Symposium I: The Economic Community of West African States in its Fifties – Looking Back, Look Forward - Beyond Borders: Towards a Collaborative and Sustainable Maritime Future in West Africa

By:

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Introduction

The ocean and its resources support many sectors vital to the West African region, including fisheries and aquaculture, maritime transport and shipping, maritime security, coastal and maritime tourism, sustainable energy, mineral resources, and emerging marine industries. Collectively, these sectors are

called the “Blue Economy” (BE). The BE is a cornerstone of economic growth, sustainability, and security for the twelve coastal and island states and three land-linked countries in the region,[1] providing livelihoods for millions and serving as a primary revenue source for coastal and island states. The BE contributes 56% of the GDP of coastal states in West Africa, underscoring its economic significance. With one-third of the region’s population residing in coastal areas, its ocean and resources are essential to food security, trade, and long-term resilience, making them a crucial driver of sustainable development in West Africa.

The realisation that unlocking BE benefits is contingent on safety at sea, and sustainable exploitation of the ocean’s resources has driven the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – the regional bloc responsible for promoting cooperation, integration, and economic stability among its member states – to take a proactive approach to advancing initiatives that strengthen maritime security and ocean governance in the region. Such efforts include standard operating procedures related to maritime issues. Specifically, following the adoption of the African Union Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050) in 2012 by the African Union (AU, 2012), ECOWAS Heads of State convened in 2014 and endorsed the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy (EIMS). The EIMS serves as a strategic framework designed to comprehensively address maritime security challenges in the region by strengthening maritime governance, safety, and environmental management within the ECOWAS maritime domain. Further, in alignment with the African Union’s pronouncements that the BE is the “renaissance of Africa’s development”, in its Blue Economy Strategy, ECOWAS initiated the development of a draft strategic framework for the ECOWAS Blue Economy (ECOBESF) in 2022, which is aligned with the African Union Blue Economy Strategy (ABES), reflecting a coordinated approach to advancing the BE agenda across the region.

Although the positive strides made by ECOWAS in its 51 years of existence are worth acknowledging, some of which have already been noted in the foregoing paragraph, challenges remain, as what is agreed at the policy level is not always implemented or takes a very long time to implement, leading to fragmentation and loopholes in efforts to safeguard the resources in the region and the marine environment. In this contribution, I examine how ECOWAS can transition from an “ECOWAS of States” to an “ECOWAS of the People”, as

enshrined in its Vison 2050, by strengthening regional collaboration to build a shared maritime future that drives sustainable growth, employment, and security in West Africa. I first explore the key challenges and threats to a sustainable blue economy and maritime security before proposing solutions that leverage regional trade and security agreements. I conclude by highlighting how rethinking the current approach to regional cooperation on trade and security can reinforce the realisation of ECOWAS's vision of a people-centred community.

Challenges to a Sustainable Blue Economy and Maritime Security

With three land-linked ECOWAS countries—Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali—officially leaving the economic bloc in 2025, all remaining 12 states are coastal or island nations, underscoring the critical role of oceans in the economic resilience of West Africa. If strategically harnessed, the region's wealth of freshwater and ocean resources offers significant potential for sustainable food production, energy, transport, tourism, and other services. However, fragmented planning and execution of Blue Economy initiatives, such as hydroelectric power stations, maritime infrastructure, and maritime security efforts, have limited their potential. This has exacerbated economic vulnerabilities, governance challenges, and the effectiveness of initiatives to monitor, survey, and control activities in the maritime domain. Threats such as illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) fishing, piracy, environmental degradation, and weak regulatory frameworks undermine maritime security and sustainable development.

Fisheries is a source of food and livelihood for millions of people in West Africa. However, sustaining this relationship is threatened by depletion resulting from overfishing, especially through IUU fishing attributed to industrial vessels from distant water nations, devastatingly affecting both marine ecosystems, sustainable livelihoods and the economies of coastal states. IUU fishing activities include fishing in restricted areas, use of unlicensed vessels, transhipment, illegal fishing methods, and underreporting catches. The extent of the threat in West Africa is such that IUU fishing amounts to 40 to 65% of the legally reported catch, with 16% of fish exports from the region linked to transhipment at sea. In terms of the economic cost, the clandestine nature of the threat makes it difficult to ascertain; however, six countries – Mauritania,

Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and Sierra Leone – losing an estimated US$2.3 million per year to the threat, further compounding the region's struggles with poverty and food insecurity.

The safety and security of maritime activities are essential for harnessing the opportunities presented by the ocean. However, the threat of piracy and armed robbery at sea, including Petro-piracy—where vessels transporting petroleum products are specifically targeted— was once prevalent in West Africa. These acts of piracy, including kidnapping for ransom, undermine the sealine of communication, leading to West Africa, particularly Nigeria, being listed as a piracy hotspot. Since 2021, incidents of piracy and armed robbery have significantly declined, resulting in the delisting of Nigeria as a piracy hotspot in 2022. The reduction in piracy incidents is attributed to several key factors: the enhancement of legal frameworks and the strengthening of law enforcement capabilities and infrastructure at the national level. Additionally, cooperation and collaboration between states have been bolstered by operationalising the Yaoundé Architecture, which aligns with the agreements signed by the Heads of States of West and Central African countries in Yaoundé in 2013. This framework has facilitated information sharing and fostered collaboration and cooperation among states through joint patrols, with support from international partners. Despite the progress, the threat of piracy remains as pirates continue their operations, as limited naval assets, limitations around information sharing, inadequate staffing, insufficient equipment and unpredictable financing remain a challenge.

The utilisation of maritime infrastructure and domain for criminal activities, including drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, presents formidable challenges in West Africa. These illicit activities have profound security implications, undermining the peace and stability of the region. Notably, insurgent groups are suspected of engaging in these operations, particularly drug trafficking, working with organised criminal networks, deploying private vessels to transport cocaine worth billions of dollars from Venezuela and Colombia through Benin, Sierra Leone, and Togo to Europe, enabling these terrorist groups to fund their campaigns against state authorities. Relatedly, arms trafficking contributes to the proliferation of weapons, exacerbating conflicts and instability in the region. Human trafficking represents a grave violation of human rights, with traffickers exploiting

vulnerable individuals across borders. These criminal activities are intricately linked to broader security concerns, as insurgent groups leverage these illicit enterprises to fund their operations against governmental forces. These underscore the urgent need for enhanced regional cooperation and international support to combat these threats effectively and safeguard the peace and security of West African states.

As technological advancements continue to transform the maritime sector, there is a rising concern about cybersecurity within the domain. The increasing frequency of cyberattacks on ships, port networks, communication, and navigation systems presents a significant new threat to maritime activities, and West Africa is not immune to these challenges. Equally worth mentioning is a growing concern about the vulnerability of critical maritime infrastructure, particularly undersea cables. These cables are vital for global communication, commerce and data transfer, and their security is paramount. The threat to these infrastructures can arise from intentional sabotage or accidental damage caused by ships, especially fishing vessels. The consequences of such disruptions can be severe for regional economies, as evidenced by the 2024 incident where damage to undersea cables led to significant interruptions in internet access, banking services, and communication networks across eight West African countries, with Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Benin being the most affected.

While there are numerous threats to the sustainable exploitation of ocean resources and maritime security in West Africa, many of which are discussed in this report in this United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes report, the focus on the threats above is due to their pervasive and encompassing impact, with potential to destabilise the region, affecting economic development, social stability, and regional security.

The factors contributing to these threats are varied. Yet, one of the most notable is the lack of cooperation and collaboration between states, often stemming from political disagreements over maritime boundaries. These disputes can hinder effective joint action against transnational maritime threats. The absence of a hot pursuit agreement at the regional level further complicates efforts to combat security threats like piracy and armed robbery at sea. Hot pursuit allows the pursuit of suspected pirates into neighbouring

nations' territorial waters to continue. The Yaoundé Code of Conduct explicitly forbids such pursuit (see Article 6 para 3) even when chasing known or suspected pirates; some countries enter into bilateral agreements to circumvent this lack of regional agreement. Furthermore, while acknowledging progress, limitations in monitoring, surveillance, and control mechanisms continue to pose challenges in combating IUU fishing and related threats. These limitations are partly due to the lack of a legal framework commensurate with today's challenges, including inadequate interagency cooperation and collaboration. This deficiency hampers efforts to effectively establish comprehensive strategies to address maritime security threats.

Leveraging Regional Cooperation, Trade and Security Agreement

Prioritising deeper cooperation and collaboration in ocean governance is an effective route to combating security threats at sea and sustainable use of ocean resources. This approach is particularly advantageous given the transboundary nature of fisheries and criminal activities, which calls for collective management and response efforts across national borders. Three recommendations have been made for improving regional cooperation, trade, and security.

First, states should strongly consider Joint Management Agreements (JMA) to resolve protracted maritime boundary disputes rather than delimitation requests, especially when a peaceful resolution is not an option. Such agreements can facilitate cooperative resource management and reduce tensions, fostering a collaborative environment for addressing common challenges. While these agreements can be expensive to manage, Nigeria, Sao Tome, and Principe resolved their maritime boundary dispute through this means. They continue to enjoy cooperation and collaboration, including working together through joint operations to combat piracy and armed robbery at sea.

The emphasis on JMA is particularly pertinent due to the complex nature of delimitation requests. A notable example of this complexity is the ceding of the Bakassi Peninsula, an oil-rich region, to Cameroon following a prolonged conflict and diplomatic row between Nigeria and Cameroon. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Cameroon, thereby transferring sovereignty over Bakassi to it. Despite this ruling, thousands of individuals remain displaced, and

the Greentree Agreement—a bilateral accord intended to resolve the dispute—has yet to be fully implemented. Additionally, tensions persist between the two countries regarding fisheries governance. Nigerian fishers have accused Cameroonian law enforcement of excessive force and, in some extreme instances, of killing Nigerian fishers residing on the fringes of the Bakassi Peninsula for not paying levies. Further, Cameroon has been accused of encroaching beyond the designated Bakassi area to access oil wells in Nigeria. In response, the Nigerian Senate formed an ad-hoc commission on Tuesday to investigate what they describe as the illegal annexation of parts of Nigerian territory by the Cameroonian government, specifically the Mangrove islands of Efiat-Mbo in South-South Nigeria. The motion highlighted that over 2,560 oil wells and gas revenues, which rightfully belong to Nigeria, have been unlawfully exploited by Cameroon. Additionally, it was noted with concern that Cameroonian gendarmes enforce foreign laws on Nigerian citizens residing in the affected area. These issues and continuing challenges relating to the displacement of people would not arise if a JMA were in place.

In contrast, the maritime boundary resolution between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire exemplifies the effective use of JMAs. Although the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) resolved the maritime dispute in Ghana's favour, both countries have agreed to conduct regular joint inspections along their shared international maritime boundary. This collaboration aims to regulate offshore oil exploration, prevent unauthorised activities on the high seas, and mitigate potential future territorial disputes. Furthermore, the agreement facilitates ongoing cooperation on maritime security issues, including joint patrols and the right of hot pursuit.

Questions regarding maritime boundaries are likely to become more prevalent due to increased interest in seabed exploration, offshore energy exploration, and other blue economy activities. Therefore, it is imperative that ECOWAS countries consider JMAs a viable mechanism for resolving maritime disputes.

Second, closely related to the first recommendation, West African countries should consider negotiating fisheries agreements collectively as a bloc rather than as individual states. While the ECOWAS has made significant strides in managing its fisheries resources regionally through advisory bodies such as the Fisheries Committee for the West and Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC) and the

Sub-regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), limitations remain. For instance, this regional management approach has not yet been extended to negotiating fisheries agreements as a unified bloc. Negotiating fisheries agreements as a bloc has many benefits, including ensuring that the best economic benefit is accrued, as the current approach means countries can be significantly underpaid for agreement. The ultimate beneficiaries of agreement and licensing regimes are distant water nations. It is also useful for fisheries management as it ensures decisions on monitoring, surveillance and control of the activities of vessels operating in regional waters can happen at the regional levels.

An exemplary model of such collaborative negotiation can be seen in the Pacific Island nations, which operate under the Nauru Agreement, and parties to this agreement control the world's largest sustainable tuna purse seine fishery. This agreement enables the Pacific Island Nations – Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu plus Tokelau – to negotiate fisheries agreement and manage their fisheries resources as a bloc. Furthermore, it empowers them to monitor and patrol their waters collectively, strengthening their position in international fisheries management and negotiations. Adopting a similar approach could potentially enhance the effectiveness and bargaining power of ECOWAS countries in fisheries agreements.

Finally, ECOWAS should urgently prioritise negotiating a "hot pursuit" agreement as a unified bloc. This agreement is crucial to maintaining uninterrupted efforts towards ensuring maritime safety and security, particularly when criminals cross national borders at sea. Currently, within ECOWAS countries, cross-border maritime operations are restricted to joint patrol, which represents a significant vulnerability in the region's collective maritime security framework. This gap is precisely what the ECOWAS Integrated Maritime Strategy (EIMS) and the Yaoundé Agreement aim to address. Criminals who disregard maritime boundaries benefit from unrestricted movement within the maritime domain, whereas these boundaries constrain maritime law enforcement agencies and their patrol vessels.

In contrast, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has demonstrated the feasibility of such an agreement. Specifically, countries

within the Multinational Maritime Coordination Centres (MMCC) in Zone D – Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon, enjoy this benefit, as they have successfully implemented a hot pursuit agreement, as outlined in Article 6, paragraph 4 of the Technical Agreement creating Zone D, signed in Yaoundé in 2009.

Conclusion

The significance of the ocean for ECOWAS countries is evidenced by the fact that existing member states are either coastal or island nations. These countries possess substantial potential for sustainable development in freshwater and ocean resources. However, fragmented planning and execution of blue economy and security strategies have limited their effectiveness, exacerbating economic vulnerabilities and governance challenges.

The extensive economic losses attributed to IUU fishing underscore the urgent need for enhanced monitoring and regulatory frameworks. Although piracy incidents have declined due to improved legal frameworks and cooperation, they still remain challenging due to limited assets and inadequate information sharing in the region. Criminal activities such as drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking further destabilise the region, necessitating enhanced regional cooperation and international support to combat these threats effectively. The rise in cyber threats and the vulnerability of critical maritime infrastructure, such as undersea cables, highlight the need for robust cybersecurity measures.

To address these challenges and achieve the aspirations of “ECOWAS of the people,” prioritising deeper cooperation and collaboration in ocean governance is crucial. Considerations should thus be given to adopting Joint Management Agreements (JMA) as a default mechanism to resolve maritime boundary disputes, negotiating fisheries agreements collectively as a bloc, and establishing a "hot pursuit" agreement to enhance maritime security. These strategies can foster a collaborative environment for addressing common challenges and strengthen the region's position in international negotiations.

Footnotes

[1] Until January 2025, there were 15 member states in the ECOWAS region, with Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso all land-linked countries, leaving, there are now only coastal states remaining.

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