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*Models, Innovations and Challenges of
Intra-Regional Migration and Migration Governance*

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This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

From the time of its establishment, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has used the free movement of people, goods and services within West Africa as a yardstick for regional integration (Olawale, 2024; Aniche, 2022; Opanike, Adeloji & Adenipekun, 2015; Adepoju, Boulton & Levin, 2010; Olusegun-Bolarinwa, 2015). Rising uncertainty, caused by fragmentation in the global and regional geopolitical landscape, has brought discussion on ECOWAS, regional integration and free movement into sharper focus. Several factors are driving the urgency of these debates. They include the nexus between migration and development and the need to promote intra-African migration for inclusive socioeconomic growth and development (Musara & Maredza, 2022). By 2020, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) estimated that 7.6 million international migrants resided in West Africa.

Free movement in West Africa began to gain momentum in 1979 as part of an effort to eliminate obstacles to regional integration in West Africa. The long-term objective was to promote self-sufficiency in West Africa by creating a common integrated market for investment and making the region a primary destination for people, goods and capital. ECOWAS's free movement protocols have served as a model for the rest of the continent. In 2019, the African Regional Integration Index, a report by the African Union (AU), African Development Bank (AfDB) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), identified ECOWAS as the best-performing African regional organisation in facilitating the free movement of people.

Known as Regional Economic Communities (RECs), RECs are considered building blocks of the African Economic Community (AEC), the continent's main framework for establishing mutual economic development. Instruments such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) are key tools for achieving free movement of persons and goods (Uzomah & Abdullahi, 2023; Akinyemi & Akubor, 2023; Olawale, 2021). While ECOWAS has played a key role in supporting the AU's Agenda 2063, the recent withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS raises important questions about the future of the bloc's free movement protocol.

ECOWAS FREE MOVEMENT PROTOCOLS

“ECOWAS’s free movement protocols have served as a model for the rest of the continent”

Free movement within the ECOWAS region is governed by two main instruments: the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment,

and the 1998 Transhumance Decision. The Protocol was implemented in three phases over a transitional period of fifteen years. The first phase, which was implemented from 1980 to 1985, provided the right of Community citizens to entry and stay in ECOWAS member states for a maximum of 90 days without visa. The second phase, implemented from 1986 to 90, granted the right of residence of Community citizens to seek and take up paid employment in other ECOWAS nations. The final phase, which was implemented from 1990 to 1995, emphasises the right of Community citizens to establish businesses or engage in economic activities in other ECOWAS member states (Adepoju, 2015; Olawale, 2024; Aniche, 2022; Opanike, Adeloji & Adenipekun, 2015; Adepoju, Boulton & Levin, 2010; Olusegun-Bolarinwa, 2015).

ECOWAS’s free movement protocols have recorded significant achievements, such as the establishment of uniformed travel document like the ECOWAS travel Card, passport and National Biometric Identity Card [ENBIC]; the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (ECAM); and harmonising policies that enable vehicles to enter and temporary reside in a member State. ECOWAS’ free movement protocols have significantly impacted intra-regional mobility. Five out of eight West African migrants move within the region, with an estimated 84 per cent of ECOWAS citizens’ migratory movements directed to other member states (Alexandre, Alessia & Marion, 2015). Free movement has also improved the ease of doing business by reducing border checks and creating the most open visa regime of the AU’s eight RECs, according to the Africa Visa Openness Index.

The ECOVISA, a process of harmonising visa regimes across the ECOWAS subregion, is a notable advancement in West Africa’s migration governance. Since 2011, ECOWAS has committed resources towards the ECOVISA’s realisation, by convening an Experts’ Meeting on the implementation of ECOVISA and launching a study on the modalities for the harmonisation of visa regimes. As ECOWAS gradually closes in on the implementation phase of ECOVISA, its effective implementation will create a secure and sustainable environment for West African migrants and remove barriers to mobility, goods and services, particularly for Community citizens.

ECOWAS and Challenges of the Free Movement Protocol

Free movement of people and goods in West Africa has yielded benefits such as increased intra-regional trade and remittance flows. However, there remain challenges associated with its effective implementation. The widespread insecurity challenges in several West African States, such as the Boko Haram insurgency affecting Nigeria-Niger-Cameroon have negatively impacted free movement protocols (Philip & Uwa,

2022; Ochoga, Osimen & Pokubo, 2025).

In addition, irregular migration, cross-border smuggling and human trafficking has led several West African governments to introduce security measures that have stymied the free movement of people and goods (Sowale, 2018; Isioma & Olawale, 2022). Insecurity issues linked to transhumance have also affected the free movement of the Fulani ethnic group, stemming from the growing stigmatisation of herders in West Africa (Ohiri & Kazeem, 2024; Aniche, Alumona, Iwuoha, Isike & Nnamani, 2023). Poor physical infrastructure, especially on West Africa's road network, has also impeded the implementation of the free movement protocol (Arhin-Sam, Bisong, Jegen, Mounkaila & Zanker, 2022; Adepoju, 2011).

The implementation of protectionist economic policies has frequently created tensions among member states, undermined regional economic cooperation and jeopardised migrants' rights of establishment in other ECOWAS member states (Olawale, 2023). Ghana's enforcement of exclusionary economic policies, such as the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) Act, contravenes the spirit of the ECOWAS free movement protocol. West African migrants from Nigeria and other West African countries have faced xenophobic violence and trade-related insecurity stemming from the implementation of the GIPC Act, which de jure excludes Nigerian migrants from participating in Ghana's retail and trade sectors. In Sierra Leone, public sector works are exclusively reserved for Sierra Leonean nationals and work permits cannot be granted to ECOWAS citizens who wish to access public sector employment, except under special arrangements (Teye, 2015).

Free movement of people and goods has contributed to widespread smuggling in West Africa, to which governments have regularly responded by closing land borders and hampering the goal of integration. In 2019, Nigeria closed its land borders to the movement of goods, citing alleged smuggling operations as its justification for the decision. As the free movement protocol rests on adequate documentation, the presence of undocumented migrants in ECOWAS member states has led to growing securitisation and deportation across West Africa. For instance, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) announced in February 2025 that it had arrested and deported 378 illegal immigrants who it said were involved in "fraudulent activities."

CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRANSHUMANCE DECISION

The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, local conflicts, jihadist insurgencies and resource scarcity have significantly impacted the implementation of the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol. Tensions between herders and farmers have become a growing concern for ECOWAS members, prompting some to implement stricter security measures including increased border checks. These actions have had varied outcomes on pastoral mobility. Several West African countries such as Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea as well as some states in Nigeria have restricted and banned transhumance movement. In 2019, Benin banned cross-border transhumance in

order to curb intercommunal violence and promote safer livestock management. This measure aimed to reduce intercommunal violence between pastoralists and farmers and to promote safer livestock farming practices. Similarly, Guinea prohibited cross-border transhumance between January 1, 2025, and March 1, 2026, as a means of alleviating conflict between farmers and herders and managing environmental resources.

Recent developments suggest that there is considerable non-compliance with the ECOWAS Transhumance protocol such as the establishment of an International Transhumance Certificate as a requirement for entering national borders, and the use of the arbitration Commission or law court in settlement of transhumance disputes. Farmer-herder conflicts across West Africa have roots in non-compliance by herders with stipulations of the Transhumance protocol such as the absence of travel documents and widespread use of small arms and light weapons. A shortage of cattle corridors, grazing reserves and regional road networks across West Africa has stifled effective transhumance governance. In Nigeria, the government's effort to establish grazing reserves translated into ethnic identity conflict, leading further to the exclusion of Fulani herders from some States.

The inconsistent implementation of ECOWAS' free movement protocols has undermined its effectiveness. West African governments have been slow to adopt the ENBIC as a replacement for the ECOWAS Travel Certificate, despite its endorsement more than a decade ago, due to institutional and bureaucratic delays. The delays to adopting the ENBIC, in addition to a lack of political will among some ECOWAS members, continues to hinder progress toward the bloc's free movement goals.

THE RISE OF THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOWAS FREE MOVEMENT

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in January 2025, several months after they established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) has had an adverse effect on the bloc's free movement framework, by creating uncertainty about the future of protocols governing trade, migration and cross-border movement in West Africa. Meanwhile, the AES has announced plans to harmonise travel and identity documents to facilitate free movement for nationals of the three countries, while it has said that it will maintain free movement for citizens of ECOWAS members, subject to the laws of the three countries. Despite the lingering uncertainties over free movement of people and goods in West Africa, the ECOWAS and AES have acknowledged the need to safeguard existing regional integration arrangements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are provided to present solutions for the challenges of free movement in the ECOWAS region. The importance of the bloc's free movement

ECOWAS during the 50 years of its existence should be pursued with cognisance of the emerging geopolitical fissures in the region.

- 1. ECOWAS should strengthen the existing Directorate of Free Movement of Persons, Migration of the ECOWAS Commission and other related task forces to monitor and provide technical advice on free movement dynamics in the AES States.** They must collaborate better with other ECOWAS agencies like the Transport Directorate, ECOWAS Brown Card Insurance and the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism (ECOWARN).
- 2. ECOWAS must increase the role of ECOWAS Parliament from a dialogue forum to a significant decision-making body capable of establishing popular debate, dialogue and consensus on policy issues.** ECOWAS must also increase its citizen-oriented collaborations with civil society groups and other non-state actors to raise awareness among ECOWAS citizens on the vital importance of free movement protocols to peace, security and prosperity in West Africa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOUR

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