

PUBLICATION | OCT 2025

ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series

Introduction to the Series

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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

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a 15-member regional group that was established on 28 May 1975 to promote the integration and collective self-sustainability of the West Africa region. Established by the ratification of the Treaty of Lagos, ECOWAS became the continent's pioneer in implementing initiatives governing the free movement of people, goods, and capital after its members signed two Protocols in 1979, one on the Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment. Over time, ECOWAS has broadened its remit to address issues of regional peace, security and governance, and adopted the requisite norms, standards and institutional mechanisms needed to effectively tackle threats to regional stability. The adoption of two more groundbreaking protocols in 1999 and 2001 signaled a willingness by the bloc's leaders to take concrete steps toward institutionalising conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, and establishing democracy and good governance in West Africa.

ECOWAS is managed by an array of organs like an Authority of Heads of State and Government, a Council of Ministers and a Commission. The Commission is the main body tasked with implementing policy decisions taken by the bloc's leaders. It is the executive organ of ECOWAS, while the ECOWAS Parliament is the bloc's legislative arm and the Court of Justice is its judicial body. ECOWAS coordinates its activities with a range of specialised agencies like the West African Health Organisation, the West African Power Pool, the West African Monetary Agency and the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre. ECOWAS has developed a strategic partnership with civil society organisations in the region such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), which created an early warning and response system for conflict prevention in West Africa.

Despite these key achievements, the ECOWAS Commission continues to face significant obstacles in implementing its long-term goals. These include its limited organisational efficiency, insufficient resources and a negative public perception among regional publics, much of which believes that ECOWAS has selectively enforced its norms and principles and does not represent their interests.

Most notably, ECOWAS' effectiveness is constrained by a fundamental tension between its supranational mandate and the reluctance of member states to cede aspects of their national sovereignty. The bloc's members are often slow or unwilling to adopt and implement regional protocols, and tend to execute policies in national siloes. Although ECOWAS promotes the goal of a people-centred approach to regional integration and development, the perception that ECOWAS is a "club of heads of state" lingers among many West African citizens. In addition, the organisation's capacity is hindered by a dependence on foreign donors and entrenched local conflict dynamics that originate in domestic disputes but are significantly shaped by non-state actors and external actors.

"Despite several notable achievements, the Commission faces persistent challenges..."

These dynamics, as well as the shifting geopolitical landscape in the region and internal divisions within ECOWAS, are placing a strain on its mandate to accelerate regional integration in West Africa.

In recent decades, many have pointed to ECOWAS' inability to effectively adapt to evolving regional dynamics as a symptom of its growing legitimacy gap and a lack of capacity needed to fulfill its integration mandate. In that vein, the critiques made of ECOWAS can also be seen as a way to challenge the organization's historical order, and give it a new renewed sense of purpose in a changing regional and international landscape.

West Africa is experiencing significant stresses stemming from a combination of local, regional and global challenges. The region suffers from persistent security and governance challenges, food insecurity, climate emergencies and demographic pressures, all of which have adversely affected economic development. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, conflict in the Middle East, global trade wars and other international crises have amplified geopolitical instability to a degree that has negatively affected countries in West Africa. All of these factors have had detrimental effects on the peace-security-governance nexus in the region, and coincided with a rupture inside ECOWAS that poses the most significant challenge to its corporate existence since the bloc was formed in 1975.

This geopolitical fragmentation has completely reshaped the politics of global and regional economic integration, which is increasingly driven by strategic competition rather than cooperation. Meanwhile, African states and multilateral institutions are asserting their voices on the global stage and demanding an opportunity for the continent to shape the international order. Thus, the West Africa region needs an integrated policy approach to address the multiplicity and complexity of the obstacles to political stability, economic development and security that West African states are faced with.

In the context of ECOWAS' golden jubilee, this policy analysis series examines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that the regional bloc faces in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape and the ways in which it can anticipate and respond to them. It is motivated by a view that the ongoing shifts associated with the global order warrant greater policy attention and improved cooperation on the part of African states.

An important aim of the publication is to recall the vital role ECOWAS has played in shepherding regional integration in Africa, and the opportunity costs of failing to shore up its shortcomings in an evolving global landscape. Accordingly, the 14 policy papers reflect on how ECOWAS can partner with non-state actors in the region to address key challenges around economic and political integration.

An overarching question this essay series sought to answer is *how ECOWAS could adapt its current norms and practices, including its partnerships with West African actors (civil society organizations, private sector, citizens, local communities, youth and women) to address key challenges around economic and political regional integration amid an evolving global order.*

In making the case for a reinvigorated ECOWAS, it is important to remember the bloc's foundational ideal of solidarity and collective self-sufficiency among its member states. This would be achieved by advancing the development prospects of West African nations and improving the welfare of their citizens through policy development across multiple sectors.

Thus, the essay series contains papers in the following areas:

- 1. ECOWAS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT**
- 2. CULTURE**
- 3. MIGRATION AND FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE**
- 4. TRADE, INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND REGIONAL VALUE CHAINS**
- 5. CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE**
- 6. PEACE, SECURITY, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**
- 7. REFORMING ECOWAS**
- 8. HEALTH**
- 9. DIGITALIZATION**
- 10. CLIMATE AND ENERGY TRANSITION**
- 11. GENDER**
- 12. DEMOCRACY, INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE**

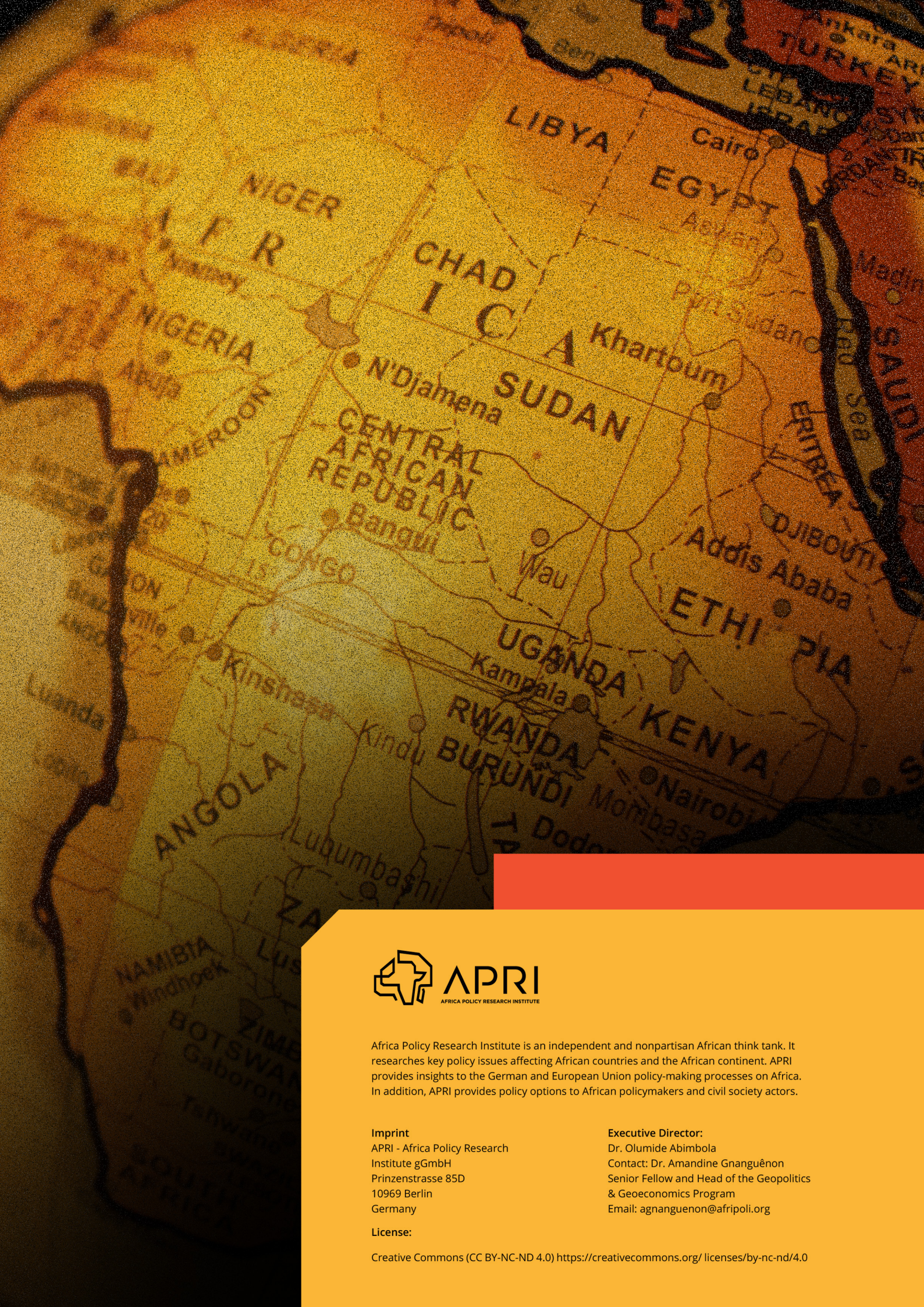
The diversity of topics covered in this series underscores that any effort to revitalise ECOWAS must pay close attention to the varying effectiveness of policies ECOWAS has implemented over the years, the ways in which different policy sectors interact, the broad range of objectives being pursued by ECOWAS and its members, and the complex interplay of domestic, regional and global forces.

Looking back at both ECOWAS' achievements and its shortcomings, the organization must be better equipped to work with West African states to deliver critical objectives, such as enhancing resilience to violent extremism, promoting inclusive democratic practices, developing regional value chains that foster industrial development and job creation and strengthening healthcare systems to better withstand pandemics and other emergencies. Only by doing so will ECOWAS fulfill its core objective of enhancing the self-sufficiency of the West Africa region and improving the lives of its people.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Amandine Gnanguênon is a senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Program. She is also an associate research fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and a nonresident fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF). She has more than 15 years of experience working on West African regional security and integration, and has published several policy briefs focusing on ECOWAS.

Christopher O. Ogunmodede is an editor, consultant and analyst of African politics, security and international relations with a specialized focus on West Africa. He has worked with governments, multilateral organizations, private sector organisations, think tanks, non-profit organisations and media organizations on three continents. Chris is the author of Penkelemesi, a newsletter about African politics, foreign relations, security and culture. He has appeared in a range of media outlets including the BBC, CNN, NPR, Al Jazeera, CGTN, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, TRT World, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, Reuters, Politico, GZERO Media, Arab News, Tagesspiegel, La Repubblica and France 24. He has made presentations at the Economic Community of West African States, African Union, German Federal Foreign Office, U.S. Department of the Army and U.S. Naval War College.



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Imprint

APRI - Africa Policy Research
Institute gGmbH
Prinzenstrasse 85D
10969 Berlin
Germany

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