

The Economic and Political Drivers Behind the Formation of New Regional Groupings and Their Influence on the Sustainability of ECOWAS

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Abstract

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has historically been central to promoting economic integration, political stability, and regional cooperation among its fifteen member states. Recent formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, however, threatens growing fragmentation of the region and raises basic questions regarding the sustainability and continued viability of ECOWAS. This study probes the political and economic origins of these new regional alignments, with particular focus on disaffection with ECOWAS interventions, divergent security interests, economic disparities, and shifting global allegiances.

With a qualitative research methodology, the study is based on secondary data collected from scholarly literature, formal communiqués, regional agreements, and policy briefs. In addition, key informant interviews between diplomats, political analysts, and policy analysts were conducted to validate and complement the analysis. Content analysis was employed to monitor patterns and themes from the exploration of political contestation, economic divergence, and disintegration of regional cohesion.

The outcome shows that dissatisfaction with ECOWAS due to perceived political bias, marginalisation in economic terms, and retaliatory measures against military rule states has forced some states to seek other alignments. Moreover, the growing role of external players such as Russia and China has further complicated the regional geopolitical environment.

The report recommends a series of strategic changes such as institutional reform for equitable representation, participatory security dialogue, developmental imbalances reduction policies, realistic democratic transition paradigms, and increased public engagement. The challenges of today threaten ECOWAS' solidarity but also hold the potential for redefining its mandate and reinforcing its legitimacy in the evolving regional context. ECOWAS must reinvent itself if it is to remain a pillar of West African integration and stability.

Keywords

ECOWAS, Regional Integration, Political Discontent, Economic Divergence, Security Cooperation and Regional Sustainability

Introduction

Regional integration has been the cornerstone of economic and political policy in West Africa, with ECOWAS at the heart of it since the establishment of the organization in 1975. ECOWAS

has the aim of promoting economic integration, regional stability, and peace among member countries. However, the regional coordination landscape is evolving with new emergent regional orders because of various economic as well as political factors.

This presents a number of key questions in regards to sustainability of ECOWAS as well as its ability to fulfil its mandate in the light of a more sophisticated regional environment.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the primary objective of advancing economic integration and cooperation between member states. ECOWAS has, over the years, expanded its mandate to include political stability, conflict management, as well as promoting peace and security in the region. These aside, regional cooperation in West Africa is confronted with a turning tide. The establishment of new regional alignments, such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, attests to the dynamism of regional politics and economies in West Africa. These phenomena raise defining questions regarding the viability and effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional institution.

New regional groupings are established by a number of economic and political drivers. Economically, countries in specific sub-regional regions strive to address specific challenges and benefit from opportunities through a chosen cooperation. The G5 Sahel of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger is an example, having been created to harmonize security and development initiatives in a region plagued by terrorism, susceptible to climate change, and economically underdeveloped [1]. Such regional groupings aim to focus resources, harmonize policies, and initiate joint programs specifically addressing the special needs of their member states.

Politically, new regional groupings emerging are usually a result of governance issues, security concerns, and geopolitical considerations. The Mano River Union, for example, was revived to address the effects of civil wars and to promote peace and stability among its member states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire [2]. Political stability and security concerns are primary determinants of such unions, where countries attempt to cooperate with nearest neighbours in a bid to achieve mutual security and stability.

The implications of these new regional configurations for ECOWAS are varied. On the negative side, they can cause fragmentation and competition for resources, which deteriorate the general cohesion of regional integration steps. On the positive side, they can reinforce ECOWAS's efforts by addressing specific regional issues more effectively and providing new layers of cooperation and security. It is crucial that policymakers and stakeholders comprehend the economic and political forces shaping these structures and their impact on ECOWAS as they attempt to navigate through the shifting dynamics of regional integration in West Africa.

The study seeks to explore the economic and political factors behind the formation of new regional blocs and their significance for ECOWAS sustainability. Through an examination of the drivers and implications of the process, the study would prefer to enlighten on how ECOWAS can develop and consolidate its mandate towards regional integration and stability against changing dynamics [3].

Statement of the Problem

Appearance of new regional aggregations in West Africa, such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, reflects shifting

economic and political forces that challenge the sustainability and unity of ECOWAS. These aggregations often develop as a reaction to specific regional security concerns, economic interests, or political sympathies and can lead to dispersed regional cooperation.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established with the altruistic vision of developing economic integration, political stability, and social progress of member states. More importantly, in recent years, the creation of new regional unions such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union has created dynamics that test the sustainability and consistency of ECOWAS. These new groupings, which were created in response to specific economic and political needs, have a tendency to overlap ECOWAS's mandate and offer a splintered regional framework. Such fragmentation is an obstacle to the unified approach that ECOWAS has struggled to offer in West Africa [4].

The economic imperatives to deliver targeted economic cooperation and development have led to the formation of new regional coalitions. For example, the G5 Sahel made up of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger was formed to address domestic security and development matters peculiar to the Sahel. The grouping seeks to pool resources and synchronize efforts towards countering terrorism, mitigating the impacts of climate change, and promoting economic development. Similarly, the Mano River Union, revitalized to address post-conflict needs of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, prioritizes peacebuilding, security, and economic cooperation within the Mano River basin.

Political, new groupings are a response to governance, political stability, and responding to geopolitical pressures. These configurations are likely to form from a perceived need for more localized and effective schemes of cooperation that can more effectively deal with some regional issues than broader frameworks like ECOWAS. The geopolitical landscape, defined by extraneous donors and actors from outside, also shapes new realignments.

The growth of new regional alignments poses a serious challenge to ECOWAS. These involve potential duplicity of action, competition for resources, and the potential for having disjointed policies that undermine the objective of regional integration. Additionally, the existence of multiple regional groups with overlapping mandates leads to inefficiencies and dilutes the impact of regional cooperation endeavours. It is imperative to know the political and economic forces that propel the formation of these new groupings and their implications for ECOWAS in order to develop approaches that can ensure maximum effectiveness and sustainability of regional integration in West Africa.

Therefore, this study will investigate the political and economic incentives for the formation of new regional groupings in West Africa and analyse their implications for ECOWAS sustainability. By examining these dynamics, the research will provide insights into how ECOWAS can re-model to address the evolving regional landscape and remain a rock of regional integration and stability. It is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders planning to ensure ongoing regional integration and stability to understand the impetuses driving these new realignments and what they bode for ECOWAS in order to comprehend the political and

economic forces driving the emergence of new regional structures in West Africa. This paper aims:

- To identify the economic and political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings in West Africa.
- To assess the impact of these new groupings on the sustainability and effectiveness of ECOWAS.
- To provide recommendations for enhancing the resilience and relevance of ECOWAS in the face of emerging regional dynamics.

This research is significant since it addresses the present issues threatening ECOWAS, a significant regional institution in West Africa. By exploring the economic and political drivers driving new regional dynamics, the research provides keen analysis of the evolving regional cooperation context. The study will provide guidance for policymakers, regional policymakers, and international actors on how to best improve ECOWAS and its sustainability in the midst of evolving regional dynamics. The paper provides the literature review, methodology, results, discussion, findings, conclusion, recommendations and suggestions for further studies [5].

Literature Review

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been a central institution tasked with economic integration, political stability, and peace in West Africa since 1975. The area is now becoming increasingly complex with the establishment of new alignments such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union. These new formations have come into being due to some economic and political concerns, which pose implications to ECOWAS's effectiveness and sustainability.

Among the economic explanations of the creation of these new regional constructs are filling niche regional concerns and capitalizing on special economic opportunities. As a case in point, the G5 Sahel coalition of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger seeks to harmonize security and development efforts within the Sahel, which also faces its own set of issues such as terrorism and climate change [6]. Similarly, the revived Mano River Union of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire seeks to promote peace and economic cooperation in the post-conflict Mano River basin.

Political interests also play a significant part in the formation of these new alignments. These include efforts to foster political stability, governance, and security within specific sub-regions. The geopolitical influence of external powers and global donors also determines these alignments because countries seek to align themselves with favourable powers in a bid to address their unique challenges.

The advent of these new groupings at the regional level poses challenges and opportunities for ECOWAS. On the negative side, there is a potential risk of fragmentation and duplication of efforts, which can erode the collective approach that ECOWAS seeks to promote. Overall, however, these new groupings can supplement ECOWAS by handling particular regional matters better and delivering further layers of cooperation and security [7].

This literature review strives to examine the economic and political forces behind the establishment of new regional clustering

within West Africa and the significance on the sustainability of ECOWAS. Through examining the dynamics, the review aims to have a sharp sense of the evolving nature of regional cooperation and the extrapolation of how ECOWAS will be a part of the future of the region.

Economic Drivers

The economic justification for establishing new regional alignments often stems from the need for enhanced economic cooperation and development. Countries in specific sub-regions could seek to form more focused, smaller economic unions to be able to manage shared economic opportunities and problems more effectively. The G5 Sahel alliance of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, for example, was formed to promote development and security collaboration in the Sahel region with shared economic and security concerns.

The formation of new sub-regional groupings in ECOWAS is highly influenced by various economic factors. These influencers are on the basis of the need for specialized economic cooperation, economic growth, as well as tackling some economic challenges that are unique to specific sub-regions in West Africa. The literature review here explores these economic driving forces in great detail and uses a range of academic sources in an attempt to better understand what is compelling the driving factors.

Regional Economic Integration and Specialised Cooperation

One of the key economic reasons for the establishment of new regional groupings is the pursuit of more specialised and effective economic cooperation. More specialised and smaller groupings are able to fine-tune their policies and programs to the particular needs and requirements of their member states more effectively than larger, more diverse organisations like ECOWAS. For instance, the G5 Sahel comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger was formed in order to coordinate development and security programs within the Sahel [8-10]. The region presents unique issues of desertification, food insecurity, and terrorism that require specialized and coordinated effort.

The smaller regional groupings can also permit more economic integration among countries with similar economic structures and development ambitions. This can lead to more efficient resource allocation, less cumbersome regulatory settings, and greater trade and investment flows within the sub-region. Thus, these groupings can achieve economic outcomes that could be harder for larger organizations like ECOWAS to accomplish as they must cater to a greater number of member states with diverse economic profiles.

Meeting Economic Needs

The second powerful economic impetus is the need to meet tangible economic challenges which regional efforts at a larger scale cannot adequately handle. Therefore, revival of the Mano River Union, which includes Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, was necessitated by a need to spur economic growth and recovery in a region severely devastated by civil wars. The focus on post-conflict reconstruction, economic stabilization, as well as regional trade in this specific grouping allows for more targeted interventions and aid.

Economic disparities among ECOWAS member states also help in forming new alignments. Those states with similar economic development levels and similar economic challenges may find it beneficial to form alliances that allow for more effective sharing of resources and more specialized economic policies. This approach can help in addressing the deficits in infrastructure, limited market access, and the need to diversify the economy.

Enhancing Economic Development

Economic development is at the heart of the forces driving regional cooperation. New regional groupings often form with the intention of enhancing economic growth and development across member countries. By focusing on specific economic sectors or development goals, these groupings can adopt more effective strategies and projects. For instance, the G5 Sahel's focus on sustainable development projects, including agriculture and infrastructure, aims to spur economic development in an area that has long lagged behind the rest of West Africa [11-15].

In addition, regional clusters are likely to receive more foreign investment and support than individual countries. Together as a collective, these clusters will have the ability to negotiate better aid, investment, and terms of trade agreements and hence achieve greater collective economic development opportunities. This negotiating power is a key economic advantage in forming new regional coalitions.

Thus, economic forces of new regional groupings in ECOWAS are varied and reflect the complexity of the economic landscape in West Africa. The need for specialized economic cooperation, the desire to address specific economic problems, and the pursuit of increased economic growth are all compelling factors that lead countries to form new unions. It is essential that policymakers and stakeholders know these economic drivers as they navigate the evolving dynamics of regional cooperation and try to make the ECOWAS model effective and sustainable as a tool to foster regional integration and development.

Economic disparities among the ECOWAS member states also facilitate the formation of new clusters. Countries with similar economic features and development ambitions might cluster to obtain more targeted economic policies and programs. This can lead to better resource allocation and economic integration on a sub-regional scale.

Political Drivers

Political factors also play a significant role in the formation of new regional unions. Political stability, governance issues, and security concerns all lead the countries to seek more cooperation with other surrounding countries. For example, the Mano River Union was reactivated in the early 2000s to address the effects of civil wars and the promotion of peace and security in its member nations, which include Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire.

Geopolitical factors also come into play, as nations may ally due to political interests or foreign influence. Dominant power and international organizations' influence can create regional alignments, as nations align themselves with nations that provide political or economic support.

The establishment of new regional configurations within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is not

motivated by economic factors alone but by a range of political drivers. The political incentives are the calls for improved governance, pursuit of regional stability and security, geopolitical drivers, and pursuit of political autonomy and sovereignty. This literature review explores these political incentives, providing an in-depth analysis based on scholarly literature.

Enhanced Governance and Political Stability

Part of the most crucial political drivers of the establishment of new regional aggregations is the quest for enhanced governance and political stability. Specialized, small aggregations are a vehicle through which member states can initiate governance reforms and political measures that best match their local environments. For example, the G5 Sahel that comprises Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger was established to address Sahel-relevant governance and security issues. This group allows member states to cooperate more synchronously towards policies and initiatives focused on stabilizing their political environments.

Political stability is an important regional cooperation determinant as it makes the political climate that facilitates economic development and societal progress. By establishing new regional dynamics, states are in a position to make joint efforts aimed at ensuring political stability through common security policies, conflict management mechanisms, and democratic norms of governance. This will help to smoothen the danger of political instability spilling over into neighbouring states and thereby boost regional stability and peace [16, 17].

Collective Defence and Regional Security

Security concerns are another significant political driver for new regional groupings. In regions plagued by terrorism, insurgency, and cross-border crime, countries have a tendency to attempt to form alliances that are capable of providing a collective defence against these threats. The G5 Sahel, for instance, was created with the primary objective of mobilizing military and security capabilities in an effort to combat terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel region. By sharing their capability and ability, member states are able to enhance their total security capacity and address security issues better.

Mano River Union, with Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, was reaffirmed because of the genuine need for post-conflict reconstruction and regional security cooperation. The focus on peacebuilding, security sector reform, and former combatants' reintegration indicates the political imperative to achieve lasting peace and security in a region with widespread conflict.

Geopolitical Dynamics and External Influence

External actors' influence and geopolitical dynamics also play a significant role in the shaping of new regional configurations. Nations tend to ally in reaction to changing geopolitical tensions and foreign powers' and international donors' involvement. For example, the formation of the G5 Sahel was facilitated by international actors such as France and the European Union, who have a stake in securing the Sahel region to prevent the spread of extremism as well as in securing their strategic interests.

The participation of external actors can provide new regional groupings with the financial and technical means to implement

their projects. It can also establish dependencies and dictate the political agendas of the groupings. Understanding the geopolitical interests and role of external actors is important in understanding the political forces behind the formation of new regional alliances.

Political Autonomy and Influence

The desire for political clout and independence is yet another essential driver of the establishment of new regional clusters. Less powerful states or small states within a large organization like ECOWAS may seek to form new combinations in their bid to be more politically influential and prominent. By forming or joining smaller regional clusters, such states can have greater voice in decision-making processes and regional ventures. This political autonomy allows them to proactively seek their national interests more and extend their influence in the regional context.

The political forces behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS are complex and reflect the complex political context of West Africa. Improved governance, regional security, geopolitical forces, and the search for political autonomy and influence are some of the major drivers compelling countries to form new groupings. Understanding of such political forces is significant to policymakers and stakeholders as they find their way through the evolving landscape of regional cooperation and seek to assure the sustainability and efficiency of ECOWAS in its quest for regional integration and stability.

Impact of Emerging New Regional Groupings on the Sustainability of ECOWAS

The emerging new groupings present both threats and opportunities to ECOWAS. On the other hand, these groupings can lead to fragmentation and duplication of efforts undermining the overall coherence of regional integration endeavours. Alternatively, they can complement ECOWAS endeavours by addressing specific regional issues more effectively and increasing layers of cooperation [18-23]. These groupings, established to address specific economic and political issues, can impact ECOWAS's capacity to promote regional integration, economic development, and political stability. This review of literature investigates the impact of these emerging regional blocs on ECOWAS sustainability, drawing from a variety of academic sources for a general understanding.

Fragmentation and Overlapping Mandates

One of the main problems in the creation of new regional groupings is fragmentation within the broader regional architecture. ECOWAS, as a comprehensive regional institution, tries to unite disparate member states under a single agenda. The creation of smaller, specialized groupings like the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, however, leads to overlapping mandates and duplicated efforts and creates fragmentation and vulnerability to ECOWAS.

The G5 Sahel, for instance, aims at security and development issues unique to the Sahel and are potentially coincidental with ECOWAS's broader mandate on regional defense and economic integration. Overlap may lead to competition for resources and attention, and therefore lead to diluted impacts of ECOWAS initiatives and regional challenge management inefficiencies.

Complementarity and Enhanced Focus

Conversely, however, new regional alignments can also complement ECOWAS's initiative by providing more specialized and targeted responses to specific regional issues. The Mano River Union, which was reactivated to engage in post-war reconstruction as well as economic cooperation among Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, highlights the potential of smaller alignments focusing on niche regions that require specialized intervention. These specialized interventions have the potential to enhance regional stability and development, which eventually benefits ECOWAS's larger agenda.

In addition, the existence of specialized regional clusters allows ECOWAS to leverage their localized experience and technical expertise in addressing specific problems. This collaboration can lead to superior and more sustainable solutions that can impact the entire West African region.

Resource Allocation and Financial Implications

Establishment of new regional blocs has significant economic implications for ECOWAS. The blocs compete for the same scarce resources, e.g., funds from foreign donors and technical aid. G5 Sahel with support from international actors such as France and the European Union is heavily funded for its security and development initiatives. Such competition could strain ECOWAS's finances and dilute its ability to implement its own programs efficiently.

In addition, the allocation of resources to numerous regional groupings can lead to dispersed financial aid, weakening the combined impact of regional development programs. Financing ECOWAS activities in a sustainable manner requires careful coordination and planning with new regional groupings to avoid duplication of efforts and achieve maximum utilization of resources.

Political Influence and Autonomy

The political power and autonomy of ECOWAS also have an influence from new regional formations. Weaker states or smaller states within ECOWAS can attempt to enhance political power and autonomy by participating in or forming other groupings. This can shift power dynamics in ECOWAS and affect decision-making.

In addition, the engagement of foreign actors in backing emerging regional arrangements has the potential to alter the geopolitical landscape and determine ECOWAS's political independence. France and the EU's backing of the G5 Sahel emphasizes the way external forces can affect regional dynamics, possibly impacting ECOWAS's capacity to execute its policies independently.

Regional Integration and Cooperation

Despite difficulties, new regional clusters can also facilitate enhanced regional integration and cooperation through better management of local affairs. Mano River Union's focus on post-war reconstruction and economic cooperation can result in regional stability, ultimately sustaining ECOWAS's overall agenda of integration.

Besides, these alignments serve as pilot projects for new policies and practices that, if successful, could be copied and applied at the ECOWAS level. This bottom-up approach to regional inte-

gration allows learning and experimentation, resulting in more efficient and sustainable regional solutions.

The implications of new regional alignments on the sustainability of ECOWAS are multifaceted, containing constraints as well as opportunities. While these alignments risk fragmentation and competition for resources, they also offer the potential for enhanced concentration, differentiated strategy, and more intense regional cooperation. An understanding of these processes is crucial to policymakers and stakeholders navigating the evolving dynamics of regional cooperation and attempting to deliver ECOWAS the sustainability and efficiency in promoting regional integration, development, and stability in West Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The research is premised on two core theories, namely Neofunctionalism and Regionalism Theory, which explain the dynamics of regional integration, disintegration, and realignment.

Neofunctionalism, as developed by Ernst Haas (1958), assumes that integration in a sector of society or economy creates pressures for further integration in associated sectors a process that has been called "spillover." Regional integration, in terms of the theory, is not merely an outgrowth of state policy but is based on the action of supranational institutions, interest groups, and transnational actors. Within ECOWAS, the failure to accomplish substantial spillover effects, especially in economic and security matters, can be considered as a frailty of the integration process and a determinant of fragmentation.

Neofunctionalism also places great emphasis on political will and institutional adaptation in sustaining integration. ECOWAS's inability to effectively address regional security crises, such as those of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, may demonstrate an institutional collapse, leading member states into alternative groupings [24-30].

New Regionalism Theory (NRT), as theorized by scholars such as Hettne and Söderbaum (1998), deals with post-Cold War regionalism, highlighting the operation of non-state actors, security, and exogenous elements in regional construction. NRT recognizes regionalism in the modern world to be complex and influenced by international political economy, contrary to the state-oriented approach of traditional theory. To this end, the re-adjustment of fresh formations in West Africa such as the Alliance of Sahel States can be attributed as a response to domestic security and governance challenges, in addition to external readjustments, such as tactical alignments with non-Western states.

Both Neofunctionalism and New Regionalism Theory offer an advanced explanation of sustainability challenge problems of ECOWAS, such as institutional capacity, national interest, and changing international geopolitics.

Use of Neofunctionalism and New Regionalism Theory (NRT) is highly relevant for this study because they provide a robust analytical model for understanding the evolving dynamics of regional disintegration and integration in West Africa, particularly in relation to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The use of theoretical framework to study is: Neofunctionalism explains why ECOWAS has not achieved deep integration after

decades of existence. According to the theory, regional integration depends on spillover effects where cooperation in a particular area leads to further cooperation in other areas. This study uses this concept to test whether the early economic integration of ECOWAS has effectively spilled over into key sectors such as security, political governance, and infrastructural development. Lack of proper spillover, particularly in responding to security crises in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, upholds the theory's postulation that integration decelerates when institutions are inflexible or not capacitated to expand.

Neofunctionalism also highlights the significance of supranational institutions and the requirement of political will. ECOWAS's inability to impose democratic standards or enforce adequate responses to security challenges (e.g., military coups or terrorist insurgencies) illustrates institutional unresponsiveness. This has resulted in political grievances among member states and has prompted realignments, such as the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States. These trends are consistent with neo-functional predictions of disintegration in the context of a deficit of functional efficiency and political commitment.

New Regionalism Theory applies in that it broadens analysis from state actors to external powers, regional security threats, and civil society dynamics. It allows this research to consider how external geopolitical actors (e.g., Russia, China, Turkey) and insecurity (e.g., jihadist insurgencies) influence re-alignment of alliances in West Africa. By signalling how non-ECOWAS interests are shaping new regional blocs, NRT provides insight into why a traditional regionalism is being challenged in today's multipolar and security-focused world.

Together, the two theories provide a solid platform for policy recommendation. Neofunctionalism guides recommendations on consolidating ECOWAS's political integration and institutional capacity, while NRT guides recommendations on creating space for outside alliances as well as enhancing regional security cooperation. These theories thus provide the pragmatic significance of the study in recommending how ECOWAS remains relevant and sustainable in a changing West African context.

Theoretical framework is crucial in both prescriptive and explanatory contributions to the study. While Neofunctionalism helps assess ECOWAS' intra-dynamics and institutional ability, New Regionalism Theory helps to assess broader external pressures, new alignments, and multi-actor forces. These perspectives combined offer a balanced methodology to comprehend the current and future regional integration dynamics of West Africa.

Conceptual Framework

This study examines the political, economic, and security dynamics of undermining or supporting regional integration efforts under ECOWAS in West Africa. The conceptual model seeks to follow the complex dynamics between internal and external drivers that shape member state actions and the effectiveness of ECOWAS.

Core Concepts and Definitions

Regional Integration (Dependent Variable)

This is the level to which ECOWAS can attain objectives of political stability, economic cooperation, and regional integration. Indicators are implementation of free trade protocols, peace-

keeping operations, conflict resolution, policy harmonization, and overall credibility of ECOWAS institutions.

Political Drivers (Independent Variable)

Political considerations such as issues of governance, legitimacy of state leadership, perceived domination by certain countries (e.g., Nigeria or Côte d'Ivoire), and ECOWAS's strict implementation of democratic process (e.g., sanctions on military regimes rule) all influence member states' allegiance to the organization.

Economic Drivers (Independent Variable)

Economic inequality between member states, ECOWAS's poor impact on poverty alleviation, intra-regional trade barriers, and exclusion of Sahelian or landlocked countries often induce some states to seek other alliances for greater economic gain.

Security Issues (Moderating Variable)

The proliferation of armed insurgencies, terrorism, and transnational criminality in the Sahel has exposed fissures in ECOWAS's collective security architecture. Security governments increasingly view ECOWAS interventions as interfering with sovereignty rather than with assistance mechanisms for peace.

External Influence and Geopolitical Shifts (Moderating Variable)

The growing interference of external powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey in West Africa has reshaped the geopolitical landscape. They offer military, financial, and political support without the governance and democracy demands of ECOWAS and Western institutions.

Formation of Alternative Alliances (Intervening Variable)

Indignation against ECOWAS has given rise to new alliances such as the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger). The new alliances prefer to articulate sovereignty, collective defence, and shared political ideology over ECOWAS.

Causal Relationships

Political and economic discontent are prime causes of alienation. Security and external pressures temper the effect of discontent by making the secession desire stronger or weaker. The emergence of alternative alignments acts as a spur to erode ECOWAS's institutional grip.

Lastly, all the above forces coalesce to render regional integration under ECOWAS sustainability.

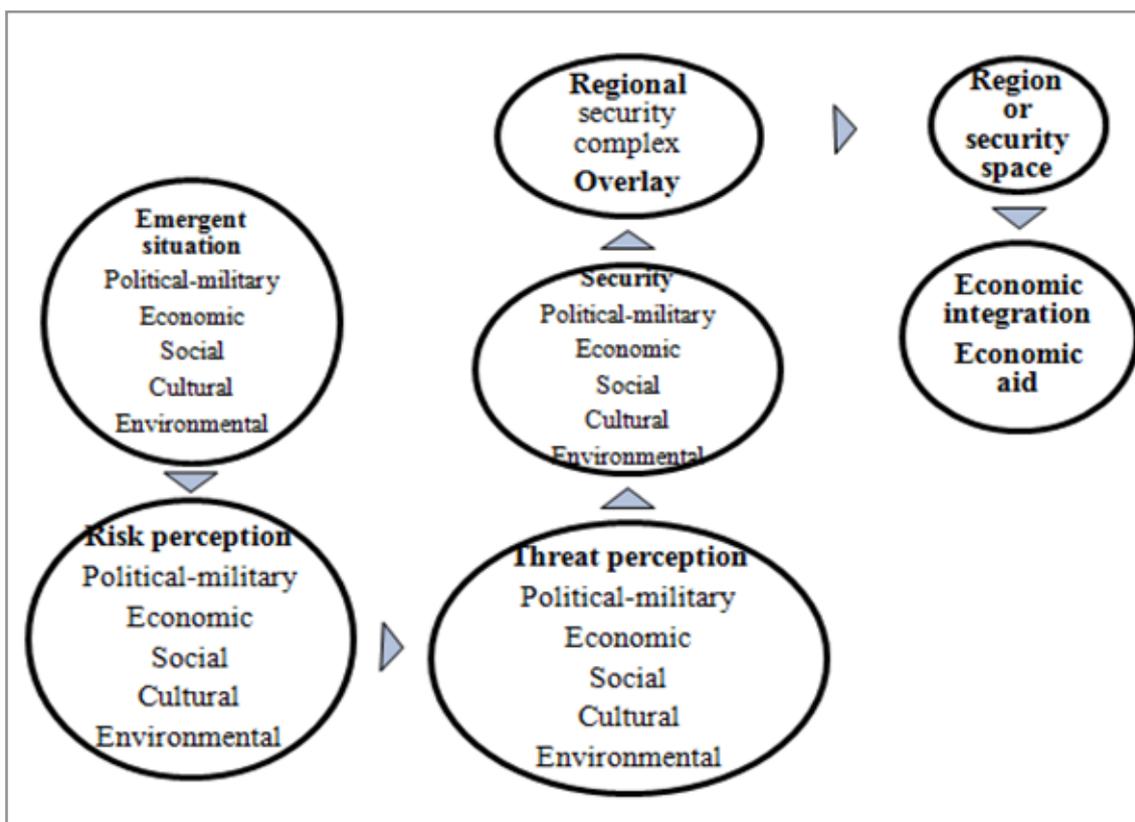


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Researcher's Construct, 2025

- **Emergent Situation:** It is the initial stage where potential security issues initially begin to be realized. These issues may emerge in various dimensions: Political-military, Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental. This stage reflects instability or transformation that is not clearly realized to be a security threat.
- **Risk Perception:** In this stage, actors or states begin perceiving possible risks in the same five spheres. These are however not seen as imminent dangers, but as dangers that could become threatening if not mitigated.
- **Perception of Threat:** Once the risks are heightened or persist, they are perceived as threats. That is, stakeholders now

perceive that their economic, political, or social stability is at risk. The same five dimensions remain the central ones.

- **Security:** Now there is a clear perception of security concerns in the five dimensions. Security measures cooperative or unilateral are taken against these threats.
- **Regional Security Complex:** When the threats are extensive or interlinked across a number of states, they form a Regional Security Complex (RSC). It is such a system that the security of a state is connected with others, and reactions within one state affect the others. An overlay can be when external actors (e.g., international powers or institutions) impose their influence or control over security frameworks within the region.
- **Region or Security:** This equates to an agreed regional economic or security space in which coordinated measures, partnerships, and even institutional mechanisms are designed to manage collective security challenges.
- **Economic Integration / Economic Aid:** In response to the security threats and as a bid to create long-term stability, the region could move toward economic integration: Common market, regional trade agreement, or economic union. Economic Aid: Financial assistance of external actors for stabilizing or rebuilding an economy. The diagram shows how a region evolves from early signs of insecurity to formal regional integration through a sequence of perceptions (risk → threat), institutional responses (security), and regional cooperation (economic aid/integration).

Relevance to ECOWAS and the Study

In ECOWAS and other nascent regional formations: Emergent crises like terrorism or coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger engender risk and threat perceptions. When ECOWAS is not able to respond strongly, member states may re-align into new groupings (e.g., Alliance of Sahel States) a process indicating the shift to a new regional security complex. The ultimate goal might be economic union or external aid from outside ECOWAS organizations (i.e., alliances with Russia, China, etc.).

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research approach drawn from evidence gathered using interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. Policymaker, regional experts, and officials from ECOWAS and the emerging regional alignments are interviewed to assess motivations and impacts of these alignments. Focus group discussions of actors from the various member states bring in diverse perspectives regarding regional integration dynamics through WhatsApp and zoom conference. Documentary analysis of policy documents, reports, and scholarly literature puts the findings into perspective and inform the analysis.

This study aimed to explore the economic and political reasons driving the formation of new regional arrangements within ECOWAS and their impact on the sustainability of ECOWAS. To this effect, this study employed a qualitative research approach through the utilization of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. This study design allowed for a proper comprehension of complex dynamics.

The study adopted a case study research methodology that focuses on specific regional clusters such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union. This was chosen to provide in-depth study of the specificity and diversity of these clusters, as well as their

interaction with ECOWAS. Qualitative research design was appropriate as it will enable the exploration of participants' views, experiences, and perceptions, which are very important for the identification of drivers and influences of the political and economic.

Policy-makers, ECOWAS officials, representatives of newly emerging regional groupings, regional integration experts, and West African politics experts are interviewed through in-depth interviews. In these interviews, specific information on:

- The justifications for the emergence of new regional combinations.
- Perceived impacts of the combinations on the viability of ECOWAS.
- Hindrances and opportunities that emerge from the emergence of these combinations.

The interviews are semi-structured, implying being capable of permitting flexibility in going deeper into specific areas of concern without losing track of prioritized items consistently across all interviews.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) are conducted with a number of stakeholders, from civil society organizations, academic experts, to the business community. The FGDs aimed to get a diverse range of opinions and initiate discussion on:

- The sufficiency of ECOWAS and new regional arrangements in addressing regional issues.
- The potential for cooperation or competition between ECOWAS and new arrangements.
- Recommendations for promoting regional integration and cooperation.

Each focus group consisted of between 6-8 participants to allow dynamic discussion while ensuring that everyone in the group gets an opportunity to contribute. The research was guided through discussions by the researcher to ensure that all points of interest are addressed.

ECOWAS policy documents and reports. Strategic plans and action plans of emergent regional groupings. Reports and publications of international agencies, think tanks, and research centres. Media press releases and articles. This strategy provides contextual background and allows triangulation of data obtained from FGDs and interviews. It also helps the identification of trends, patterns, and shifts in regional integration policies and processes.

The data collected through interviews, FGDs, and documentary analysis are analysed using thematic analysis. This involves:

- Transcribing all interviews and FGDs to ensure accuracy and allow for in-depth analysis. Systematic coding of the data to identify major themes and sub-themes relative to the economic and political drivers of new regional re-alignments and their impact on ECOWAS. Analysis of coded data to establish patterns and relationships of themes. This helps to make sense of the underlying aims and implications of new regional alignments. Comparing and contrasting findings from different data sources in a bid to enhance validity and reliability of findings.

The study adhered to ethical research practice in offering informed consent to all the participants, anonymization, and re-

spect for participants' rights to withdraw at any moment. Ethical clearance is issued by the respective institutional review board before conducting data collection.

The study also acknowledged potential limitations, including the inability to reach high-level decision-makers and the qualitative data's subjectivity. The limitations are tried to overcome by applying multiplicity of data sources and rigorous data analysis procedures.

The research approach chosen, which is by using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to obtain information, provides a good foundation for exploring the economic and political reasons behind the formation of new regional clusters within ECOWAS and their role in the sustainability of the organization. The integrated methodology guaranteed an adequate examination of the complex dynamics involved, making valuable contributions to the existing knowledge in regional integration and cooperation in West Africa.

Results

The results section presents the findings from the qualitative research conducted to examine the economic and political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS and their impact on the sustainability of ECOWAS. This section synthesizes the data gathered from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis, providing a comprehensive overview of the key themes and insights that emerged from the study. The findings are organized into several thematic areas to systematically address the research objectives. These thematic areas include the motivations behind the formation of new regional groupings, the perceived benefits and challenges associated with these groupings, their impact on ECOWAS's sustainability, and the broader implications for regional integration and cooperation in West Africa. Each thematic area is supported by direct quotes from participants, detailed analyses of documentary sources, and relevant contextual information. This approach ensures that the results are grounded in empirical evidence and provide a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

The subsequent sections will delve into the specific findings related to economic drivers, political drivers, and the overall impact on ECOWAS, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges posed by the emergence of new regional groupings. These insights form the basis for the discussion and conclusions that follow, offering valuable implications for policymakers, regional organizations, and stakeholders invested in the future of regional integration in West Africa.

Economic Drivers

The qualitative analysis of the economic drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS involves synthesizing data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. This explored the key economic motivations that have led to the establishment of groupings such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, highlighting how these drivers influence regional cooperation and the sustainability of ECOWAS. The economic drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings include the pursuit of targeted economic development strategies, addressing specific regional economic challenges, and enhancing economic cooperation

among countries with similar economic profiles. These drivers are evident in the establishment of groupings like the G5 Sahel, which aims to coordinate development efforts in a region with unique economic and security challenges [31].

Economic Integration and Targeted Cooperation

Interviews with policymakers and officials from both ECOWAS and the new regional groupings reveal a consensus on the need for more targeted economic cooperation. Several respondents emphasized that smaller groupings allow for more specialized and effective economic policies tailored to the specific needs of member states. For instance, one respondent from the G5 Sahel Secretariat noted:

- "The economic challenges in the Sahel are unique. We face issues like desertification and food insecurity that require specialized interventions. By focusing on our specific region, we can implement targeted policies that address these challenges directly."

This sentiment was echoed by officials from the Mano River Union, who highlighted the importance of addressing post-conflict economic reconstruction in their member states. The specialized focus of these groupings enables them to allocate resources more efficiently and design policies that are more attuned to local economic realities.

Addressing Economic Challenges

Interviewees also pointed out that new regional groupings emerge to address specific economic challenges that are not adequately tackled by broader organizations like ECOWAS. An official from the Liberian Ministry of Finance remarked:

- "After years of civil conflict, our economic infrastructure was in ruins. The Mano River Union has been instrumental in coordinating reconstruction efforts and ensuring that our economic recovery is on track. ECOWAS provides a broad framework, but the MRU gives us the focused attention we need."

This targeted approach allows for more effective interventions in areas such as infrastructure development, market access, and economic diversification, which are critical for the economic recovery and growth of member states.

Regional Economic Development

Focus group discussions with representatives from civil society organizations, academic experts, and business leaders highlighted the role of new regional groupings in promoting regional economic development. Participants noted that these groupings can implement projects and initiatives that are specifically designed to foster economic growth in their regions. A participant from a regional development NGO commented:

- "The G5 Sahel has launched several sustainable development projects, including those focused on agriculture and infrastructure. These projects are crucial for economic development in a region that has historically lagged behind."

Focus group participants also discussed the potential for these initiatives to create economic opportunities and improve livelihoods in member states. By focusing on key sectors such as agriculture and infrastructure, new regional groupings can stimulate economic activity and contribute to broader regional development goals.

Enhancing Trade and Investment

Another theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the role of new regional groupings in enhancing trade and investment within their regions. Participants noted that by creating more integrated and harmonized economic policies, these groupings can attract investment and facilitate trade. A business leader from Sierra Leone remarked:

- "The Mano River Union has made significant strides in harmonizing trade policies and reducing barriers to trade. This has made it easier for businesses to operate across borders and has attracted investment to the region."

This enhanced trade and investment environment not only benefits the member states of the new regional groupings but also contributes to the overall economic stability and integration of the West African region.

Policy Papers and Strategic Documents

The analysis of policy papers and strategic documents from new regional groupings such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union provides further insights into the economic drivers behind their formation. These documents emphasize the need for targeted economic policies and the importance of regional cooperation in addressing specific economic challenges.

For example, the G5 Sahel's strategic framework highlights the focus on sustainable development and the coordination of economic policies to address the unique challenges of the Sahel region (G5 Sahel Strategic Framework, 2016). Similarly, the Mano River Union's development plan underscores the importance of post-conflict economic reconstruction and regional economic integration [32].

Reports from International Organizations

Reports from international organizations such as the African Development Bank and the World Bank also shed light on the economic drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings. These reports often highlight the need for targeted interventions in specific regions to promote economic development and address structural economic challenges. For instance, a World Bank report on the Sahel region emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation in addressing food insecurity and promoting sustainable agriculture [33].

These documentary sources corroborate the insights gained from interviews and focus group discussions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the economic motivations behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS.

The qualitative analysis of the economic drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS reveals a multifaceted set of motivations. These include the need for more targeted and effective economic cooperation, the desire to address specific economic challenges, and the pursuit of regional economic development. By focusing on these economic drivers, new regional groupings can implement policies and initiatives that are tailored to the unique needs of their member states, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of regional integration and economic stability in West Africa.

Political Drivers of New Regional Groupings within ECOWAS
This qualitative analysis explores the political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Drawing on data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis, this section examines how political factors influence the establishment and operation of groupings such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, and their implications for regional integration and cooperation.

Political Autonomy and Influence

Interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers and representatives from new regional groupings and ECOWAS, reveal that political autonomy and influence are significant drivers. Smaller or less influential states within ECOWAS may perceive new groupings as platforms to assert their political agendas and enhance their voice on regional issues. An official from a member state of the G5 Sahel noted:

- "Joining the G5 Sahel allows us to collaborate closely with neighbouring countries on security and development, where we have a direct stake. This enhances our political influence within the region and strengthens our position in ECOWAS discussions."

This sentiment underscores how political drivers can shape the formation of new regional alliances as states seek to wield greater influence over regional policies and initiatives.

Regional Security and Stability

Political motivations also include the pursuit of regional security and stability. Focus group discussions highlighted that new regional groupings often emerge in response to specific security challenges that require coordinated efforts beyond ECOWAS's broad mandates. Participants emphasized the role of the G5 Sahel in addressing security threats such as terrorism and transnational crime, which pose significant challenges to regional stability [34].

A focus group participant commented:

"The G5 Sahel is crucial for enhancing regional security cooperation, especially in combating extremist groups operating across borders. This political commitment to security is essential for our collective stability."

Governance and Policy Flexibility

Another political driver identified through interviews and documentary analysis is the desire for enhanced governance and policy flexibility. New regional groupings may offer member states more agility in decision-making and policy implementation compared to the larger, more bureaucratic structures of ECOWAS. This flexibility allows member states to respond more swiftly to regional challenges and tailor policies to their specific needs.

Political Cohesion and Coordination

Focus group discussions highlighted the importance of political cohesion and coordination among member states of new regional groupings. Participants noted that these alliances foster closer political ties and mutual trust, which are essential for effective regional cooperation. A participant from a civil society organization remarked:

"The Mano River Union has played a critical role in promoting political dialogue and reconciliation among member states. This political cohesion is crucial for maintaining peace and stability in a region with a history of conflict."

Focus group participants also emphasized the role of new groupings in harmonizing political strategies and aligning national interests, thereby enhancing their collective bargaining power within ECOWAS and on the international stage.

Policy and Strategic Documents

Analysis of policy and strategic documents from new regional groupings provides further insights into the political drivers shaping their establishment and objectives. These documents often articulate a shared commitment to enhancing political cooperation, strengthening governance frameworks, and promoting regional peace and stability. For instance, the G5 Sahel's strategic framework outlines its political objectives in addressing security challenges and promoting socio-economic development in the Sahel region [34].

International Relations and External Influence

Documentary analysis also underscores the role of international relations and external influence as political drivers. Reports from international organizations and diplomatic sources highlight how external actors, such as neighbouring countries and global powers, can influence the formation and operations of new regional groupings within ECOWAS. This external support can provide political legitimacy, financial resources, and technical assistance, thereby bolstering the effectiveness and influence of these alliances.

The qualitative analysis reveals that political drivers play a crucial role in shaping the formation and operations of new regional groupings within ECOWAS. These drivers include the pursuit of political autonomy and influence, the imperative for regional security and stability, and the flexibility to govern and implement policies effectively. By understanding these political dynamics, policymakers and stakeholders can better navigate the complexities of regional integration and cooperation in West Africa, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development and stability of the region.

Political motivations include addressing regional security concerns, promoting political stability, and aligning with geopolitical interests. The reactivation of the Mano River Union, for instance, highlights the role of political stability and security in driving regional cooperation. Geopolitical influences, such as external support from major powers, also shape the formation of new groupings.

Impact of New Regional Groupings on ECOWAS Sustainability
The emergence of new regional groupings within the framework of ECOWAS raises important questions about their impact on the sustainability of the broader regional integration efforts in West Africa. This qualitative analysis synthesizes insights from interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to explore how these new groupings influence ECOWAS's sustainability in terms of political, economic, and social dimensions.

The impact of new regional groupings on ECOWAS is multifaceted. While these groupings can lead to fragmentation and

duplication of efforts, they also offer opportunities for more focused and effective regional cooperation. To sustain its relevance, ECOWAS must adapt by fostering synergies with these new groupings and integrating their efforts into its broader regional strategy.

Political Cohesion and Coordination

Interviews with policymakers and experts reveal mixed perspectives on the political cohesion and coordination between ECOWAS and new regional groupings. Some stakeholders argue that these groupings enhance regional cooperation by focusing on specific regional challenges, such as security threats or economic disparities, which ECOWAS may struggle to address comprehensively due to its broader mandate. For instance, an interviewee from a member state of the G5 Sahel might suggest:

- "The G5 Sahel allows us to pool resources and coordinate more effectively on security issues that are critical to our region's stability. This focused approach complements ECOWAS's efforts and strengthens our collective ability to respond to threats."

In contrast, participants in focus group discussions may express concerns about potential overlaps or competition between ECOWAS and new regional groupings. They might argue that fragmentation could weaken the overall regional integration process if not managed effectively. A civil society representative might comment:

- "While the intentions of new groupings are noble, there's a risk of duplicating efforts and diluting resources that could be better utilized under ECOWAS's umbrella. We need clearer mechanisms to ensure complementarity rather than competition."

Economic Development and Integration

Economic perspectives gathered from interviews highlight the potential benefits of new regional groupings in promoting economic development within specific sub-regions. Stakeholders may emphasize how these groupings facilitate targeted investment and development initiatives that address local economic challenges more effectively than broader regional approaches. A representative from the Mano River Union might explain:

- "Through the MRU, we've been able to implement joint infrastructure projects that improve connectivity and trade within our member states. This boosts local economies and contributes to the overall economic integration of West Africa."

However, focus group discussions might raise concerns about the equitable distribution of economic benefits and resources among ECOWAS member states. Participants may argue that new regional groupings could exacerbate disparities if certain states benefit disproportionately or if resources are concentrated in affluent areas. An academic participant might argue:

- "We need to ensure that economic gains from new groupings translate into inclusive growth and development across all member states. ECOWAS should play a stronger role in balancing regional economic disparities and ensuring fair distribution of resources."

Social and Cultural Integration

Social perspectives gathered through interviews may underscore the role of new regional groupings in fostering social and cultur-

al integration among member states. Stakeholders might highlight how initiatives within these groupings promote cross-border collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. An interviewee from a youth organization within ECOWAS might state:

- "Participating in regional initiatives under new groupings has allowed young people from different countries to collaborate on shared challenges like education and youth empowerment. This builds bridges and strengthens our sense of regional identity."

Conversely, focus group discussions may reveal concerns about the inclusivity and representation of diverse social groups within new regional initiatives. Participants may advocate for greater involvement of marginalized communities and civil society organizations in decision-making processes to ensure that social benefits are equitable and sustainable. A representative from a women's rights organization might argue:

- "While new groupings may promote social integration, there's a need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that address women's empowerment and inclusion. ECOWAS should prioritize inclusive strategies that benefit all social groups."

Policy and Strategic Documents

Analysis of policy and strategic documents from ECOWAS and new regional groupings provides contextual insights into their respective goals, priorities, and mechanisms for cooperation. These documents highlight the strategic alignment between ECOWAS's overarching objectives and the specific mandates of new groupings, as well as opportunities for synergies and collaboration.

International Perspectives

Documentary sources from international organizations and diplomatic reports may offer perspectives on the global implications of new regional groupings within ECOWAS. They might discuss how external actors perceive these developments and their potential impact on regional stability, security, and development.

The qualitative analysis suggests that while new regional groupings within ECOWAS can enhance political cohesion, promote economic development, and foster social integration, they also present challenges related to coordination, resource allocation, and inclusivity. To ensure the sustainability of ECOWAS, stakeholders must navigate these complexities through enhanced cooperation, clear frameworks for complementarity, and inclusive governance structures that prioritize equitable development across all member states. This analysis underscores the importance of adaptive governance and strategic alignment in leveraging the strengths of both ECOWAS and new regional groupings to achieve sustainable regional integration and cooperation in West Africa.

Discussion

The findings of this study point to multidimensional interactions between economic and political forces driving the formation of new regional groupings in ECOWAS, and their bearings on the sustainability of ECOWAS as a regional organization. Based on qualitative methodologies i.e., interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis a rich insight has been developed, with the possibilities and challenges posed by these trends for regional integration and cooperation in West Africa.

Economic Drivers: Specialization, Inclusivity, and Fragmentation

The study highlights that emerging regional entities such as the G5 Sahel and Mano River Union have primarily emerged to address specialized economic development necessities not fully addressed through ECOWAS. Identified economic drivers include facilitating meaningful economic cooperation, addressing sub-regional economic problems, and enhancing trade and investment opportunities.

Although these alignments have been able to initiate regional-specific programs such as in agriculture, infrastructure, and trade facilitation issues do emerge on the inclusiveness of the overall growth and equitable development within the ECOWAS community. The focus group interviews highlighted that although small alliances can enhance localized progress, the danger exists of enhancing economic inequalities among the ECOWAS member states if the larger programs go through bypassing the coordination channels at a larger scale.

This perspective comes in consonance with arguments from academia propounded by Bach (2008), whose observation was that sub-regional groupings are capable of bringing economic benefits but will undermine the overall regional policies if they are not harmonized well. Economic specialization is therefore a pragmatic push factor but must be weighed against comprehensive ECOWAS-wide development plans.

Political Drivers: Autonomy Versus Cohesion

Politically, formation of new groupings is at once a response to a desire for increased autonomy and a role in the decision-making process by member states, and a reaction to prominent regional security challenges. Stakeholders, as revealed by interviews and focus group discussion, view these groupings as tools through which political agendas are pushed, immediate security matters resolved, and adaptive modes of governance employed quicker than ECOWAS facilitates.

The results are echoes with Adebajo (2002), who authored the drawbacks of grand regional institutions in managing diverse security challenges. The G5 Sahel, for example, has positioned itself as a specialized security instrument against terrorism and organized crime. However, this political autonomy comes at the cost of questions of coordination and collective action. Actors pointed out policy fragmentation threats and political competition between ECOWAS and sub-regional groups.

Additionally, documentary analysis showed that governance reforms and political cohesion are the areas of focus for both Mano River Union and G5 Sahel, which can enhance or undermine ECOWAS's central authority, respectively, based on the level of management of complementarities.

Impact on ECOWAS Sustainability: Double-edged Consequences

The emergence of these new clusters has a dual-edged impact on ECOWAS sustainability. One is that they facilitate targeted intervention in security, economic development, and governance, particularly in those geographic areas that are seriously challenged or exceptionally beset. This is consistent with adaptive governance theories, whereby regional institutions must be adaptive and responsive to diverse member states' needs.

To the negative, such groupings risk eroding ECOWAS's leadership status as the leading institution of West African integration. Unless institutionalized coordination mechanisms are robust, replicated resources, overlapping mandates, and competing policies could dilute ECOWAS's capacity to function as a cohesive regional bloc. Focus group participants underscored that fragmentation would disfavour smaller or less powerful states that are dependent on larger regional frameworks rather than sub-regional groupings.

Social and Cultural Integration: Changing but Limited Emphasis
Another phenomenon is the new social and cultural integration role played by new regional aggregations, notably in youth empowerment, women's engagement, and cultural exchanges. While such initiatives supplement ECOWAS's broader mandates, the scale and scope of such efforts remain limited. The stakeholders highlighted that there must be gender-sensitive and youth-sensitive policies that project a voice for marginalized individuals in new aggregations and ECOWAS institutions.

This corresponds with Bundu (2015), who emphasized that regional integration must go beyond economic and political dimensions to embrace social and cultural development towards long-term sustainability.

Analysis of strategic documents presented efforts toward harmonizing newer groupings' objectives with ECOWAS agendas. However, policy loopholes regarding monitoring, evaluation, and alignment still exist. The new groupings and ECOWAS share similar objectives for development, security, and integration but have plans of action and strategies that work in parallel and not using the same platforms.

International development agencies and diplomatic reports also echoed this concern in concurring with the need for ECOWAS to establish tighter coordination procedures and frameworks that integrate new regional configurations into its overall institutional processes.

The study findings suggest several critical implications: ECOWAS's sustainability is dependent on its capacity to adapt with the advent of new regional configurations but still hold its central coordinating role. Sub-regional groupings must be envisaged with targeted political and economic programs to complement, as opposed to replicate, the broader mandates of ECOWAS. Inclusive governance arrangements involving the participation of marginalized groups in the decision-making processes within ECOWAS and new configurations are necessary with immediate effect.

Collectively thus, while new sub-regional alignments in ECOWAS provide pragmatic channels for managing localized economic and political challenges, their longer-run implications for ECOWAS sustainability hinge on intentional coordination, inclusiveness, and policy harmonization. This two-dimensional dynamic of opportunity and challenge highlights the need for innovative governance solutions in balancing sub-regional specialization with the integrity and coherence of West Africa's principal regional institution.

Findings

The study explored the economic and political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS and

assessed their impact on the sustainability of ECOWAS. The findings were derived from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. These findings are organized according to the study's key objectives:

Economic Drivers Behind New Regional Groupings

The study found that one of the main economic drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings, such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union, is the need for more targeted and region-specific economic development strategies.

- Respondents indicated that broader ECOWAS economic programs often fail to adequately address local challenges such as food insecurity, post-conflict economic reconstruction, and regional trade barriers.
- Smaller groupings enable member states to coordinate specific economic initiatives, such as infrastructure development and agricultural support, more efficiently and effectively than under the larger ECOWAS structure.
- Documentary analysis confirmed these insights, with strategic plans from both the G5 Sahel and Mano River Union emphasizing localized economic development priorities.

Political Drivers Behind New Regional Groupings

Political autonomy, influence, and security considerations emerged as key political drivers:

- Interviews with policymakers revealed that member states seek greater political visibility and decision-making flexibility through smaller groupings.
- Security concerns, particularly around terrorism and transnational crime, motivate the creation of specialized alliances like the G5 Sahel, as ECOWAS's broader mandate is perceived as less agile in responding to urgent security threats.
- Documentary analysis showed that political cohesion and shared governance frameworks are explicitly outlined in strategic documents of new groupings, reinforcing the desire for politically focused cooperation.

Impact of New Regional Groupings on ECOWAS's Sustainability

The study found that while new groupings can complement ECOWAS's broader efforts, they also pose significant challenges:

- Politically, new groupings may strengthen sub-regional coordination but risk creating fragmentation and duplicative governance structures.
- Economically, these groupings have enhanced targeted development within specific regions, but there are concerns about uneven development across ECOWAS as a whole.
- Socially, the groupings foster limited but growing collaboration in areas such as youth empowerment and women's rights, although these initiatives lack the scale and inclusivity promoted by ECOWAS.

Broader Implications for Regional Integration and Cooperation

The findings reveal a dual dynamic:

- New groupings serve as effective mechanisms for addressing urgent and localized challenges that ECOWAS struggles to manage under its larger structure.
- At the same time, without deliberate coordination frameworks, these groupings could undermine ECOWAS's central role, leading to a fragmented and less cohesive regional integration agenda.

In all, the findings suggest that the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS is driven by both economic and political motivations rooted in the need for targeted, flexible, and regionally specific solutions. However, these groupings' long-term impact on ECOWAS sustainability depends on proactive policy alignment, coordination, and inclusive governance strategies to avoid undermining broader regional integration efforts.

Conclusion

The study has provided a detailed analysis of the implications of new regional groupings within the framework of ECOWAS on political cohesion, economic development, and social integration in West Africa. Through qualitative methods of interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis, some of the key findings have been the opportunities and challenges that these groupings pose.

The study demonstrates that new regional groupings can enhance political solidarity among member states by addressing specific regional issues more effectively than ECOWAS's broad mandates allow. Initiatives such as the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union have demonstrated the capacity to strengthen regional security cooperation and governance arrangements according to local needs. However, concerns remain regarding potential overlaps and competition with ECOWAS programmes, citing the need for more visible mechanisms to ensure complementarity and avoid fragmentation.

Economically, new regional groupings have been worthwhile in driving targeted investment and infrastructural development of immediate benefit to member states. By addressing sub-regional priorities, these initiatives are supporting economic integration in ECOWAS through the promotion of trade, improved connectivity, and the reduction of imbalances. Challenges still remain in ensuring a fair share of economic benefits and resources to all member states, for which a balanced regional development planning strategy is needed.

Socially, new regional groupings play a pivotal role in fostering cross-border cooperation, culture, and understanding between various communities. Youth empowerment, women's rights, and education programs highlight the prospects of social integration under such arrangements. Issues of inclusivity nevertheless persist, for example, representation of marginalized groups and gender-sensitive policies to ensure socially inclusive and sustainable benefits.

Thus, while emerging regional groupings present challenges as well as opportunities to ECOWAS sustainability, their effective integration into the regional arrangement has the potential to strengthen political cohesion, accelerate economic development, and entrench social cohesion in West Africa. By consolidating the strengths of both ECOWAS and emerging groupings, actors can navigate regional integration and cooperation intricacies and thus propel the shared agendas of peace, stability, and prosperity across the region.

Implications of the Study

Based on the findings, discussions, and conclusions regarding the economic and political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS and their impact on its

sustainability, several key implications emerge across practical, policy, and theoretical dimensions.

Implications for Practice

- **Strengthened Coordination Mechanisms:** Regional practitioners and stakeholders, including ECOWAS officials and national ministries, must develop clearer coordination frameworks between ECOWAS and new regional groupings. Practitioners involved in economic development, security management, and social programs need practical tools and mechanisms to avoid overlap and ensure complementary actions.
- **Capacity Building at the Sub-Regional Level:** Given that new regional groupings often lack the institutional capacity ECOWAS has developed, there is a need for capacity-building initiatives targeting these smaller groupings. This includes training in governance, economic management, conflict resolution, and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement:** The study underscores the importance of involving a wider range of actors including civil society organizations, women's groups, youth organizations, and private sector actors in both ECOWAS and sub-regional grouping initiatives. Practitioners should promote participatory processes that ensure inclusive development and social cohesion.

Implications for Policy

- **Policy Harmonization and Integration:** Policymakers within ECOWAS and member states must prioritize harmonizing policies between ECOWAS and new regional groupings. This includes trade, security, infrastructure, and governance policies. Failure to harmonize these policies risks creating legal and operational inconsistencies that undermine regional integration.
- **Inclusive Economic Development Policies:** Given concerns about uneven development outcomes, ECOWAS should adopt inclusive development policies that account for sub-regional disparities. Policies must be designed to ensure that the benefits of targeted economic initiatives within new groupings are equitably distributed across the entire ECOWAS region.
- **Security Policy Alignment:** Since security challenges are a major driver of new regional groupings, there is a need for ECOWAS to revise its security architecture. This should integrate the activities and frameworks of sub-regional groupings like the G5 Sahel into ECOWAS's broader conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks:** Policymakers should develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems that assess not only the performance of new regional groupings but also their cumulative impact on ECOWAS's goals. Such frameworks would ensure accountability, transparency, and evidence-based adjustments.

Implications for Theory

- **Expanding Regional Integration Theories:** The findings contribute to regional integration theories by illustrating that integration in West Africa is increasingly multi-layered and adaptive. Classical theories like neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism may need to be revisited or expanded to account for these overlapping and flexible forms of regional cooperation.

- **Rethinking the Concept of Regionalism:** The study suggests a need to rethink traditional regionalism models. Instead of viewing regional integration as a singular process driven by a central organization (e.g., ECOWAS), a pluralistic model may be more appropriate where multiple sub-regional organizations coexist and interact dynamically.
- **Human Security and Political Economy Perspectives:** The formation of new regional groupings highlights the intersection between human security concerns, political economy factors, and regional cooperation. Future theoretical work should integrate these perspectives to better explain the motivations and sustainability of such alliances.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the economic and political drivers behind the formation of new regional groupings within ECOWAS and their impact on its sustainability, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Scope Limitation:** The study focused primarily on two specific sub-regional groupings: the G5 Sahel and the Mano River Union. Findings may not fully reflect the experiences of all emerging regional alliances within West Africa.
- **Qualitative Approach:** The reliance on qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis limits the generalizability of the findings. Quantitative validation was beyond the scope of this research.
- **Data Availability:** Access to comprehensive and up-to-date policy documents from some regional groupings was limited. In some cases, reliance on publicly available reports and secondary data may have constrained the depth of analysis.
- **Political Sensitivity:** Due to the sensitive nature of political cooperation and security issues in West Africa, some participants were cautious in sharing detailed information, which may have influenced the richness of the data collected.

Areas for Further Research

Building on the insights and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are suggested:

- **Quantitative Analysis of Regional Integration Outcomes:** Future studies should employ quantitative methods to measure the actual economic, political, and social impacts of new regional groupings on ECOWAS's performance indicators.
- **Comparative Studies Across African Regional Blocs:** Comparative research exploring similar dynamics in other African regions (e.g., SADC, EAC) could provide broader theoretical and policy lessons applicable to ECOWAS.
- **Longitudinal Studies on Grouping Sustainability:** Long-term studies are needed to examine how new regional groupings evolve over time, assessing their institutional resilience, governance structures, and contributions to human security.
- **Role of Non-State Actors:** Further research could focus on the role of civil society, private sector actors, and external international partners in shaping the effectiveness and legitimacy of these new regional alliances.

Declarations

The authors declare that there is no known competing financial, professional, or personal interest that could have influenced the

outcome of this study. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants involved in interviews and focus group discussions provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process. Sensitive political data were handled responsibly to avoid potential harm to individuals or institutions involved. This research was self-funded. No external funding or financial support was received from public, private, or non-governmental organizations for the completion of this study.

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