guidelines For The Harmonization Of Migration Data Management in the Ecowas Region, 2018,

https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_guidelines_2018.pdf.

³⁷Agnese Pacciardi 2024, “EU-Africa Relations on Migration: Current Trajectories and Future Challenges,” ISPI, 2 July 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/eu-africa-relations-on-migration-current-trajectories-and-future-challenges-179041>.

³⁸European Union 2024, “Our Mission,” Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 10 April 2024, https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-mission_en.

³⁹ETIAS 2025 “Western African Migration Rises as Other EU Routes Decline,” ETIAS.COM, 2 January 2025, <https://etias.com/articles/western-african-migration-rises-as-other-eu-routes-decline>.



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



demands are perceived as compromising national interests or sovereignty.^{40 41}

Role of the United Nations

While the UN is not directly involved in addressing migration issues in West Africa, it plays a vital role in addressing the issues globally, including in West Africa. Due to the complex nature of migration in the region, the UN offers a wide range of support through policy guidance, technical assistance, humanitarian aid, and advocacy. These actions aim to support regional efforts, complement national policies, and provide a framework to ensure that migration is managed effectively and safely for those involved.

The UN, through its agencies and initiatives, supports ECOWAS member states in managing migration flows, protecting migrants' rights, and promoting regional cooperation.

Initiatives and Programs: The UN also has initiatives and programs that contribute to the migration management in West Africa. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is a UN framework that was adopted in 2018 that provides guidelines and principles for managing migration flows, protecting

migrants' rights and promoting international cooperation. Again, the UN Network on Migration supports ECOWAS in developing and implementing regional migration policies that address the impact of climate change on migration and promote regular pathways for migration.^{42 43}

International Organization for Migration

(IOM): The IOM works closely with ECOWAS to enhance migration management capacities, combat human trafficking, and provide humanitarian assistance to migrants. The IOM also supports the implementation of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol and the Common Approach on Migration.^{44 45} The IOM's migration data initiatives provide critical data on migration trends internally and internationally, which help ECOWAS member states to assess migration patterns and plan for the economic and social integration of migrants.

United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR): The UNHCR provides protection and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers in the ECOWAS region. This institution collaborates with ECOWAS member states to ensure the rights of refugees and asylum seekers are respected and that they receive the necessary

⁴⁰Michael P. Okom 2016, "Sovereignty versus Supranationality: The ECOWAS Conundrum," *European Scientific Journal, ESJ* 12, no. 23 (29 August 2016): 289-297.

⁴¹ Femi D. Ojumu 2024, "ECOWAS: A Way Forward," *The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News*, 25 December 2024, <https://guardian.ng/opinion/ecowas-a-way-forward/>.

⁴² Wikipedia 2025, "Global Compact for Migration," Wikipedia, January 7, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Compact_for_Migration.

⁴³ ECOWAS Commission 2021, ECOWAS - Report on Regional Consultations on Global Compact for

Migration, October 2021, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/ECOWAS%20-%20Report%20on%20Regional%20Consultations%20on%20GCM.pdf>.

⁴⁴ IOM GMDAC 2018, Guidelines For The Harmonization Of Migration Data Management in the Ecowas Region, 2018, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_guidelines_2018.pdf.

⁴⁵ ECOWAS 2008, ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration, 18 January 2008, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/49e47c8f11.pdf>.



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



support.^{46 47} The UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990) is an important international instrument that emphasizes the protection of migrants rights and serves as a reference for migration policies of ECOWAS.⁴⁸

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): The UNDP supports ECOWAS member states addressing the root causes of migration such as poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation. It also promotes sustainable development and economic opportunities to reduce the need for migration.⁴⁹

ECOWAS Member State Positions

ECOWAS member states have different positions on migration shaped by their unique socio-economic and political contexts. While some countries emphasize the benefits of free

movement, others express concerns over security and socio-economic impacts. For example, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have recently withdrawn from ECOWAS, citing inhumane sanctions and lack of support from the bloc.⁵⁰

Côte d'Ivoire: Côte d'Ivoire has a relatively liberal migration policy that allows migrants from the ECOWAS countries to move in and out of the country, granting access to work and residence in the country under the ECOWAS framework. However, the Ivorian authorities raise concerns about irregular migration to Europe and migration-related security threats, particularly the rise of terrorism in the Sahel.⁵¹

European Union (EU): The EU has been instrumental in shaping migration policies in West Africa. Its security and migration strategies are closely tied to ECOWAS, with initiatives like the "Support to Free Movement of Persons and Migration in West Africa (FMM West Africa)" project aimed at harmonizing migration

⁴⁶L-R Raouf Mazou and Clementine Nkweta Salami 2022, "ECOWAS Reaffirms Its Commitment to Dynamic and Fruitful Cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)," Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS, 2022, <https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-reaffirms-its-commitment-to-dynamic-and-fruitful-cooperation-with-the-united-nations-high-commissioner-for-refugees-unhcr/>.

⁴⁷ ECOWAS 2023, "ECOWAS and UNHCR Sign an Agreement to Strengthen Refugees' Protection and Address Internal Displacements in West Africa: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)," Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS, 24 October 2023, <https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-and-unhcr-sign-an-agreement-to-strengthen-refugees-protection-and-address-internal-displacements-in-west-africa/>.

⁴⁸United Nations 1990, "International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families | Ohchr," United

Nations, 18 December 1990, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-rights-all-migrant-workers>.

⁴⁹UNDP 2024, "ECOWAS-UNDP Technical Consultation Initiates Efforts to Develop West Africa Resilience Strategy," UNDP, 13 February 2024, <https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/ecowas-undp-technical-consultation-initiates-efforts-develop-west-africa-resilience-strategy>.

⁵⁰ Chinedu Asadu 2024, "What Is ECOWAS and Why Have 3 Coup-Hit Nations Quit the West Africa Bloc?," AP News, 29 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-burkina-faso-niger-ecowas-africa-d2e8b1e5448d9a7823e6b9d3d8ec774b>.

⁵¹ Migration Data Portal 2020, "Migration Governance Profile: The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire," Migration Data Portal, 18 June 2020, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/overviews/mgi/cote-divoire#0>.



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



data management in the region.⁵² The EU also provides financial support to ECOWAS member states to prevent onward migration to Europe.⁵³

Ghana: Ghana generally supports the free movement of persons within ECOWAS and has open immigration policies compared to some other West African countries. Ghana is the destination of migrants across the region; however, it raises concerns over irregular migration to Europe, especially the youth.⁵⁴

Mali and Burkina Faso: These countries have been affected heavily by conflict and terrorism and therefore face internal and cross-border migration challenges. They become transit countries for migrants trying to reach Europe through North Africa. They both emphasize the need for regional cooperation to address the root cause of migration.⁵⁵

Nigeria: Nigeria supports the free movement of people within the ECOWAS region even though it has at times been cautious of intra-regional migration due to economic strains caused by the large migrants from neighboring countries. However, irregular migration to Europe remains a critical concern for Nigeria.⁵⁶

What the UN Cannot Do

Since the UN operates on the principle of respecting the sovereignty of its member states, it cannot directly interfere with or dictate national policies and practices on migration. All the ECOWAS member states have their own migration policies and regulations. This may not always align with UN recommendations or frameworks. The UN can only provide guidance and support, and it cannot enforce compliance with its guidelines.

Due to resource constraints, the UN cannot carry out large interventions in the ECOWAS region since it relies on funding from member states and other donors. This prevents the UN from addressing certain critical issues in the region.

The role the UN plays in the region is advisory and supportive. The UN does not have the authority to enforce its resolutions or recommendations in the region. The implementation of the UN policies depends on the willingness and capacity of member states to adopt and implement them.

Even though the UN advocates for human rights protection, it cannot always prevent human rights violations related to migration. The UN can raise awareness and call for action, but it

⁵² IOM GMDAC 2018, Guidelines For The Harmonization Of Migration Data Management in the Ecowas Region, 2018, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_guidelines_2018.pdf.

⁵³ European Union 2015, "Valletta Summit on Migration, 11-12/11/2015 - Consilium," European Union Council, 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-12/>.

⁵⁴ Musah Issaka 2024, "The Immigration Policy Of Ghana: The Politics Of The Policies To Other Neighbouring Countries," Salamkuundaa, 1 April 2024, [https://salamkuundaa.net/the-immigration-](https://salamkuundaa.net/the-immigration-policy-of-ghana-the-politics-of-the-policies-to-other-neighbouring-countries-by-owusu-eric/#google_vignette)

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⁵⁵ Joachim Chukwuma Okafor et al. 2023, "Trans-Border Mobility and Security in the Sahel: Exploring the Dynamics of Forced Migration and Population Displacements in Burkina Faso and Mali - Society," SpringerLink, June 8, 2023, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12115-023-00859-4>.

⁵⁶ R. I. ONWUKA 1982, "The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons: A Threat to Nigerian Security?" *African Affairs* 81, no. 323 (April 1982): 193–206,



The Role of ECOWAS in International Migration



cannot directly intervene in sovereign states internal affairs.

The UN alone cannot single-handedly support addressing the root causes of migration, such as poverty, conflict, and climate change. While the UN provides humanitarian aid and development support to the region, it cannot resolve the structural economic, social, and political issues that drive people to migrate.

Some Possible Proposals for Action

As sovereign states, the members of ECOWAS are free to develop their own policies and interpret ECOWAS mandates as they chose. They might agree, for example, that there is nothing the organization can do collectively, leaving each Member States free to act as best they can, individually. And as a consensus-based organization, a controversial resolution, one that leads to a divided vote with some countries opposed, risks being ignored by the country that voted against.

Consensus makes ECOWAS very powerful when it acts together, but also can lead to lowest common denominator resolutions that mostly conceal the depth of the Member States' divisions. Listed below are major options ECOWAS might consider. Delegates at ODUMUNC may develop these or their own alternatives.

Halt Free Movement to Combat Terrorism:

The ECOWAS should suspend the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol to address security concerns of member states and combat terrorism. The suspension means that all

travelers must obtain visas and undergo thorough security screenings before crossing borders. This will potentially limit the risk of terrorist activities but also hinder economic integration and mobility.

Implement a Regional Border Control

Authority: A centralized ECOWAS Border Control Authority should be established and vested with power to regulate and manage all cross-border movements within the region. This body should be mandated to enforce strict immigration policies, monitor movement using advanced surveillance technologies and detain individuals who do not comply with migration regulations. This will enhance the security of the region by preventing unauthorized border crossing, trafficking, and illicit activities. However, establishing a Regional Border Control Authority will require significant financial and logistical resources. Training the personnel and integrating surveillance technologies across borders can be complex and costly.

Investment in Socio-Economic Development:

To address the root causes of migration, the ECOWAS member states should invest in socio-economic development endeavors. This includes creating job opportunities, improving access to education and healthcare, and promoting sustainable development initiatives. By improving living conditions in the region, the quest to migrate may be reduced. Investing to enhance the living conditions of citizens may take a long time to yield results and so while waiting for the results, the region will continue to experience high levels of migration among the citizens and its associated challenges.



Map of ECOWAS Member States

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