
ECOWAS Council of the Wise: State of Play and Potential

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Introduction

African values, cultures and beliefs continue to shape conflict management and resolution on the continent (Ajayi and Buhari, 2014). In many African societies, traditional methods for resolving conflicts are used to maintain social harmony and restore social order. Elders who often act as mediators and conciliators play a central role in this traditional conflict-resolution system. They are accorded this role owing to their vast experience, knowledge, wisdom and the respect they command in society. Over the years, the role of elders in responding to societal disputes has inspired institutional practices at the multilateral level through the inculcation of wisdom from elders as an expression of traditional conflict governance. In West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has institutionalised this practice to bolster its conflict prevention and peacemaking efforts by establishing the Council of Elders (CoE) in 2004 (ECOWAS, 1999). The CoE later became the Council of the Wise (CoW). Through the transformation, ECOWAS acknowledged that good offices combined with experience are more impactful than just being elders.

By design, the CoW is one of the key pillars of ECOWAS for preventive diplomacy and mediation interventions in member states. It was established as a supporting organ to the Mediation and Security Council (MSC). Members of the CoW are expected to use their wealth of experience, expertise and good offices to play the role of mediators, conciliators and facilitators in resolving or mitigating conflicts/disputes before they escalate – for the good of the entire ECOWAS Community. Following the example of ECOWAS, similar mechanisms have been established by the African Union Commission (AUC) and some other Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs), such as the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Development

Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). The AU, for example, established the Panel of the Wise in 2007 and the Pan-African Network of the Wise (PanWise) in 2013 to foster coherence, collaboration and complementarity in the field of preventive diplomacy and mediation between the RECs/ RMs and the AUC (Khamis and Mutisi, 2013).

Since its establishment, members of the CoW have engaged in the prevention and resolution of political crises and disputes and participated in election observation missions in countries such as Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger, The Gambia and Mali (ECOWAS, 2017). However, from its inception in 2004 until 2010, the CoW was non-functional (Odigie, 2021). Its functionality as a preventive diplomacy and mediation organ of ECOWAS diminished, as it was not reconstituted for a while. It also lacked a dedicated secretariat, statute, operational framework and adequate funding to support its activities and interventions.¹ Nevertheless, the impact of the rising insecurity and socio-political tensions on peace and security in the region reinforced the need to urgently constitute a new CoW to help ECOWAS deliver on its peace and stability mandate. Consequently, to reinvigorate the CoW, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States and Government adopted a Statute (A/Dec.12/16) in 2016 to clearly define the mandate, composition, operations and mode of functioning of the CoW (ECOWAS, 2016). The Council was subsequently reconstituted in 2021 and an orientation workshop for the nominated members was organised in Accra, Ghana, to enable them to execute their mandate (ECOWAS, 2022).

Although the reconstituted CoW is relatively new, its symbolic and practical value in the overall ECOWAS peace and security architecture has been acknowledged by policymakers, practitioners and scholars. However, with the exception of a study by Jo-Ansie van Wyk (2020) there is a dearth of knowledge on institutional arrangements, the effectiveness and impact of roles, key challenges and how the CoW operates alongside the multiplicity of other intervening actors and mediation mechanisms in the region.

¹ Some of these challenges such as the reconstitution of the CoW members and the adoption of a statute have been addressed while others like the funding gaps and lack of a dedicated secretariat still persist and impede the work of the CoW.

This chapter addresses this knowledge gap by examining the institutional arrangements and contributions of the CoW to peace, security and stability in West Africa. It also expands the scope of the 2020 study by Van Wyk (2020) to include analysis on the reconstituted CoW in 2021, its working modalities, and how the CoW works with other intervening actors, including other organs of ECOWAS, in the performance of its roles.

The chapter begins with a contextualisation of the CoW as one of the key pillars of the ECOWAS peace and security architecture. It then proceeds to analyse the working modalities and how the CoW collaborated and interacted with other intervening actors, including other organs of ECOWAS, in the execution of its mandates. The role and potential of the CoW to participate in preventive diplomacy and mediation interventions in West Africa are discussed in the next section. This is followed by an analysis of the key challenges facing the CoW in the execution of its functions. The chapter concludes with some pragmatic recommendations to further enhance the CoW's work. The analysis is based on secondary sources of data such as ECOWAS reports, protocols, statutes of the CoW, media reports, journal articles and web-based publications. The chapter is also enriched by the authors' knowledge and professional working experiences with ECOWAS and with the facilitation of CoW activities.

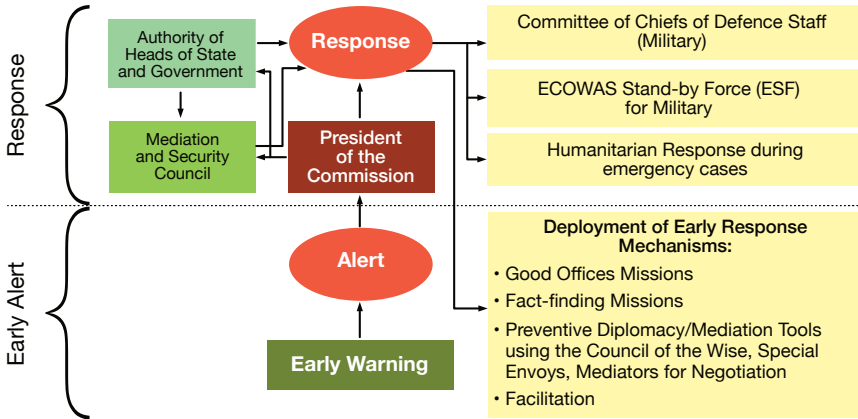
Overview of the ECOWAS Council of the Wise

The CoW is a key component of the ECOWAS Alert and Response Structure (ECOWAS, 2017). Article 58 of the ECOWAS revised Treaty states that member states should safeguard and consolidate relations conducive to the maintenance of peace, stability and security in the region (ECOWAS, 1993). In pursuit of this objective, member states have cooperated with ECOWAS in establishing and strengthening appropriate mechanisms for the timely prevention and resolution of intra-state and inter-state conflicts using good offices, conciliation, mediation and other methods of peaceful settlement of disputes. Accordingly, Chapter II of the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security created institutions for the purpose of preventive diplomacy, mediation and conflict resolution. These institutions include the Authority of

Heads of State and Government; the MSC; and the Executive Secretariat (now the ECOWAS Commission). As illustrated in Figure 1, the Authority of Heads of States and Government is the highest decision-making organ but has delegated the MSC to take decisions on issues of peace and security in the sub-region on behalf of the Authority. The MSC performs this responsibility based on early warning alert information from the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) (ECOWAS, 2017; African Union, 2008). The ECOWAS Commission provides administrative, operational and logistical support as part of the alert and response structure. In performing this role, several response structures are deployed by the Commission depending on the nature of the situation in member states. These response structures include the Committee of Chiefs of Defence Staff, ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), and the deployment of early response mechanisms including good offices missions, fact-finding missions, special envoys and preventive diplomacy/mediation tools.

The CoW is one of the response structures and supporting organs of the MSC created for the purposes of preventive diplomacy and mediation in the region. It was established under Chapter III (Article 17-20) of the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security. The Council was officially inaugurated in March 2004 in Ghana by the then Chairperson of the ECOWAS Authority, Ghanaian President John Agyekum Kufuor. It consisted of 15 eminent personalities (13 men and 2 women), one from each member state of the Community.² Members of the CoW are influential and are drawn from the list of eminent personalities from various segments of society, including former heads of state, women, political, traditional and religious leaders approved by the MSC at the level of the heads of state and government, as referred to under Article 20 of the 1999 Protocol.

² The members of the Council of Elders in 2006 were: Omar de Souza (Benin); Léopold Andre Joseph Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso); Julio Monterio Santes (Cape Verde); Alassane Salif N'diaye (Côte d'Ivoire); Seth K. Obeng (Ghana); Abdourahmane Sow (Guinea); Gaetano Nitchama (Guinea Bissau); Emmanuel Gbalaze (Liberia); Sira Diop (Mali); Aminrou Garba (Niger); Abdulsalaam Abubakar (Nigeria); Mbaye Mbengue (Senegal); Elizabeth Alpha-Lavalie (Sierra Leone); Babou Ousmane Jobe (The Gambia); and Bitokotipou Yagninim (Togo).

Figure 1: ECOWAS Alert and Response Structure

Source: Odigie, (2021).

The President of the ECOWAS Commission nominates the eminent personalities from the approved list to deal with a given conflict situation and to report back to the President who also reports to the MSC and the Authority. In other words, the CoW could be requested by the President of ECOWAS or the MSC to deal with any given conflict situation, whenever the need arises.

According to Odigie (2016), the predecessor of the CoW (ECOWAS Council of Elders) had an active membership of 13 in 2007/08 from 15 members in 2015 and only two active members in 2016. This is partly because the Council became moribund after attempts to involve it in mediation and conciliation in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau in the 2000s did not yield much fruit.³ Following the establishment of the Mediation Facilitation Division (MFD) in June 2015 to backstop mediation efforts, there was however a renewed impetus to reposition the CoW as an effective mediation organ of ECOWAS. As part of efforts to reinvigorate the CoW, in 2016 the

³ During the period, warlords were more interested in political and economic interests than the Council of Elders. Also, the Council lacked a functional operational framework, administrative secretariat and the necessary budgetary support to function as expected.

ECOWAS Authority adopted a Statute (A/Dec.12/16) which defined the mandate, composition, operations and mode of functioning of the CoW.

According to the Statute, each member state of ECOWAS is expected to nominate two (2) eminent persons to the Council (totalling 30 members compared to the 15 members of its predecessor) with a least 30 per cent of the members being women.⁴ While some countries have nominated two candidates, others have nominated just one and others such as Mali are yet to nominate any member, perhaps owing to the ongoing diplomatic issues with the ECOWAS Commission. Therefore, as of December 2021, 27 eminent personalities constituted the CoW as presented in Table 1. Members of the Council are appointed for a term of one (1) year, renewable as necessary. However, a member may resign from the CoW with a notification of at least 30 days by addressing a letter to the President of the ECOWAS Commission (PEC) after informing the Chairperson of the CoW. In addition, the tenure of a member of the CoW may also cease once it is demonstrated that the member is unable to perform his/her functions and roles as designated in the Statute. In the performance of their roles, Council members are required to be neutral, impartial and objective. The Chairperson⁵ and a Vice-Chairperson of the Council are also appointed by consensus from among the members or are elected by a simple majority. Former President Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of Nigeria is the Chairperson of the reconstituted Council.

In 2021, the CoW was reconstituted and an orientation workshop for the nominated members was organised in Accra, Ghana, to build their capacity to enable them to execute their mandate (Gyesi, 2021). The orientation workshop was crucial partly because members of the CoW are not professional mediators and therefore needed to be oriented on their roles. In September 2021, the ECOWAS Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) organised a two-day Strategic Planning and

⁴ Member states were encouraged to nominate one male and one female to ensure a gender balance in the Council's membership.

⁵ The Chair of the Council presides over all meetings; ensures a consensus on matters; and presents reports of the Ordinary and Extraordinary sessions, among others. In the case of the absence of the Chairperson, the Vice-Chairperson acts in that position.

Table 1: List of reconstituted members of the ECOWAS Council of the Wise

| | Name | Country | Status |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Mr Kolawole Idji | Benin | Former Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| 2 | Mr Joseph Gnonlonfoun | Benin | Former Minister of Justice |
| 3 | Mr Léandre B. Bassole | Burkina Faso | Former Ambassador, former OAU Special Representative and former Director of Political Affairs of UNOWAS |
| 4 | Mrs Monique Ilboudo | Burkina Faso | Former Ambassador, former Minister |
| 5 | Amb. Amilcar Fernandes Spencer Lopes | Cabo Verde | Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, former President of National Assembly and current Chairperson of the Union of African Parliamentarians |
| 6 | Ms Francoise Angeline Delphine Assi Kaudjihis Epse Offoumou | Cote d'Ivoire | Attorney and international consultant |
| 7 | Mr Adama Toungara | Cote d'Ivoire | Former Minister of Mines, Petroleum and Energy |
| 8 | Mrs Patience Sonko Godwin | The Gambia | Veteran educationist, historian |
| 9 | Dr Lamin J. Sise | The Gambia | Chairman of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) in The Gambia |
| 10 | Dr William Collins Asare | Ghana | Former country representative United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| 11 | Mrs Gifty Affeyi Dadzie | Ghana | Former Member of Council of State |
| 12 | Mr El Hadj Mohamed Said Fofana | Guinea | Former Prime Minister |
| 13 | Madam Hadja Saran Daraba | Guinea | Former Minister and former Executive Secretary of the Mano River Union |
| 14 | Mr Domingos Meta Camara | Guinea Bissau | Civil society |
| 15 | Mr Canjura Injai | Guinea Bissau | Member, Council of State |
| 16 | Mrs Ophelia E. Hoff (Saytumah) | Liberia | Former Mayor of Monrovia/National Focal Point – Liberia Chapter Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) |
| 17 | Dr Nathaniel N. Zarway | Liberia | Bishop and advocate of peace, social justice and religious tolerance |
| 18 | Madam Salifou Fatimata Bazeye | Niger | Former President of the Constitutional Court |
| 19 | Mr Maidagi Allambaye | Niger | Former Minister of State and former parliamentarian |

| | Name | Country | Status |
|----|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 20 | Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan | Nigeria | Former President, Federal Republic of Nigeria |
| 21 | Mrs Salamatu H. Suleiman | Nigeria | Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and former Commissioner – PAPS, ECOWAS Commission |
| 22 | Madame Maymouna Diop Sy | Senegal | Ambassador, technical advisor to the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| 23 | Mr Babacar Mbaye | Senegal | Former resident representative of ECOWAS in Cote d'Ivoire |
| 24 | Amb. Joe C. Blell | Sierra Leone | Former ambassador and former Deputy Minister of Defence |
| 25 | Amb. Haja Alari Awahnatu Cole | Sierra Leone | Former ambassador |
| 26 | Madam Awa Amadou Aboudou Epse Nana | Togo | Mediator of the Togolese Republic |
| 27 | Mr Dama Dramani | Togo | Former President of the National Assembly |

Source: ECOWAS Commission, 2021.

Operationalisation Workshop in Abuja, Nigeria, for the members of the CoW (ECOWAS, 2021a). The objective of the workshop was to develop the modalities for the operationalisation of the new CoW and for members and the ECOWAS Commission to jointly develop and validate a one-year Plan of Action. During the meeting, the CoW also had a briefing on the ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanisms and a brainstorming session on strategies to swiftly respond to and mitigate the growing peace and security challenges in the region. The agreed Plan of Action from October 2021–December 2022 had the following activities (ECOWAS, 2021b):

- creating a WhatsApp and email group for CoW members to enhance the quick exchange of information and sharing of ideas;
- including the CoW on the mailing list to receive ECOWAS early warning products (e.g., incident reports, situation reports, policy briefs, WARN bulletins, country baseline studies) to enhance awareness/knowledge of the socio-political trends and developments in the region;

- sending memoranda to the Authority of Heads of State and Government through the PEC with the names of the members of CoW and requesting their official induction to confer an institutional mandate in compliance with the relevant normative frameworks;
- undertaking preventive diplomacy/fact-finding missions to member states in order to create inclusive electoral processes, resolution of pre- and post-electoral conflicts/disputes and to ensure an inclusive, credible, peaceful and generally acceptable electoral outcome;
- embark on in-country sensitisation and engagements with relevant stakeholders, peace actors and peace infrastructures (CSOs, traditional and faith-based leaders, youth and women), to favour creating synergies and strategies for addressing existing or emerging conflicts/disputes.

While the first three activities in the bulleted list have been done, the last two activities on preventive diplomacy/fact-finding missions and in-country sensitisation and engagements are yet to fully materialise. In February 2022, the CoW held a strategic retreat and planning workshop in Lagos, Nigeria (ECOWAS, 2022). During the workshop, the CoW reviewed the political and security situation in the region, while identifying concrete plans of action for its interventions. It also validated a one-year Plan of Action. Since then, not much has been done by the CoW in terms of their involvement in mediation processes across the region, even though there are many ongoing political crises in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal that require their valuable contributions.

Working modalities and collaboration with other actors

The CoW draw up and implements its programme of activities with the approval of the PEC. The working modalities specify that the CoW is expected to meet twice a year in Ordinary sessions. During such meetings, members are expected to review the socio-political and security situation in the region; proffer strategies and recommendations for the attention of the PEC to assist ECOWAS in realising its conflict prevention and peacebuilding objectives; and explore forms of collaboration between the CoW, Offices of

the Permanent Representatives and CSOs leading to strengthening conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.⁶ Beyond the Ordinary sessions, they also meet in Extraordinary sessions when the circumstances warrant it, at the request of the PEC and in consultation with the Chairperson of the CoW (ECOWAS, 2016). The PEC in consultation with the Chairperson of the CoW sets the dates for the meetings. Unless it decides to invite resource persons, experts and pertinent institutions to its meetings to enable them to contribute to its discussions on specific issues, the CoW meetings are held in closed-door or in open sessions, as the circumstances warrant. The Chairperson in consultation with other Members of the Council and the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security prepares the agenda for meetings. A simple majority of the members is required to form a quorum for meetings. Between the two Ordinary sessions, members of the CoW also hold regular consultations using suitable technology such as video conferencing/virtual meetings to facilitate the effective performance of their mandate.

In the performance of its role, the CoW is expected to collaborate with a range of actors both within and outside the ECOWAS Commission. Internally, apart from the Authority of Heads of States, the MSC, ECOWAS mediators and the PEC, the Council works with the ECOWAS Commission through the PAPS. The Directorate of Political Affairs in the PAPS specifically provides the administrative, technical, logistics and secretarial support to the CoW to effectively execute its mandate (Odigie, 2016).⁷ Therefore, apart from providing support in organising meetings/retreats/missions, and drafting meeting agendas, working documents and reports, the Directorate provides research, advisory and capacity-building opportunities on dialogue, mediation, negotiation and other relevant issues in order to enhance the work of the CoW (Odigie, 2016).

⁶ For more information see ECOWAS Council of the Wise Draft Plan of Action, October 2021–December 2022.

⁷ Before this, ECOWAS established the MFD in June 2015 to backstop mediation efforts undertaken by its mediation organs, member states, non-state actors and joint initiatives with other international organisations such as the African Union Commission (AUC) and the United Nations (UN). In January 2016, the structure was upgraded to a directorate in the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security .

In addition, the Directorate of Political Affairs is expected to facilitate networking and collaboration with AUC Panel of the Wise (PoW)/PanWise and other similar continental mechanisms. This is very important to align strategies, ensure coordination and build a common vision for resolving conflict at the regional and continental levels. However, this has been ineffective because the CoW has not been very active since its reconstitution in 2021. Beyond the PoW and PanWise at the continental level, the CoW is expected to work with other international actors such as the United Nations (UN) and national actors including peace infrastructures, CSOs, traditional and faith-based leaders, youth and women during its preventive diplomacy/fact-finding missions and sensitisation and engagements with relevant stakeholders. Nonetheless, the collaboration and interaction with this range of actors in creating synergies and strategies for addressing existing or emerging conflicts/disputes has been very weak.

Role of the Council of the Wise

The pool of eminent personalities constituting the CoW are expected to use their wealth of experience and good offices to, on behalf of ECOWAS, play the role of mediators, conciliators, and facilitators. They are also expected to give the PEC its independent opinion on relevant issues relating to the promotion of peace, security and stability in the region. However, the specific mandate of the CoW is defined by the PEC based on the missions to be carried out. By design, the CoW participates in fact-finding missions to member states as an instrument of conflict prevention and facilitates the creation of communication channels between parties in dispute with a view to preventing conflict escalation. They are also to use their good offices to encourage parties in conflict to embark on political dialogue, adopt confidence-building measures, initiate reconciliatory processes and, where possible, facilitate humanitarian responses (ECOWAS, 2016). In executing its mandate and functions, the CoW is expected to embark on missions at the request of the PEC, or through the PEC, by the MSC at the Heads of State level. The CoW is also required to regularly brief and consult the PEC on its activities to enhance the coordination of interventions. Overall, the expected role and initiatives of the CoW are to facilitate suitable action by the PEC and

to enhance existing efforts to contribute effectively to conflict prevention, management, resolution and the consolidation of peace.

Practically, in view of the short lifespan of the reconstituted CoW and given that not much information regarding its activities in the early years of its formation is available to the public, it is challenging to make any conclusive remarks on the impact of its interventions. Nevertheless, it is useful to note that during its formative years (under the Council of Elders), it was one of the instruments used by the ECOWAS Commission and the Authority to help defuse conflicts in West Africa. Specifically, members of the CoW were involved in mediation and conciliation in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau in the 2000s (Malu, 2003; Addi, 2005; Afolabi, 2009). For example, CoW member General Abdulsalaam Abubakar, the former Nigerian head of state, played an important role as a mediator in the Liberian peace process, and often intervened to break impasses that arose among the parties in conflict (Ndinga-Muvumba and Lamin, 2006). CoW members were also deployed by ECOWAS to observe elections in member states. A delegation of CoW members led by Sierra Leone's Speaker of Parliament, Elizabeth Alpha-Lavalie, for instance observed the presidential and parliamentary elections in The Gambia in September 2006 (Ndinga-Muvumba and Lamin, 2006:17). Other elections including in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Togo were observed by CoW members. CoW participation in these elections imbued the process with credibility and contributed to the relatively peaceful conduct of the elections, the acceptability of their outcomes and the peaceful transfer of power between incumbent governments and opposition political parties.

Since its reconstitution in 2021, some CoW members have been appointed as special envoys and mediators in particular crisis situations. A more recent example is the appointment of former President Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of Nigeria as ECOWAS special envoy to head its mediation mission in Mali following the military coups in the country (Premium Times, 2021). He facilitated dialogue with all Malian parties including former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the military junta, opposition leaders, religious organisations, and civil society groups to resolve the worsening socio-political situation in the country. While the role of former President

Jonathan resulted in the establishment of a transition government to oversee the restoration of civilian rule in Mali, it is unclear whether he performed the mediation role as the Chairperson of the CoW or as the former president of Nigeria and based on his great contributions to the maintenance of regional peace, security and stability.

The CoW has also participated in some of the ECOWAS election observation missions in The Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Benin and Guinea Bissau, among others, in line with the provisions of Article 14 of the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance on assistance to member states holding elections. For instance, CoW members were part of the 75 observers deployed to Guinea Bissau for the 4 June 2023 legislative elections (Reliefweb, 2023). Similarly, CoW members were part of the ECOWAS election observation mission in Liberia during the country's general elections on 10 October 2023 (ECOWAS, 2023). In all the observation missions, the CoW members avail their good offices to all stakeholders in the electoral process to ensure that the polls are conducted in a peaceful environment and in conformity with national, regional and international standards. While the success of these observation missions cannot be entirely attributed to the CoW due to the multiple actors involved, its roles cannot be underestimated.

Key challenges of the CoW

The CoW is faced with several challenges that affect its effective operations. One of the most notable challenges is the lack of adequate funding to support its activities and interventions. The CoW operates with an inadequate dedicated budget for the implementation of its activities. It depends mainly on financial support from donor partners that has been unpredictable and unsustainable. This has negatively affected its role in conflict facilitation, mediation and resolution to foster peace, security and stability in the region. Despite the growing peace and security challenges in some member states, such as Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the CoW work seems to be dominated by its participation in election observation missions instead of its core mandate. The CoW would require substantial resources to establish its relevance and impact in the region.

The CoW members' inadequate skills in and knowledge of mediation and conflict resolution, as well as the complexity and sensitivity of West Africa's security landscape which prevents them from effectively performing their roles, is yet another key challenge. The CoW members are selected based on their influence, experience and contributions to the region's peace and stability. The field of expertise of members cuts across different sectors including governance, security, business, communication, law, politics, media and economics. Therefore, most of them do not have skills in and adequate knowledge of the mediation processes and the intricate peace and security landscape of the region. As a result, although they have the gravitas, reputation, convening powers, wisdom and good offices to influence conflict or security situations, they often lack the requisite skills and knowledge to, for example, manage the peace process, defuse tensions, and facilitate parties' communication, cooperation and negotiations. Although an orientation session was organised for the reconstituted CoW members to enhance their knowledge, it was not enough to build the needed skillset and competence so that members can effectively play their roles.

The language barrier among CoW members is yet another challenge militating against the effective functioning of the Council. ECOWAS has three official languages: French, English and Portuguese. Members of the CoW operate and come from countries that speak these three official languages. Most of the members are not bilingual and even with those who are, it is often English and French. This has affected formal and informal communication among the CoW members and even during peace processes. The CoW often depends on interpreters but sometimes the meaning of their conversations with warring factions and among themselves is distorted or misinterpreted. For example, apparently while former President Jonathan was mediating the Malian crisis, he faced similar challenges in dealing with the French interpreters and this adversely affected the peace process (Mensah, 2024).

Another major challenge is the tensions that often exist between the appointer (ECOWAS), members of the CoW, and the governments. Appointing members to the CoW is the prerogative of member states'

governments. However, when there is a change of government, the new government often does not support the CoW member in some instances. This situation affects how members are used by ECOWAS to deal with conflict situations. For example, it is alleged that members of the CoW in Nigeria are facing this challenge. Former President Jonathan and Mrs Salamatu H. Suleiman who are current members of the CoW and members of the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) were appointed by President Muhammadu Buhari's All Progressive Congress (APC) government. Former President Jonathan, for example, received much more logistical support from Buhari's government when he was appointed mediator for the Malian crisis (Finnan, 2020). However, although it is the same political party in government but under the new leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, it is alleged that these two members of the CoW were not receiving the same level of support and acceptance from the current administration, and this limited their involvement in regional peace processes. Clear evidence of this is former President Jonathan's inactiveness in peace processes since the new administration came to power, as compared to the previous administration. Another dimension of this issue is the tense relationship between ECOWAS and the four suspended/sanctioned countries (Mali, Guinea, Niger and Burkina Faso) and how it is affecting the members of the CoW from those countries. As a result of the political developments in these countries, it has become extremely difficult for the members of the CoW to receive the necessary support from the transitional governments to actively participate in the activities of the CoW (Mensah, 2024).

There is also the challenge of cultural dilemmas that is often prevalent when members of the CoW engage actors with different, competing and even conflicting worldviews, beliefs, values, practices and ethical rules of conduct. West Africa is made up of people from different ethnic groups and religious persuasions including Christianity, Islam and African traditional religions (Oyedokun, 2024). These various ethnic and religious groupings have different beliefs, values and practices that guide how they relate to people from other groups. The same dynamics apply to how anglophones, francophones and lusophones relate to each other. These cultural, religious

and language dynamics have often created much sensitivity relating to the conduct, behaviour and communication during peace processes, and sometimes even delaying the conclusion of peace agreements. A typical example was the mediation role of former President Jonathan in Mali. As an anglophone and a Christian from the Ijo (Ijaw) ethnic group in Nigeria, he had to mediate a crisis in a francophone country that involved Muslims from different ethnic groups. At some point, it was reported that he faced some cultural dilemmas during the peace processes (Mensah, 2024).

The CoW also lacks an operational framework, dedicated secretariat at the ECOWAS Commission and an expert group with expertise in various fields including constitutional law, governance, security, gender and conflict management to support the effective execution of its mandate. Currently, the ECOWAS Commission, through the PAPS Directorate of Political Affairs, provides the administrative, technical, logistics and secretarial support to the CoW. While the Directorate of Political Affairs is trying its best to provide the needed support, it has not been very effective because of its preoccupation with other political matters in the region.

Conclusion

The CoW has been a key pillar of the ECOWAS peace and security architecture since its establishment in 2004. Its establishment was an attempt to resolve conflict issues using an African perspective and methodology (Malu, 2003). From the ECOWAS Council of Elders to the Council of the Wise, its work has been dominated by its participation in election observation missions across different countries in the region. However, most of the interventions attributed to the CoW are either done by some members or in conjunction with other ECOWAS bodies. In addition, the cooperation and coherence of its interventions with similar bodies such as the AU Panel of the Wise and PanWise at the continental level and national infrastructures for peace at the national level has been weak. Nevertheless, the CoW has enormous potential to contribute to ameliorating the worsening peace and security landscape in the region. It is therefore important to reinvigorate the CoW and its complementarity with similar bodies at the national and continental level in order to play a very

active role in West Africa. If this is not done, it is likely to suffer the same fate as the ECOWAS Council of Elders which became inactive because of some of the challenges (inadequate funding and dedicated secretariat) currently impeding the operations of the CoW.

To improve CoW's work, the following recommendations are made:

- ECOWAS should prioritise the CoW's work and provide them with predictable and sustainable funding to enable them to function effectively. The CoW could possibly be added to the ECOWAS budget as first-line recipients from a community levy to ensure their independence and sustainability. In addition, there should be a vigorous resource mobilisation from donor partners, businesses and private-sector actors in order to augment the CoW's allocated budget from ECOWAS.
- The CoW should strengthen partnerships with CSOs and academic institutions to organise regular capacity development programmes that match good offices with good skills. The programmes can focus on conflict management and resolution and other relevant areas including cultural diversity, communication and language issues in peace processes in order for the CoW members to enhance their skills and intellectual capacity. The CSOs in particular could also support the work of the CoW through policy advocacy and public education.
- ECOWAS should consider establishing a dedicated secretariat and expert support group to support and coordinate the work of the CoW.
- It is important for ECOWAS to consider establishing an independent panel of experts that could develop selection criteria to oversee the appointment of CoW members. This will ensure that the members are independent of governments.
- The AU should strengthen the collaboration, coordination and cooperation between the PoW, regional councils of the wise such as the CoW and national peace infrastructure such as national/local peace councils/committees in order to enhance coherence, complementarity and sustainability of peace and security interventions.

- The ECOWAS Commission should organise an annual lesson learned workshop for the CoW members and other relevant stakeholders to share knowledge and deepen appreciation of current dynamics in preventive diplomacy. 🌍

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