

An Assessment of ECOWAS Early Warning and Crises Response Network (ECOWARN)
and Transborder Criminality in West Africa, 1999-2021

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Crisis Response Network (ECOWARN) in the fight against transborder criminality and conflicts in the West African sub-region with particular emphasis on the activities of the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP), which is implementing ECOWARN Mechanism in the sub-region. It argues that the existential degeneracy of cross-border conflicts and transborder criminality across the West African sub-region over the years has generated extensive debates in the literature on the structural and psychocultural factors sustaining the quasi-state of insecurity and has become a challenge in the trajectory of conflict containment and peacebuilding efforts. The increasing mobility of criminals, changing pattern of crime and the rate of crime and insecurity has shown the resourcefulness of ECOWARN and the need for solidarity among vivisected ethnic groups in addressing transborder security challenges. The paper concludes that though the early warning network gathers collaborative intelligence information on transnational crimes across the sub-region, ECOWAS member states have failed to respond early to such security threats in their respective domains which account for their persistent manifestations. For Early warning systems to have any meaningful impact in the fight against transborder crimes and criminality, there must be a corresponding early response to avert conflict situations to engender peace, security and socio-economic development without which early warning systems would be worthless.

Keywords: ECOWAS; Early warning system; Response network; Transborder crime; Security

Introduction

According to Zartman and Deng (91), the existential degeneracy and crises in Africa have been explained in terms of conflict triggers of issues of identity, nationalism, social structures, nation-building and a virulently hostile international system. Weak political institutions and dependence on natural resources and poverty are also triggers of conflict. More so, political consciousness, rising expectations and political participation are not

undergirded by the legitimacy and effectiveness of political institutions, a composite profile of instability and violence in Africa is thus, dialectically anchored on their insertion into the global system at a particular developmental stage (Ifesinachi 121). This is implied in the congenital susceptibility to neoliberal pressures and the structural subordination and dependence of the African states in the global capitalist market. The effect is that the devastating impact of conflicts has become a recurring decimal in the quest for national development. The incidence of cross-border conflicts in West Africa has been on the increase in the recent time bothering the challenges of conflict resolution and management.

Development and security challenges tend to regress as reported in the *International Human Suffering Index* developed by the Population Crisis Committee in Washington, DC, indicating that 90 per cent of the countries with the highest levels of human suffering are located in Africa (Ifesinachi 122). Thus, the forms of withdrawal and shrinking of political arenas arising from the states' declining capacity to maintain the conditions for the operation of its eroding productive conflict resolution, increasing inability to relate national means to policy ends, and decline in probity; depending on the conjunctural crisis has conducted to parallel systems (absence of unity of state power), the rise of private sector security governance, regional irredentism, insurgency and conflicts in the West African sub-region.

Over the years the problem of trans-border security has become thematic in conflict resolution, containment and peacebuilding in the West-African sub-region. This is because the nature of ethnic fragmentations within the location of the international boundaries gave rise to security challenges derived from their well-known paradoxical role as factors of conflicts and cooperation or wars and peace between states. The image paradox of boundaries and borderlands between adjacent states has been underscored by generations of border-instigated conflicts. Thus, the composite nature of the borderlands with proximate neighbours generates conflicts and insecurity which have attracted acrimony and outcry in the underutilization of the ECOWAS Early Warning System and Crises Response Network (ECOWARN) leading to the sub-region's frustration in forging appropriate and credible strategies for crime prevention, conflict containment and peacebuilding. Following from the above, therefore, is to provide a critical appraisal of community participation and crime or conflict prevention elements of the ECOWARN from a transnational perspective and structural model of a deliberative discourse of participation of ECOWAS member states. The transnational perspective converges with the structural model to provide an interface between state-centric international relations theory and strategies for addressing the challenges of transborder criminality, conflict containment and peacebuilding. It suggests, therefore, that the peace-building process and security yields result when based on principles that assume democratic reforms. In M. O. Bonchuk's analytical frame:

power should be mediated through a multifaceted infrastructure for peace to co-create through deliberative constructivist processes and a constituted social structure" (50). This transforms the multivariate claims and diverse interests into solidarity, especially among the divided but related ethnic groups who organize based on ethnic (and sometimes religious) solidarity (50).

This framework is useful for early warning and crisis response due to the increased mobility of criminal elements, changing patterns and increasing rates of transborder crime and conflicts which only reliance on individual member state security model has proved unreliable. For instance, the decade-long rebel sway in Sierra Leone began as an insurgency by a small group of radical youths led by a former army corporal of the Sierra Leonean army, Foday Sankoh. Charles Taylor who was then rebel leader in neighbouring Liberia provided the group with some logistic and tactical assistance. Indeed, the first gunshot that eventually ignited the conflict in Sierra Leone was fired at the Sierra Leone - Liberian border on March 9, 1991 (Okozie 213).

The sophistication of crimes across the West African sub-region requires some more focused instrument for tackling transactional threats to security that exist in the region through intelligence gathering to identify possible security threats. The establishment of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECO-WARN) in 1999 became imperative for a paradigm shift towards a culture of preventive peace-building mechanisms. The Network covers the entire Economic Community of West Africa States and the Sub-region including Cameroon and Chad. As stated earlier the concept of WARN was given impetus by the conflicts and transnational crime in West Africa from the late 1980s to mid-1990s. The war in Liberia for instance, eventually involved Sierra Leone, Guinea and Coted' Ivoire as a result of Cross-National ethnic and social linkages. Thus, the Nature of war and crime transcended national boundaries. Despite territorial sovereignty based on the old colonial borders, the strong ethnic, social, economic and political affinities could foster cross-border reprisals from 'brother' and 'sister.' Therefore, WARN focused on establishing a regional civil society network for early warning analysis and intervention in the West African Sub-region (WANEP II).

Clarification of Concepts

The need for conceptual clarification is to limit the level of ambiguity which is the hallmark of research, it is imperative to examine some key concepts. We begin with the concept of transnational crimes are crimes that have actual or potential effects across national borders and crimes that are intrastate but offend fundamental values of the international Community (Neil 14). For Payne, Transnational crime has a similar definition to global crime, it is a criminal activity conducted across borders of two or more countries. He further asserts that, as societies and individuals become more connected to one another, as a result of globalization enables criminal networks to work alongside legal global activities and to establish connections with many different countries (256). A closer look at the above definition suggests that, as the world population grows every year, so does the volume of exchange among people. The vast majority, of the exchanges are legitimate and beneficial, but a significant share of such exchanges is illegitimate or criminal. Transnational criminal markets crisscross the planet, conveying drugs, arms, trafficked women and children, toxic waste, stolen money and national resources etc. hundreds of billions of dollars flow through the world every year, distorting local economies, corrupting institutions and fueling conflict (Garuba 7).

Within the West African sub-region, Gani identifies some of the major transnational crime which poses a threat to national and sub-regional security including among others: Trafficking in person, Mass refugee movement/spread of HIV/AIDS, Drugs trafficking, Money laundering, Smuggling of goods and services, Illicit arms trafficking resulting to Proliferations of arms and ammunition, Armed robbery, Terrorism, Violation of human right, Inequitable and Illicit exploitation of natural resources, Illegal bunkering, Advance-fee and internet fraud, Forgery of travel documents. These factors he maintained create serious insecurity and conflicts in Africa which in turn retard sustainable development (278).

Early Warnings

Early warnings and crisis response methods are sometimes used interchangeably. Rupesinghe and Kumar defined early warning as the field of conflict resolution that seeks to forecast the outbreak of armed conflict, or at minimum, to detect the early escalation of violence, to prevent the outbreak or further escalation of violence to save lives (462). The initial conception of conflicts early warning materialized in the 1970s and 1980s but the field emerged on the international policy agenda after the cold war. Over the years both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been developed for conflict forecasting and conflict monitoring, qualitative methodologies typically draw on local area experts with extensive knowledge of the country or region. This is the approach taken by the international crisis group. In contrast, the quantitative method quantifies conflict trends and uses mathematical

techniques to forecast future trends of “events of interest” such as the onset of conflicts, for example, the Integrated Conflict Early Warning Systems ICEWS (Nyheim 14). Some approaches to early warning combine both qualitative and quantitative methodology, such as the ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) through her implementation partner West Africa Network for Peace Building (WANEP) which is the focus of our research work.

Insecurity

Insecurity is a state of being subject to danger or threat. Most scholarly articles on insecurity in the Cold-War era focused on the traditional approach to security which is state-centric. In this regard, insecurity can be conceived as threats to the state which often accounted for the race for arms and nuclear weapons to defend the state (Ajodo-Adebanjoko and Ugwuoke, 46). In the post-Cold War era, however, human security or a people-centred view of security has assumed centre stage. This is based on the fact that threats to human life emanate not only from situations of violent conflicts but other non-conflict sources (Saliu, Luqman and Abdullahi, 60). In this regard, insecurity refers to a situation of fear or anything that causes fear, or harm or can cause fear or harm to an individual. Such issues could be politico-strategic, socio-economic, or ecological; for instance, political instability, poverty, environmental degradation, lack of access to education, discrimination based on gender, diseases and unemployment.

It is pertinent to add that insecurity created by armed conflicts does not respect political or territorial boundaries but forms part of wider-regional conflict systems through dynamics that cross-border refugee fluxes, nomadic armed groups, criminal networks, illicit trade, etc. Though border policy is well established between states (diplomacy) and within them (governance), Bonchuk indicates that there is a policy gap in local community policing across border regions as strategies often focus on the state-centric perspectives as the central unit of analysis and intervention to the detriment of the grassroots or transnational paradigm. (57).

Border Security

The centrality of border security to states’ existence and survival is well recognised globally. This is because a state’s border properly policed by security and law enforcement personnel serves to separate unwanted elements: persons, goods, ideas, information and substances from the desired from entering or exiting its territory. The crucial importance of borders could be likened to the doors and windows that could be opened to allow easy ventilation and illumination when desired by the occupant (Chukwudi and Chukewuma 95). However, when left open and unguarded, could heighten the exposure of the occupant and the property therein to compromise by criminal elements. Traditionally, the concept of border security has largely been seen from the perspectives of threats and risks associated with activities perpetrated within or facilitated through a state’s land, sea and air borders. The emergence of cyberspace enabled by the processes of globalisation and its associated threats has radically changed the border security landscape. So much, so that the conceptualization of border security now encompasses concerns over what goes on air, land, sea and virtual space as they concern a nation’s interests and security. These arguments have been succinctly expressed in the works Otor, O. A. “Transboundary Data Flows and the Challenge of Cross-Border Security...” in *Ndunode: Calabar Journal of the Humanities*, (369-381) and Otor, O. A. “Piracy and Maritime Criminality...” in *Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies*, (207-225). In specific terms, the concept of border security has been defined by Okumu:

a prevalent condition devoid of factors or forces that are capable of undermining the safety and welfare of the people or integrity of assets of a state and achieved through a broad-based deployment of personnel,

technology and resources for control of the movement of persons, goods, and ideas across the air, sea, land and virtual borders of a state.

According to Okumu, border security consists of border control, border management, border monitoring, border protection and coordination to facilitate or limit the movements of people, animals, plants and goods in and out of a state to promote national security. Furthermore, the emphasis on the utilization of personnel, technology and resources implies that border security involves several activities, many if not most of which take place far away from the physical border itself. While personnel ensure the physical presence and response-ability; technology helps to guarantee domain awareness and rapidity of response, while resources are key to ensuring that the right number, quality and mix of personnel and technology are available for control, monitoring and management of national borders (Chukwudi and Chukwuma 95).

In other words, factors that could undermine a state's border security are many and varied. Threats of espionage, militancy, insurgency, smuggling and proliferation of small arms and light weapons, kidnapping irregular migration and human trafficking, inter alia, have ensured that concerns over border security remain at the forefront of national security discourse. Thus, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in Washington DC, border security has largely been thought of in terms of terrorist threats. This informed W. Spencer to postulate that "the border is the first line of defence against terrorism and the last line of a nation's territorial integrity" (110). Yet, there are other less obvious threats such as contaminated agricultural and food products which could severely impact the nation's farming industry of the population.

ECOWAS Early Warning and Response System (ECOWARN), the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and Cross-border Criminality in West Africa

Three years after the establishment of ECOWAS, the Protocol on Non-aggression and Mutual Assistance in Defence to promote peace and security in the sub-region was signed in 1978. Both protocols were designed to aid the settlement of both internal disputes and those initiated outside the region. However, successive outbreaks of intra-state conflicts and other emerging security challenges led to the call for the creation of a Sub-Regional Peace and Security framework using the 1993 revised treaty. As a follow-up to this demand the protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolutions, Peacekeeping and Security otherwise known as the Mechanism was signed on December 10, 1999, at Lome, Togo. The mechanism is composed of thirteen chapters with an elaborate legal framework that encompasses the entire security sector and its relationship to peace in the West African sub-region (WANEP 27).

Furthermore, ECOWAS also adopted a supplementary protocol on Democracy and good governance in 2001. This second protocol set out guiding principles for intra-state relations that would help foster participatory democracy, good governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights and a balanced and equitable distribution of resources. The imperative for a paradigm shift towards a culture of prevention was reflected in a provision in the 1999 protocol for the establishment of an early warning system. The Early warning department (EWD, formally known as the Observation and Monitoring Centre) located at the commission with four Zonal bureaus under which member states were been clustered. However, implementation of the mechanism for early warning only began in 2001, when the first personnel were recruited (WANEP 21).

The West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is a leading peace-building organization founded in 1998 in response to civil wars that plagued West Africa in the 1990s. Over the years WANEP has succeeded in establishing a strong national network in every member state of ECOWAS with over 500 member organizations across West Africa. The network places special focus on collaborative approaches to conflict prevention, and

peacebuilding, working with diverse actors from civil society, governments, intergovernmental bodies, women groups and other partners in a bid to establish a platform for dialogue, experience sharing and learning, thereby complementary efforts at ensuring sustainable peace and development in West Africa and beyond. In 2002, WANEP entered into a historic partnership with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) an inter-governmental structure in the implementation of a regional early warning and response system (ECOWARN) A Memorandum of Understanding between WANEP and ECOWARN was signed in 2004, for five years and has since been renewed for another ten years. This partnership constitutes a major strategic achievement for WANEP and ECOWARN as it offers the much-desired opportunity to contribute to Track I response to conflicts and policy debates in the West African sub-region (WANEP 24).

Whereas transborder or cross-border crime is a serious problem confronting the West African states which imperilled national security and regional stability, there may not be accurate data on cross-border crimes in West Africa; while there are growing concerns among national governments and inter-governmental organizations on the effects of cross-border criminal activities in the sub-region (Adetula 295). Our discussion on transborder crime will focus mainly on its effect, especially cross-border conflicts and general insecurity in West Africa. The West African region is home to quite a lot of trans-border crime including drug trafficking, natural resource smuggling, forgery, smuggling of contraband goods, small arms and light weapons (SALWS), prostitution, banditry, cattle rustling, carjacking, etc. In all of these, trafficking stands out as the phenomenon that is increasingly undermining peace, security and stability in West Africa. For instance, out of about 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide in 2004, it was estimated that about 100 million were in sub-Saharan Africa, with eight to ten million concentrated in the West Africa sub-region alone (Bah 3). Traffickers of the weapons are West African nationals and their foreign collaborations, given the ineffectual national security systems, porous borders and growing demand for arms by criminals and militant groups. Cartels specializing in arms trafficking have devised methods for concealing and conveniently trafficking arms across the borders in West Africa.

The audacity of militant groups operating in West Africa has grown with the proliferation of weapons in the Sahel region following the destabilization of Libya. The fall of Qaddafi has enabled the trickling down of weapons from state actors into the hands of non-state criminal elements in the Sahel. Libyan arms are obtained by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other mercenaries who have relocated and joined other terrorist groups such as Ansar Dine, Boko Haram, and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) emboldening and enabling them to mount more deadly attacks against state security apparatus and innocent civilians (Bowser & Sanders 215). The result has been that of general insecurity across the region as these terrorist groups operate across borders. With sophisticated weapons in their hands militants and bandits have been able to abduct both expatriates and locals for ransom through kidnapping. This deadly act is carried out across the border for instance; Boko Haram kidnapped a French family of seven in Cameroon on 19 February 2013, transported them to Nigeria and freed them on 18 April 2013 after allegedly collecting 3.5 million dollars as ransom (This day, 6). Related to the above is the escalating threat of Maritime piracy off the coast of West Africa. Unlike the pirate of yore today's sea bandits, in the region use technology to track their prey, sneak alongside ships in speed boats, armed with machine guns, rocket launchers and grenades; and board vessels with grappling irons. Once aboard, pirates plunder or ransom cargo and terrorize crew. Commenting on some of the factors that drive this problem Charlie Carpenter observed that:

Grinding poverty that makes piracy look like easy money, technological changes that make it easy for non-state actors to take on state cooperation, and the collapse of state governance in many parts of the world. But more

importantly, is the simple lack of global coordination to address the problem(11).

The activities of pirates cut across the region, because oceans are radically transactional, ungoverned spaces, no one state has the power to quell piracy on its own, hence it needs a collaborative effort to address the problem in the region.

Furthermore, West Africa's drug smuggling routes have been linked to most of the conflicts in the region as they provide opportunities for militant organizations to generate funds. West Africa is now a major transit hub and destination of drugs coming from Latin America. Transportation is done by land, air and sea. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) claims that cocaine seizures in West Africa peaked in 2007 with 47 tons netted. At least fifty tons of cocaine worth 2 billion dollars transit through West Africa per year, with about one ton slipping through the "narcotic state" of Guinea Bissau (UNDDC 76). The arrest of a former Chief of Guinea-Bissau Navy, Rear-Admiral Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto by the United States Drug Enforcement Agency for drug trafficking as well as the seizure by United Kingdom Border Force officials of Cocaine worth over 17 million pounds at the Port of Tisbury in Essex both in April 2013, signpost a dangerous trend (Carpenter 12). Other forms of transactional criminal activity that originate from, transit through or are destined for West Africa include cigarette smuggling, human trafficking/smuggling, (including illegal migration), counterfeit medicine, and money laundering also a major challenge in the region due to corruption, weak governance and deficient rule of law institutions. These trafficking flows contribute to instability as well as sustain terrorism and conflicts in the region.

The imperative of addressing security challenges has inspired the adoption of several regional mechanisms and instruments for enhancing security, development of good governance and conflict prevention, management and containment in the West African Sub-region. One of these instruments is the protocol relating to mechanisms for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security signed in 1999 which eventually gave birth to the ECOWAS early warning and response network (ECOWARN). Considering the mode of operation of trans-border criminals, there is a need for collaborative intelligence gathering. This will require an open-source between nation-states against the older method of keeping information secret from nation-states. ECOWARN has risen to this challenge sharing intelligence security reports of potential threats across the West African sub-region.

West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the principal partner of ECOWARN working with over 550 member organizations and a dozen well-functioning national network offices in almost all ECOWAS Member countries has become the backbone of ECOWARN. It has produced independent credible and accurate early warning analysis, alerts and incidents report about the activities of trans-border criminals across the West African Sub-region. However, it is one thing to provide useful information about possible negative development that requires, in the case of trans-border crime and conflicts situation, it is another thing to take necessary precautionary measures to avert or reduce probable harmful consequences of an impending or potential conflict. This is one of the major challenges facing ECOWARN. The political will of the state to act on the information given on an impending situation has always been the problem. For an early warning system to be any meaningful value there should be an alert function Yaqub put it succinctly:

Timely alertness to potential conflicts is central to an early warning system which, to make meaning, must be complemented by early political action; such alertness underlines the predictive capability of any early warning system to that extent. Therefore, early warning should not be seen as an end in itself; but rather, as a tool for preparedness, prevention and mitigation of conflicts,

the efficiency which is predicated upon a clear methodology for data collection, analysis and information exchange (71).

Colliers further explicate that:

... the real problem in coping with crime or conflict situations is less early warning than early action. The purpose of early warning, therefore, is not to confidentially inform the authorities involved that a problem is developing but to create a regional and international will and momentum to do something about the deteriorating condition (70).

This explains why, despite the information gathered by ECOWARN on transnational crime and potential conflict, most nation-states in the sub-region have failed to nib such conflict in the bud because they lack political will. Furthermore, over the year the absence of a strong regional police force has been one of the greatest challenges facing ECOWAS as a regional organization. Member States are still responsible for the security of their borders and coastlines. Most nation-states lack the necessary manpower and logistics to tackle transborder criminality which has grown larger in scale and sophistication in their areas of operations.

ECOWARN, through its implementation partner, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), have organized several workshops and seminar on transnational crimes and criminality. In October 2010, ECOWARN organized a strategic-level seminar on 'Transnational Crime and Human Security' in partnership with the African Centre for Strategic Studies in Accra Ghana. The Seminar brought over 74 participants from 13 West African countries, the United States and the United Kingdom as well as Civil Societies Organizations (CSOs) across the sub-region and beyond. Worried about the spate of transnational criminality in the sub-region, the seminar explored the linkages between organized criminal activities and the financing of terrorism given the vulnerability of the region and put forward three remarkable proposals:

- (a) X-rayed the initiative led by West African states and requested ECOWAS, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and foreign security assistance partnership to build African capacity to combat transnational crimes.
- (b) Raised a serious level of awareness, to develop the political will and support capacity development in combating transnational crimes within the ECOWAS sub-region.
- (c) Proposed means of enhancing national coordination and international collaboration against transnational crime (WANEP 3).

As lofty as these proposals and recommendations may be, the challenge has been that of implementation. Therefore, the challenge has not been the lack of requisite regional frameworks and instruments to respond to transnational threats but rather the failure and lack of political will to address the underlying factors contributing to the outbreak of these crimes and the complex linkages between them.

Conclusion

The study examined the need for national and regional development and security as well as the utility of early warning for transborder crimes and border security management between Nigeria and her proximate neighbours. The study proceeds from the analytical framework of borders and borderlands literature and implications of the repressive apparatus of the peripheral security state and its corresponding disdain for popular participation, solidarity and communication feedback in border security management. The utility of early warning systems for border security management was examined. Early warning was seen as detecting, monitoring and forecasting early signs of conflicts and crimes through local initiatives. In this regard, the need for vigilance, cross-border conflicts and transborder crimes awareness and proactive sensitivity in threat detection is seen as the way forward. There is no doubt that the ECOWARN as a new paradigm shift from the militaristic methods of fighting

crime through a culture of preventive diplomacy and collaborative intelligence gathering on potential threats has helped in conflict management across the West African borders. However, there is still much to be done in the areas of response to those security threats, especially transactional transnational crimes.

Accordingly, the view taken is that the development of early warning systems for conflict and border management is a categorical imperative for vigilance, democratic sustainability and political and sub-regional stability. To that extent, therefore, the following is recommended to help ECOWARN in the fight against transnational crimes and criminality.

- (a) Establishment of a regional intelligence fusion centre for warehousing intelligence and information on Transnational Criminal activities to inform the proactive response.
- (b) Initiate partnerships with central and North African states to develop a robust tri-regional mechanism for combating the flow of drugs, arms, weapons exposure and fighters in the Sahara Desert.
- (c) Reforms and professionalization of state security forces to ensure rapid response to crises.
- (d) Implementation of targeted development interventions in border communities to earn their goodwill to support government and civil society's efforts by providing useful information about transnational criminals.
- (e) Evolution of broad-based strategic communication or information operations strategy to counter growing extremism and Jihadist narrative radicalizing the minds of impressionable youths.
- (f) Government should strengthen all institutions and processes that promote efficiency, accountability and transparency in the management of national resources across West Africa.
- (g) Finally, broadening and democratization of the political space to accommodate people and groups that have been marginalized along ethnic, religious or political lines across the states in West Africa.

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