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# The EU's Financing of Regional Peace and Security Architecture: Through the Lens of ECOWAS

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## Abstract

The EU has been both a model, based on the European Economic Community (EEC) experience, and a support resource for improving ECOWAS's objectives in terms of economic and political integration, good governance, and regional stability. As a main partner, the EU was engaged as a supporting actor through the European Development Fund (EDF) Regional Indicative Programme (RIP). From 2002 (9th EDF RIP) to 2020 (11th EDF RIP), the scope of this financial support was extended from regional economic integration activities towards peace and security cooperation between West African countries.

Under the EDF RIP, the relationship with EU was a good example of the ECOWAS's expectations regarding partnership in terms of process and alignment with its priorities. Launched in 2021 to promote EU values and interests, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) represents another EU ambition to reconstruct the relationship with the African continent. Yet, it is unclear, how the current instrument will strengthen relations between the EU and ECOWAS and not perpetuate challenges and shortcomings of previous European support. Indeed, ECOWAS ownership is still hampered by a lack of resources and capabilities and by its dependency on external funding to support its programmes. From an ECOWAS perspective, EU's rules and administrative procedures are extremely cumbersome for the ECOWAS Commission to navigate different, sometimes overlapping European programmes and funding.

This paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of NDICI's adoption through the lens of EU-ECOWAS relations as a pilot case. While the NDICI aims to promote EU's interests in a context of increasing geopolitical competition, ECOWAS should consider the adoption of NDICI as a momentum to leverage a renewal of its partnership with the EU.



## Keywords

ECOWAS, European Union, NDICI, regional security, African ownership

## Table of Contents

## List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ACP | Africa Caribbean Pacific |
| AEC | African Economic Community |
| AfCFTA | African Continental Free Trade Area |
| AGA | African Governance Architecture |
| AMU | Arab Maghreb Union |
| APF | African peace facility |
| APSA | African Peace and Security Architecture |
| ARO | African Regional Organisation |
| ASF | African Standby Force |
| AU | African Union |
| CEN-SAD | Community of Sahel-Saharan States |
| CEWS | Continental Early Warning System |
| COMESA | Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa |
| CPA | Cotonou Partnership Agreement |
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| DPKRS | Directorate of Peacekeeping and Regional Security |
| EAC | East African Community |
| ECCAS | Economic Community of Central African States |
| ECOMOG | ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group |
| ECOWARN | ECOWAS Warning Network |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African states |
| ECPF | ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework |
| EDF | European Development Fund |
| EEAS | European External Action Service |
| EEC | European Economic Community |
| EPA | Economic Partnership Agreement |
| EPF | European Peace Facility |
| EPSAO | ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations Project |

| | |
|---|---|
| ESF | ECOWAS Standby Force |
| EU | European Union |
| EWEA | Early warning and early action |
| EWS | Early warning system |
| GIZ | German Agency for International Cooperation |
| IGAD | Intergovernmental Authority on Development |
| JAES | Joint Africa Europe Strategy |
| MFF | Multi-Annual Financial Framework |
| MoU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MSC | Military Staff Committee |
| NDICI | Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument |
| NEPAD | New Partnership for Africa's Development |
| OAU | Organisation of African Unity |
| PAPS | Political Affairs, Peace and Security |
| PoW | Panel of the Wise |
| PSC | Peace and Security Council |
| RAO | Regional authorising officer |
| REC | Regional Economic Community |
| RIP | Regional Indicative Programme |
| RM | Regional Mechanism |
| SADC | Southern African Development Community |
| SALW | Small Arms and Light Weapons |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| WAEMU | West African Economic and Monetary Union |

## 1. Introduction

European Union (EU) - Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries and EU-ECOWAS relations have evolved symmetrically to the broad spectrum of EU external relations, towards an increasing interest for regional and sub-regional organisations as partners, recipients, or contact points for European policies (Nivet, 2006, p. 9). Although the EU's policy may reflect national interests, the more neutral and legitimate perception of the EU as an institution allows its member states to overcome negative perceptions of their foreign policies as deriving from colonial legacy or political disputes (Chafer and Stoddard, 2014). In the same way, the creation of ECOWAS offers valuable insights into the regional balance of power, including between Francophone and Anglophone countries, which decisively influence the degree of economic and political cooperation in West Africa.

Historically, much of the EU's cooperation with West Africa has fallen under the framework of the EU-Africa Caribbean Pacific (ACP) cooperation. It started in 1963 with the Yaoundé Convention and was then replaced by a succession of four Lomé Conventions which progressively broadened the scope of cooperation. The birth of ECOWAS in 1975 may be considered as a West African expression of the changing relationship established with Europe under the Lomé Convention (Bach, 1983, p. 611). Lomé I (1975-1980) supported regional cooperation among ACP countries but it was restricted to an economic level (ACP-EEC, 1975). In the Lomé III Convention (1985-1990), the European Commission confirmed its support to the ACP countries "to organise themselves into a regional grouping" (ACP-EEC, 1984). For the first time, the Lomé IV Convention (1990-1995) included "combatting drug trafficking" as an area of regional cooperation (ACP-EEC, 1989). The EU and ECOWAS share thus a strong and longstanding relationship of partnership and cooperation, with 2000 as a pivotal year for the political dialogue. The EU is West Africa's main trading, investment and development partner, and a key security provider (Nivet, 2006). In 2000, ECOWAS was the first Regional Economic Community (REC) to open a permanent representation to the European Commission in Brussels (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023b) and to set up ministerial EU-ECOWAS meeting (EU-ECOWAS, 2000). The adoption of the Cotonou agreement marks another important milestone in the EU-West Africa cooperation. Signed in 2000, the Cotonou Agreement involved 27 EU member states and 79 states in the ACP region[1] and was based on three pillars: development cooperation, political cooperation, and economic and trade cooperation. The revised 2010 Cotonou Agreement added regional organisations to the set of core actors officially recognised as involved in ACP-EU relations and noted specifically the role of sub-regional organisations (ACP-EC, 2010).

Some EU member states, such as France, the UK, and Germany, make substantial investments in West African countries in terms of economic, development, and security policies, trying to maintain and/or further their influence (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 10). While the EU and its member states are directly involved in addressing conflict in West Africa, such as in the Sahel, the EU member states engagement simultaneously reinforces and contradicts the EU's support for regional solutions (Piccolino and Minou, 2014, p. 12). The European Development Fund (EDF) is a central instrument for supporting the EU's activities in the ACP countries[2]. Regional Indicative Programmes (RIPs) funded through the EDF are crucial EU instruments which have been further exploited to foster peace and security. The 9th (2000-2007), 10th (2008-2013), and 11th (2014-2020) EDF RIPs represent a qualitative and quantitative leap in the EU's ambition to support regional integration in West Africa (Piccolino and Minou, 2014, p. 13).

Following the EU agenda evolution, interregional connections, progressively extended towards political and security issues, whereas they were initially focused on trade and development. Institutional dialogue between Africa and the EU has been steadily gathering pace since the first Africa-EU summit in 2000 in Cairo. The economic integration process in Africa is revamped with the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) in 2002, and with the adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Supporting the implementation of African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is one of the priorities of the EU-Africa partnership, and ECOWAS is a milestone of this institutional framework. EU funding for ECOWAS peace operations has been channelled since 2004 through the African Peace Facility (APF). This special envelope of EDF aid managed by the AU aims to support the establishment of the APSA and has been replaced in 2021 by the European Peace Facility (EPF) (see Crisis Group, 2021).

1 At the time of signing Cotonou in 2000, the EU had only 15 member countries. Since then, there have been 13 new members, and the UK has left.

2 Established in 1957, it is financed by the ad hoc contributions of European member States which decide every five years on the overall amount to be allocated to each EDF. Despite internal pressure, member States have constantly refused to incorporate it into the EU budget. (see Carbone, 2008)

In September 2018, the EU and the ACP Group started negotiating the new legal framework which would organise their relations after the expiry of the Cotonou Agreement in 2020. The so-called post-Cotonou agreement (commonly known as the Cotonou Partnership Agreement - CPA) was settled by EU and ACP negotiators in April 2021, but it has not been formally signed yet (Sabourin and Jones, 2022). Interestingly, CPA reflects the evolution of the overall international context and new expectations vis-à-vis North-South cooperation, which have considerably changed during the past two decades. The AU would like to institutionalise a partnership with the EU including political and trade relations, and is oriented towards the Agenda 2063 goals. This commitment and mutual willingness materialised in the 2007 Joint Africa Europe Strategy (JAES). On the other hand, in 2018, African States adopted an African Common position for negotiations of a new cooperation agreement with the EU. This agreement emphasised the need to develop a modern political dialogue, based on equality, equity, mutual respect, the shared responsibility of both continents (AU, 2018), and the importance of taking into account African development priority pillars. The adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2018 sent a strong signal for a more balanced relationship (Amare, 2020) while, in the very same year, the AU and the EU also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Peace, Security and Governance. The ACP-EU partnership has thus gradually evolved from a preferential relationship towards a reciprocal, interest-driven partnership (Boidin, 2020; Affessie, 2022).

One of the major changes in the ACP-EU cooperation is the termination of the EDF which had been the main source of finance for over 60 years. The EU is also faced with growing scepticism about its ability to address the competing demands of its internal and external policy priorities (Sergejeff et al., 2022). In 2021, the EU unilaterally adopted its new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) that merges several former EU financing instruments, including the EDF. Before NDICI, the African Continent was a space of overlaps and divisions between European programmes, instruments, and administrative burdens (EC, 2018a). This new financial instrument aims to uphold and promote the EU's values, principles, and fundamental interests worldwide in order to pursue the objectives and principles of the EU's external action. With an overall allocation of 79.5 billion euros, it will be divided into geographic programmes, thematic programmes, and rapid response mechanisms (EU, 2021).

This process of determining the EU's cooperation priorities and financial allocations for the 2021-2027 period is subject to new approaches and ambitions for the AU and the RECs. Four intertwined key principles guide the design, programming, and implementation phases of NDICI: "policy first", geographisation, subisdiarity, and simplification (Sergejeff et al., 2022). However, African regional organisations (AROs), including ECOWAS, have expressed concerns about the NDICI adoption. They fear that a lack of EU's support for an African-driven and pan-African agenda of integration and security, whose key interlocutors would be the AROs, may detract from the African consensus. NDICI's adoption also raises questions about how the donor-recipient relationship will evolve and about the leverage that the RECs, and more specifically ECOWAS, will have in the programming and implementation of European funding. Still, the adoption of NDICI is an opportunity to question the possibility for ECOWAS to re-frame the donor–agent dynamic.

This paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of NDICI's adoption through the lens of EU-ECOWAS relations as a pilot case. Albeit ECOWAS's recognition as a key security actor in the region, an analysis of its relationship with the EU in the field of security-development nexus throws up challenges with respect to a fruitful and consistent inter-regional partnership. As a new instrument, little research has been conducted on NDICI's potential impact on the EU's partnership with ECOWAS. It is noteworthy that this paper does not cover the complex set of actors involved in EU-West Africa regional interactions, including states, other regional organisations, ad hoc coalitions, and non-state agents such as private companies, civil society, insurrectionist movements, smuggling and piracy groups, and violent extremist groups.

How will the EU-ECOWAS cooperation evolve in the wake of NDICI's adoption? This paper explores this across four sections. The first investigates the development of ECOWAS as a security actor and a regional partner for the EU. The second provides an overview of the evolution of the EU funding to support the ECOWAS agenda, focusing on the 9th, 10th and 11th RIPs. The third section questions how NDICI programming principles could affect the EU-ECOWAS relationship. Finally, the fourth section provides a brief overview of breaks and continuities in the EU-ECOWAS cooperation. The conclusion summarises the key findings. This study is the result of several years of research on ECOWAS (from 2015 to 2023) with extensive document analysis of primary and secondary resources and regular (physical and virtual) exchanges with current and former ECOWAS officials, ECOWAS partners - including the EU, and academics.

## 2. ECOWAS, a security organisation and a regional partner for the EU

In view of the evolution of ECOWAS during the last three decades,  the organisation became one of the most significant and valuable regional EU partners to increase economic and political integration, good governance, and regional stability in West Africa. At the same time, the EU saw an opportunity to export in West Africa “the integration-stabilisation” model experimented in Europe (Nivet, 2006, p. 7). Starting with regional economic and political integration, ECOWAS set up its own regional peace and security architecture.

### 2.1 Regional economic and political integration, initial priorities for ECOWAS

ECOWAS was initially established for economic purposes. As stipulated in Article 2 of its Treaty - signed in Lagos on May 28, 1975 -, the organisation aims to “promote cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity [...] for the purpose of raising the standard of living of its people, of increasing and maintaining economic stability, of fostering closer relations among its members” (ECOWAS, 1975).

At the time, the influence of the European Economic Community (EEC) on ECOWAS was indirect and it manifested mainly through ECOWAS’ recognition of the relevance of the European model and experience (Bilal, 2007), explicitly acknowledged by the founders of the new organisation (Asante, 1986, pp. 55-56). All the fifteen countries that signed the ECOWAS Treaty in May 1975 had previously signed the first Lomé Convention in February (see Olofin, 1977), then criticised for reproducing neo-colonial and paternalistic attitudes (Bonaglia et al., 2006). While ECOWAS was inspired by the EEC on an institutional level, the influence of the EU model - with its over-emphasis on trade and economic issues - had negative implications in West Africa.

ECOWAS, like other AROs, set unrealistic economic goals (Clapham, 2001, p.59), and the replication of the EU model neglected the existing contextual differences, especially the regional historical and institutional background, the continental social and economic realities, and the issue of political leadership at the national level. ECOWAS was set up and has evolved in an institutional landscape where most West African countries belong to several regional organisations (Borella, 1963). Well before African countries gained independence, cooperation and regional integration were seen as indispensable for their development and to get away from dependence on former colonial powers. From the outset, Nigeria expected that ECOWAS would weaken francophone West Africa’s link with France. Even now, among the fifteen ECOWAS members, eight join the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU – known by its French acronym, UEMOA)[3], and five of these countries make up the Conseil de l’Entente[4]. To take this into consideration, the 1975 ECOWAS Constitutive Treaty allowed simultaneous membership in two or more different sets of economic cooperation arrangements (ECOWAS, 1975)[5]. Eventually, this passage was removed from the revised 1993 Treaty to limit possible conflicting objectives (Interview, former ECOWAS staff, 2023).

In 1976, OAU laid the groundwork for cooperation among pan-African and regional organisations by dividing the continent into five geographical regions (Northern, Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa) (OAU, 1976). Fifteen years later, in 1991, African leaders signed the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC). Although they were again inspired by the EEC model, African states opted for a two-tiered model of regional integration (OAU, 1991) to foster continental unity. Indeed, part of Africa’s continental integration is based on the coordination, harmonisation, and progressive integration of RECs, which are supposed to correspond to the regional division adopted by the OAU[6]. In West Africa, while governed by its specific law, ECOWAS has been identified as a REC and is directly involved in the progress and development of the African continent as stated in ECOWAS’ Constitutive Treaty.

3  Created in 1994, WAEMU is a post-colonial continuation of colonial arrangements in West Africa in the form of the CFA franc zone. Among the 15 members of ECOWAS, eight are members of WAEMU: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo.

4  The Conseil de l’Entente, a West African-led initiative to promote closer and more dynamic political and cultural integration, was established in 1959.

5  Article 59, entitled “Relations with other Regional Associations and Third Countries”, stipulated that “Member States may be members of other regional or sub-regional associations, either with other Member States or non-Member States, provided that their membership of such associations does not derogate from the provisions of this Treaty”.

6  They include: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); the East African Community (EAC); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); ECOWAS; the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU).

In contrast to the EEC - where the locus of supranational authority is found in the European Commission -in ECOWAS, power rests with the Authority of Heads of States and Government. The direct involvement of political leaders in ECOWAS's integration reflects that economic development problems cannot overlook political realities. The political element is particularly relevant because economic policies must be welcomed and ratified by politicians (see UNECA, 2006) before their implementation. Indeed, when political and economic considerations clash, the former usually prevail (Asante, 1982, p. 312). Since its creation, ECOWAS' efforts have been limited by the conflict between its supranationality and each country's esteemed national sovereignty. This contradiction has hampered the ability of ECOWAS to oblige member states to abide by regional norms and standards beyond behind-the-scenes pleas (Musah, 2009, p. 17). In the 1970s, political instability due to military coups raised serious concerns as a widely used means of changing governments, while ECOWAS aimed at contributing to a global governance based on dialogue and cooperation, with only exceptional conflicting relations between the member states.

On July 6, 1991, Heads of States adopted the Declaration of ECOWAS political principles. The Community decided to promote a framework to ensure freedom under the law and lasting peace. In addition to the founding act, setting out legal and technical provisions to achieve the community's objectives, Article 4 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty (July 24, 1993) listed a series of core principles, including "the peaceful settlement of disputes among Member States, [the] active co-operation between neighbouring countries and [the] promotion of a peaceful environment as a prerequisite for economic development" (ECOWAS, 1993). Significantly, this is the first official reference to the link between security and development in ECOWAS's legal framework (Gnanguenon, 2014, p. 61).

From the dialogue engaged in 1998 at the level of high-ranking officials, the EU and ECOWAS recognised one another as valuable partners (Nivet, 2006, p. 20). Following this consultation, since the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, their relationship has been increasingly political and conditional, and not exclusively focused on economic and social development. Somehow, this emphasis on political norms and values legitimised the development of a broader ECOWAS political agenda (Vanheukelom, 2017). On December 21, 2001, ECOWAS signed the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, addressing some of the fundamental root causes of conflict and some constitutional convergence principles, such as respect for human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law (ECOWAS, 2001). While this normative framework shows that ECOWAS has assimilated EU political values and security norms (Aggad and Miyandazi, 2017) the West African organisation is not a passive recipient. In fact, it has adapted the mentioned values and norms to its own context, and it has strategically chosen to attract funding from external actors while gaining international legitimacy and credibility (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 20).

In January 2007, the ECOWAS Secretariat was transformed into a Commission, which again appears as an imitation of the EU model (Francis, 2009, p.93). The Conference of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS drew up its vision for 2020 to accelerate the integration process by facilitating greater collective responses to human security challenges, including poverty reduction, infrastructure development, implementation of common agricultural, environmental, and water policies, as well as trade negotiations with external partners, and the consolidation of democracy, regional peace, and security (Musah, 2009; ECOWAS, 2010). Besides, ECOWAS is determined to transform the region from an "ECOWAS of States" into an "ECOWAS of the Peoples". ECOWAS became the continent's pioneer in implementing the free movement of people, goods, and capital with member states signing the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment in 1979, supplemented by subsequent agreements. Beyond these economic and political objectives, ECOWAS has developed one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive West African peace and security architecture.

### 2.2 The development and implementation of the ECOWAS peace and security architecture

ECOWAS has developed a comparative advantage in the domain of conflict management and has become a model for the Continent. From its origins as an ad hoc institutional framework in 1990, ECOWAS has adopted institutional mechanisms, norms, and standards to strengthen existing frameworks or guide responses to peace, security challenges, and regional threats. The organisation is now better known for its record in regional security matters, especially its peace enforcement and peacekeeping intervention, and its conflict prevention mechanisms.

The 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression (ECOWAS, 1978) and the 1981 Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance on Defence (ECOWAS, 1981) are the first two instruments, unrelated to economic development, that aim at protecting member states against destabilisation emanating from another state. However, these agreements have never been implemented, and the Liberia war (1989-2003) disrupted the regional economic integration process. The ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) became Africa's first regional military intervention force (see Adebajo, 2002; Adeleke, 1995; Bah, 2005; Olonisakin and Aning 1999), which has been the main point of departure for the development of a regional peace and security architecture in West Africa. As a consequence, the EU legitimised ECOWAS (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 19), whose declaratory recognition as a security actor can be traced to 1995, when the EU stated that "the European Union congratulates ECOWAS, and particularly President Rawlings of Ghana, on their efforts and commitment to bringing peace in Liberia" (EU, 1995).

In addition to the texts mentioned above, ECOWAS has developed other legal tools to anchor the organisation's role in the security domain. These include, among others: the December 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (ECOWAS, 1999); the 2006 Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Matters (ECOWAS, 2006); and the 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF).

Though often criticised, ECOWAS's performance in the 1990s was not entirely negative (Crisis Group, 2016). Its tenacity undeniably helped to stabilise the Mano River Union in Sierra Leone (1997-2000), and in Guinea Bissau (1998-1999). Since 2000, ECOWAS has intervened in Côte d'Ivoire (2002), Liberia (2003), Mali (2013), and the Gambia (2017). Moreover, ECOMOG was renamed as ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) in June 2014, and joined the African Standby Force (ASF), a continental multipurpose composite stand-by force, composed of military and civilian units from West African States. ECOWAS has also developed a wide range of tools for conflict prevention: early warning system (EWS), preventive diplomacy, and conflict mediation. The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network - commonly known as ECOWARN - was the most advanced regional early warning system in Africa when launched in 2003 (Gnanguenon, 2018).

ECOWAS's process of reinforcing the link between security, development and governance has found a favourable echo in the EU (ACP-EC, 2000)[7]. The 2003 European Security Strategy stated that security is a precondition for development, which propelled a significant increase in the importance of security issues and objectives in EU development programmes (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 10). In 2011, the EU also adopted its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, which states in its opening paragraph that "security and development in the Sahel cannot be separated, and that helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced [and] secondly, that achieving security and development in the Sahel is only possible through closer regional cooperation" (EEAS, 2011). This nexus has been further reinforced by the subsequent adoption of the EU West Africa strategy, which establishes the priority action areas for the disbursement of EDF funds, as we will show in the next section.

## 3. The European Development Fund, a major financing instrument for ECOWAS

In spite of its institutional and political developments, ECOWAS has been hampered in its efforts to promote human security by the exigencies of regional security and its internal capacity deficit. This lack of resources and capabilities gave the EU the opportunity to emerge as a supportive actor in ECOWAS's initiatives and agenda.

### 3.1 Peace and security, a priority for successive Regional Indicative Programmes

ECOWAS is the first REC that has actuated a self-financing mechanism of a 0.5% levy on the value of all goods imported into the region, to be collected by member states and paid into a dedicated ECOWAS account (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2022). Established in 2000, this system covers mainly operational costs, funds the structures, creates policy space for ECOWAS, and provides some legitimacy to its institutions (Vanheukelom, 2017).

7 The inclusion of the peace and security component in the Cotonou Agreement derives from a perceived security-development nexus. Article 11 states that "the Parties [sic] acknowledge that without development and poverty reduction there will be no sustainable peace and security, and that without peace and security there can be no sustainable development".

ECOWAS also set up a Peace Fund to strengthen regular and unforeseen peace support operations, with contributions from the community levy, member states, and development partners. This fund is complemented by a pool fund supported by development partners and intended for internal capacity building (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, December 2022; Aggad and Miyandazi, 2017).

The levy generates between 70 and 90% of ECOWAS's annual operational budget, with external funding making up the rest - especially its programmes (ECOWAS, 2023). As a matter of fact, the EU has developed a broad range of instruments[8] to support both regional integration and regional conflict prevention and management in West Africa. This section is focused on regional development aid provided to West Africa through the EDF and regulated by RIPs, which are negotiated on a five-year basis. The RIP strategy follows a general policy on regional cooperation strategies and programmes, and it was initiated in 1995 by the European Commission to strengthen regional integration and cooperation between West African countries (EC RIP, 2008).

The 8th EDF, signed in 1996, stepped up intra-regional trade to make West African economies more competitive by focusing on WAEMU. ECOWAS then became a major recipient of EU aid from the 9th EDF (2002-2007) operationalised through the 2002-2007 RIP, with the first inclusion of support to a regional policy on conflict prevention and good governance (EC RIP, 2002; Piccolino and Minou, 2014, p. 13). The EU invested 10 million euros in two programmes directed towards building ECOWAS's capacities in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, including technical assistance to ECOWAS's Executive Secretariat, Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Moratorium, early warning, mediation, and electoral observation activities (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 17).

From the 10th EDF, the EU's funding increased significantly to support ECOWAS's governance and peace agenda. Consolidation of good governance and regional stability became the second priority sector with 119 million euros in the 10th EDF RIP (2008-2013). The strategy is based on the three pillars of the EU and West Africa partnership: political dialogue as reflected by the ministerial troikas, development cooperation through support for the integration agenda, and trade cooperation as reflected by the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). For peace and security, the EU aimed "to help to bring about a significant improvement in regional governance and stability", and to support "a proactive position" for ECOWAS (EC RIP, 2008).

The 11th EDF RIP's strategic priorities reflect the interdependence of development, peace and security, referring to Article 11 of the Cotonou Agreement, as revised in June 2010. These include: peace, security and stability; regional economic integration; management of regional public goods; and the resilience agenda (EC RIP, 2020). Two hundred and fifty million euros have been accorded to peace, security and stability, including efforts to combat global threats affecting the region.

8 Given the limitations of RIP aid, contributions to certain conflict prevention and management activities undertaken by ECOWAS and other West African actors have been provided by the EU through other channels, such as the African Peace Facility (APF).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2002-2007 | 9th EDF RIP | EUR 235 000 000 | Economic integration and support to trade 50% of total: 118 M€<br>Transports: 35% of total: 82 M€<br>Other programmes 15% of total: 35 M€, including 10 M€ for conflict prevention and good governance (non-focal sector) |
| 2008-2013 | 10th EDF RIP | EUR 597 000 000 | Deeper regional integration, improved competitiveness and EPA; 70% of total: 418 M€<br>Consolidation of good governance and regional stability; 20% of total: 119 M€<br>Non-focal sectors including the environment and support for human development; 10% of total: 60 M€ |
| 2014-2020 | 11th EDF RIP | EUR 1.15 billion | Peace, security and stability, including efforts to combat global threats affecting the region: 22% of total: 250 M€<br>Regional economic integration, including trade-related assistance, support for the private sector and infrastructure development: 50% of total: 575 M€<br>Management of regional public goods and the resilience agenda, notably through AGIR[9]: 26% of total: 300 M€<br>Institutional support to regional organisations (non-focal sector): 2% of total: 25 M€ |

**Table 1**
**RIP for West Africa: 15 member states of ECOWAS (plus Mauritania)**

**Source: Author**

As can be observed, the EU's support to ECOWAS, and more broadly the EU's involvement in West Africa, increased significantly from the 9th EDF to the end of the 11th EDF RIP, covering the 2002-2020 timespan. Peace and security became one of the three priorities of successive RIPs, with support extended to a large variety of policy areas, including conflict prevention, standby force, maritime security, security sector reform, electoral observation, as well as good governance.

### 3.2 Main challenges and shortcomings of EU's financial support

The EDF is a specific funding mechanism outside the European Commission's general budget. From an ECOWAS perspective, the possibility of using extra-budgetary resources allowed for adjustment and increased accountability for the beneficiary (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023a). In addition, under the EDF, the ECOWAS Commission was able to provide input to the regional strategy, influencing some priorities in the joint programming process (Müller, 2023). The pillars of the 10th EDF are aligned with the objectives of the regional agenda as set out in the regional poverty reduction strategy paper drawn up jointly by ECOWAS and WAEMU (EC RIP, 2008). In the 11th EDF, three priority sectors have been selected in line with the EU's Agenda for Change and West Africa's '2020 Vision' (EC RIP, 2014).

Besides, the EDF RIP marks significant progress towards ownership and responsibility of regional organisations in the implementation of the European Commission's support. The President of the WAEMU Commission and the President of the ECOWAS Commission are two designated regional authorising officers (RAO) for West Africa[10]. The function of the RAO is defined

9 AGIR: Alliance globale pour l'initiative Résilience. Launched in December 2012 in Ouagadougou, the Alliance is a framework that promotes greater synergy, coherence and efficiency in resilience initiatives in the 17 West African and Sahelian countries.

10 The RAO configuration within ECOWAS comprises the RAO (President of the ECOWAS Commission) with two Deputy RAOs (the Vice President of the ECOWAS Commission and the ECOWAS Commissioner for Finance).

by analogy to that of a national authorising officer, as described in the Cotonou Agreement (ACP-EC, 2000)[11]. The RAO provides institutional support for strategic programming capacity and project cycle management, regarding: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

During the implementation, both the 9th and 10th EDF RIP experienced delays and faced obstacles due to the limited absorption capacity of ECOWAS. Mid-term evaluations of EDF RIP demonstrated the need to strengthen: (1) the regional organisations' capacity to programme activities and to manage contribution agreements; (2) the human resources dedicated to priority activities; (3) coordination between regional organisations and Member States; (4) coherence between the RIP and the NIPs (EC RIP, 2008). In the 19th EU-ECOWAS political dialogue meeting at the ministerial level in Brussels in May 2013, "both parties recognise the importance of capacity building in order to overcome the serious 10th EDF implementation delays mainly due to the lack of implementing capacities" (EU-ECOWAS, 2013). As a consequence, the 11th EDF RIP includes a dedicated non-focal 2013 grant of 8.9 M€ for institutional reform and capacity strengthening of the ECOWAS Commission[12].

In December 2016, the ECOWAS Commission established an RAO Support Cell to implement the activities of the 11th RIP. This body relied on the authority of the Director of External Relations within the Office of the President of the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja (ECOWAS, 2016). It acts as an interface between the EU and ECOWAS to coordinate the implementation of all EU-funded programmes to the ECOWAS Commission. The main scopes of the Cell are the facilitation of project programming and preparation, coordination of activities with the different stakeholders, information, communication and training[13].

Obviously, a more efficient use of European funding to support the West African regional integration agenda depends on the ECOWAS Commission's ability to provide the necessary impetus and to coordinate the overall process, as well as on the political will of its member States to implement reforms and regional decisions. Yet, from an ECOWAS perspective, EU rules and procedures are also extremely cumbersome for the ECOWAS Commission, which struggles to navigate different programmes and funding (Akpasom and Seffer, 2021). The multiplicity of EU programmes sometimes leads to overlapping actions, especially when the EU has multiple cooperation frameworks (WAEMU, Conseil de l'Entente, G5 Sahel, etc.) that are supported by ECOWAS member states belonging to different institutions (Gnanguenon, 2020). ECOWAS considers that EU funds' requirements in terms of financial reporting often put an undue burden on the Commission staff (Müller, 2023).

Adding a further layer of complexity, as a consequence of the lack of compliance by the ECOWAS Commission with international standards on financial and administrative management, a significant proportion of EU aid to West Africa is presently being delivered through delegation agreements with various international organisations and EU member state development agencies.

The EU employs two different modes of management to support ECOWAS actions.  First, through direct management, the EU Commission is directly responsible for all steps in a programme's implementation: launching the calls for proposals, evaluating submitted proposals, signing grant agreements, monitoring project implementation, assessing the results and making payments (see EC, 2019a, pp. 16-17). These tasks are carried out by the Commission's departments at its headquarters, in the EU delegations, or through EU executive agencies and there are no third parties. Programmes implemented in direct management account for around 20% of the EU budget 2021-2027 (EC, 2023).

Second, through indirect management, some funding programmes are partly or fully implemented with the support of national agencies or international organisations. For instance, the EU Commission delegates budget execution tasks to implementing partners. The majority of the EU budget allocated to humanitarian aid and international development is implemented under indirect management. As a matter of fact, EU member states' implementing agencies have been most successful in getting

11 See Articles 14(3) and 35 of Annex IV:
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:02000A1215%2801%29-20170101&from=EN

12 As mentioned in the 10th RIP "Institutional support to two regional organisations is necessary in view of their experience of managing the 10th EDF RIP, the doubling of the 11th EDF allocation, and the importance attached to the role of the duly mandated regional organisations in managing and monitoring some of these funds".

13 For more details on the support provide by the RAO cell, see https://www.raosupportcellecowas.com/

projects funded by the EDF. As far as the projects under the 11th EDF are concerned, key implementing agencies such as Expertise France and the German International Development Cooperation Agency (GIZ) were paramount to the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations Project (EPSAO) (Akpasom and Seffer, 2021). As a consequence, ECOWAS representatives have questioned how the EU can promote ECOWAS ownership for programming while it allows national agencies from the EU to benefit from significant sources of funding in implementing ECOWAS programming (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023b). Besides, the ECOWAS Commission frequently pointed out that supporting projects that are implemented through implementing agencies - often relying on advisors and consultants - is not strengthening its capacities (Müller, 2023).

In order to access more funding from the EU and other donors and implement activities through direct management- -which is the preferred implementation modality for channelling EU funds - ECOWAS is making efforts to comply with the EU pillar assessment standards (ECOWAS Development Partners' Coordination Cell, 2023a; ECOWAS Development Partners' Coordination Cell, 2023b). The pillar assessment is an institutional compliance assessment set by the EU Commission that requires partner organisations to pass it before independently managing funds received from the European Commission. The pillar assessment is usually carried out by an independent auditor and this process ensures that all systems, controls, rules, and procedures comply with EU standards for transparency and accountability. Ultimately, this assessment will create more opportunities for ECOWAS to receive funds for its programmes dedicated to the promotion of regional and economic integration in West Africa. Ironically, the GIZ project (2020-2022) entitled Institutional Support to ECOWAS provides technical assistance in the preparation process for the EU pillar certification (Kirchner et al., 2011).

Considering all the above-mentioned challenges, there is still unsurprising disagreement among EU officials, member states, and West African recipients about whether the EU fund has sufficient African ownership. As an example, within the framework of its institutional support, ECOWAS indicated the need to maintain the support Cell under NDICI. Indeed, NDICI provides essential and necessary assistance for the validation of the EU pillars by ECOWAS, hence the importance of finding the necessary support for the sustainability of its operation (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023a ). However, the EU no longer sees the need for it.

The adoption of NDICI raises serious concerns about whether this new instrument will be better grounded in local understanding of the challenges of security, build on local knowledge and capacity, or respond to locally identified needs. As for now, the question is what kind of impact NDICI programming principles are likely to have on the EU-ECOWAS relations.

## 4. Impacts of NDICI programming principles on the EU-ECOWAS relations

The 11th EDF, one of the major external financing instruments, expired at the end of 2020. After three years of negotiations between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the EU, the NDICI was adopted in June 2021 as part of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) for the 2021-2027 period. After a brief presentation of NDICI, this section looks into the principles and changes for ECOWAS and other RECs.

### 4.1 NDICI, a new instrument to promote the EU's values and interests

The objective of NDICI is to uphold and promote the EU's values and interests worldwide in order to pursue the objectives and principles of its external action (EC, 2018b). In the context of increasing competitiveness and contested multilateralism in the geopolitical environment, the EU has decided to review all its external instruments and policy frameworks for cooperation to become a more strategic, responsive, and coherent global actor (Sergejeff et al., 2022). This choice involves making use of all EU external policies and instruments, including development cooperation, in a more interest-driven and integrated manner to achieve wider political priorities (notably climate, security, migration and multilateralism). Increasingly, development is seen as a core part of a renewed ambition for EU external relations (Di Ciommo and Jones, 2019).

This new financial instrument marks a profound transformation of EU development policy and spending. In order to have a financing architecture that is more flexible and transparent, the NDICI replaces and merges ten previous EU external financial instruments and programmes used between 2014 and 2020 (De Groof et al. 2018). Funds previously managed under the EDF fall under the NDICI, thus under the European Parliament's political and budgetary oversight. The EU Commission is still the main player when it comes to implementing the EU's external action policies.

For the current MFF period, the NDICI is set to contain a funding of around 79.5 billion euros, split up into four main components (EC, 2023b):

First, **a geographical component**, with 60.38 billion euros, accounts for 75% of the overall instrument and is focused on strengthening cooperation with partner countries from different regions of the world. Sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the priority regions, receiving 29.2 billion euros, including 11.6 billion euros for West Africa (ECOWAS, 2021). Programmes funded under this component will have a clear focus on promoting the rule of law, human rights, democracy, good governance, peace, security, and sustainable development, but also on managing inequality, climate change, migration, and employment.

Secondly, **a thematic component**, with 6.35 billion euros, complements geographic programmes and funds activities addressed at a global level. The focus is on actions that are linked to specific themes from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as the promotion of human rights, civil society, stability and peace, but also more general issues such as health, education or sustainable and inclusive growth.

Thirdly, **a rapid response component**, with 3.8 billion euros, is focused on managing existing crises, preventing conflicts, and building peace efforts. As opposed to the first two components, it does not require long-term programmes but is rather focused on financing individual measures or one-off action plans. This allows the EU to quickly respond to situations of crisis, instability and conflict, and better implement the triple nexus between security interventions, humanitarian aid, and development assistance.

Lastly, **a flexibility cushion** for responses to emerging crisis situations, with 9.53 billion euros, represents close to 11% of the instrument's overall budget allocation. This reserve of funds allows the European Commission to respond to unforeseen circumstances, new needs or emerging challenges, and new EU or international initiatives. It can be used to top up and fund projects and initiatives in all three pillars.

The programming process of the NDICI formally started in November 2020 and was concluded in December 2021. During the pre-programming phase and the design of Team Europe Initiatives, EU delegations, member states and partner countries identified common priorities. Regional MIP for Sub-Saharan Africa's priorities are anchored into priorities established in the country MIPs, which in turn are further complemented with actions articulated at the regional/continental level, as appropriate (EC MIP, 2021). In October 2021, during a three-day meeting organised in Ghana, ECOWAS, WAEMU, and member states updated and harmonised a list of West African regional projects or initiatives, ready to be financed, through the regional MIP 2021-2027, responding to emerging needs and the defined criteria of NDICI (ECOWAS, 2021).

A key challenge in the programming exercise is, however, to address the trade-off to ensure that cooperation responds to the priorities of both the EU and AROs and that it genuinely pursues mutual interests (Jones and Keijzer 2021). NDICI programming reflects the EU interests in Africa and builds on the 2007 JAES and the Africa-EU summit joint Declarations. It also builds on the priorities of the new European Commission, notably the Green Deal and the Digital Transformation Agenda, while taking into account the African Regional Agenda - as reflected in the AU's 'The Africa We Want Agenda 2063' -, the AfCFTA, the APSA, and the African Governance Architecture (AGA). Yet, beyond the continental priorities, it is also necessary to make sure that EU projects are aligned with the vision and development of West Africa (ECOWAS, 2021).

The stronger political framing around EU values and interests constituted the basis for programming. Alongside the needs and interests of partner countries and regions, this required a carefully crafted match between the strategic interests of the EU and those of RECs, and more specifically, our case study: ECOWAS (Sergejeff et al., 2022).

**4.2 Principles and changes with NDICI for RECs, especially ECOWAS**

The regional MIP comprehensively covers the EU's partnership with Sub-Saharan Africa and reflects the guiding principles of the NDICI: policy first, geographisation, subsidiarity, and simplification (EC MIP, 2021).

### Policy First

The so-called policy-first approach under the NDICI means that, while alignment with the priorities of the AU and the AROs will continue even through stepped-up policy dialogue, the priorities and envelopes in the regional MIP (2021-2027) do not follow an institutional logic (ibid.). The partnership with the RECs and the AU will be guided by joint objectives and will not exclude exploration of other types of regional cooperation (specialised agencies, ad hoc initiatives, etc.) based on their added value for joint cooperation in specific priority areas. In other words, the EU shifts from an institutions-driven approach to an objectives-driven approach. This more pragmatic and flexible cooperation follows recurrent challenges faced by the EU at the regional level: lack of financial resources, capacity, and coordination mechanisms, as well as security challenges not necessarily coinciding with the borders of RECs.

For ECOWAS, which has been a privileged and long-term partner institution under the various EDFs, this decision marks a break that is not necessarily well perceived. ECOWAS, like other RECs, seem to have lost its capacity of influence at different stages of the NDICI programme process. In terms of the identification of needs and potential projects at the regional level, the extent of African involvement depends on the approach of the EU Commission and EU member states. For some ECOWAS representatives, "EU Member States have no legal competence to determine the regional scope of an action in a region where an African regional organisation draws its mandate" (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023a). The ownership of the AROs and the potential benefits and costs for development priorities are thus still questioned (Sergejeff et al., 2022).

### Geographisation

The shift towards geographisation is another important move away from the previous decade, when the European Commission invested considerably in directly supporting AU and RECs and focussed on furthering regional capacity-building, cooperation, and integration (Jones and Keijzer, 2021).

With NDICI, actions are envisaged at three levels: (1) a multi-country level - two or more countries not necessarily belonging to the same sub-regional group of countries; (2) the regional level covering all Sub-Saharan African countries; (3) the sub-regional level. The latter is the broadest and covers groups of countries "which cooperate within an institutional or policy framework or mandate (either as RECs or other types of regional organisations), or which are part of a broadly defined geographic space" (EC MIP, 2021) (e.g., West Africa, the Sahel, or the Gulf of Guinea).

Behind the geographisation principle, the EU seeks greater flexibility in regional and multi-country cooperation. The AU and RECs will not consistently be beneficiaries of the EU support. It will depend on the clarity of their mandate, the ownership by their members, and their capacity to deliver. The concrete implications of such changes have not been clearly explained by the EU yet, and this lack of clarity has raised some concerns from traditional regional partners of the EU such as ECOWAS.

According to our interviews with some ECOWAS representatives, the regional dimension initially covered only sub-Saharan Africa but not West Africa. There was thus a strong call for taking into consideration the existing African regional geographical division. There is also a need to ensure consistency between thematic and geographic approaches in the programming exercise. From an ECOWAS perspective, the same thematic cannot be approached in the exact same way from one region to another. Indeed, peace and security, migration, employment, green transition or digital transition issues are not approached in the same way in West Africa and Southern Africa.

### Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is one of the most important legacies of European integration and one that has greatly inspired the African continent to implement a two-layered regional integration. Namely, a supranational entity should only address matters that cannot be effectively dealt with at the national or sub-national levels. In terms of NDICI implementation, this doctrine implies that regional cooperation needs to complement country programmes on issues that are best addressed regionally or through multi-country programmes, with the most appropriate country groupings, as described above.

The focus and modalities of the EU's cooperation engagement is determined by an analysis of national development needs and priorities of partner countries as well as by an identification of the EU's priorities and interests. All actions funded under the regional MIP, whether implemented at the country level or at the regional/continental level, need to demonstrate a clear added value to address an issue from a regional perspective (EC MIP, 2021). However, the reference to "clear added value" does not provide a defined demarcation or possible articulation between the national and the multi-country/regional/transregional levels aforementioned.

Based on the experience that the interplay between geographic and thematic approaches sometimes resulted in inconsistent responses at the country level, there was a sound rationale for clarifying subsidiarity and not neglecting larger challenges at the global or regional level (Jones and Keijzer, 2021). Some issues are indeed regional in nature when it comes to cross-border dimensions, economic integration (trade, infrastructures, human mobility, natural resource management) or specific legal and political challenges (multilateral agenda, harmonisation of norms and regulations).

Simplification

According to recent European Commission assessments (EC, 2018a), the restructuring of development cooperation into a single instrument will seek to avoid complex overlaps and complementarities, while simplifying cumbersome administrative and financial procedures. Civil society and local authorities emphasised that procedures and rules currently in place have important implications for their ability to become more involved in development cooperation (EC, 2019b). This simplification also seeks to increase the transparency of European cooperation because, by including other external financing – such as trust funds and investment facilities – in a single instrument of the European budget, it is expected to strengthen democratic scrutiny of these funds (Afessie, 2022). Under the NDICI, the European Parliament, representing the interests of EU citizens, has now political and budgetary oversight it did not have with the EDF, which was funded outside the EU budget.

In terms of consistency, there is still potential for joint programming to be further strengthened. However, this would require more commitment and transparency from the EU, the ECOWAS Commission, and their member states. From an ECOWAS perspective, even if the RECs are no longer the main beneficiaries, it is not possible to exclude them from peace and security decisions, or to remove their responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the actions undertaken in the region. The 23rd EU-ECOWAS ministerial dialogue in February 2023 reaffirms that "both sides recognised the important role of regional organisations, and their involvement in the process of design, steering and - where relevant - in the implementation of actions agreed for the West African region" (EU-ECOWAS, 2023b).

Considering the four guiding principles, there are still questions from West African recipients about African ownership. Obviously, the NDICI represents another EU ambition to reconstruct the relationship with the African continent. Yet, from the successive alliances, partnerships and agreements that precede NDICI, it is unclear how the current instrument will strengthen relations between the EU and ECOWAS and not perpetuate the challenges and shortcomings of previous European support.

## 5. After NDICI, breaks and continuities in the EU-ECOWAS cooperation

The shift to NDICI still raises questions about its consequences for West Africa. While only time will tell how the main principles are reflected in the implementation, the new interest-driven cooperation approaches of the EU raise concern, especially if challenges of "cooperation at variable geometry" (Gnanguenon, 2019) and its impact in West Africa are not taken into consideration. Beyond the concerns of regional ownership, the adoption of NDICI could also offer ECOWAS an opportunity to renew its partnership with the EU by leveraging this momentum.

### 5.1 EU's difficulties to navigate in a regional African landscape

The EU is engaged with West Africa in several forms of partnerships, ranging from continental (APSA), regional, bilateral, and ad-hoc formats. Correspondingly, the EU's financial support for these configurations has evolved in the last decades, resulting in the creation of the NDICI. On the one hand, the European approach aims to be more pragmatic and results-oriented in its support of ECOWAS, but on the other hand, the EU seems unwilling to decide between the different West African regional actors and programming priorities (EC, 2019b) despite the risk of overlapping in their mandates and actions. In other words, the EU appears to be struggling to navigate a complex West African landscape where the proliferation of AROs has created a complex set of political, institutional, financial, and human challenges. These include a tug of war over the issue of formalising ad hoc arrangements (G5 Sahel, Accra Initiative); fitful cooperation between AROs expanding their mandate in peace and security (WAEMU and Conseil de l'Entente); and difficulties in coordinating activity when two or more African regional organisations, including the AU, are competing with ECOWAS to solve security problem in West Africa. Over time, West African states have continued to establish many AROs, equipping them with additional policy competencies, such as the newer Alliance of Sahelian States (ASS).

The multiplication of EU support is inconsistent with the major role the EU has always wanted to play in supporting the AROs to design a suitable security architecture – in order to avoid overlapping, competition and duplication of activities between AROs. As an example, ECOWAS was unsure of the EU's intentions in light of the latter's involvement in West Africa and, more specifically, its focus on the "Sahel region". Obviously, African and European countries shared a growing concern about the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, where the spread of armed groups, transnational organised crime, and insecurity and poverty has increased migration to Europe. Yet, the EU's support to the institutionalisation of the G5 Sahel (Plank and Bergmann, 2021) - with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and Chad and Mauritania as non-ECOWAS members - has been a source of division in West Africa, reviving old rivalries between French and English speakers, and suspicions about France's neo-colonial ambitions (Bossuat and Cumming, 2013).

Despite the donor fatigue that seems to have caught up with the EU during the last decades, recent developments in West Africa remind us that ECOWAS is still a critical entity in tackling transnational threats, especially since the Sahara-Sahel region represents 40% of ECOWAS' surface area. "Politically and technically, in the case of West Africa ECOWAS, and more broadly the RECs, remains the best placed because of its legitimacy and the scope of its regional action." (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023c). The interest shown in the Accra Initiative[14], without prior consultation with ECOWAS (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023b; Michel, 2022), highlights again a double standard between a discourse that advocates cooperation between African organisations, while, in practice, it fragments West Africa into areas where the EU has strategic interests. Following calls for the removal of French diplomatic and military presence, the exit of the United Nations from Mali, and the rejection of ECOWAS for its perceived allegiance to external agendas, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have opted to exit the G5 Sahel and formalized a new military alliance. The emergence of the ASS adds another layer to the West African institutional framework.

This EU practice of cooperation at variable geometry is not new. Africa-EU security cooperation is embedded in the APSA as the main structure implementing policies dealing with peace and security on the continent. Created in 2002, the APSA[15] aims to transform the AU into a major player in Africa's peace, security and stability. As mentioned in the APSA roadmap 2016-2020 (AU, 2016), improved harmonisation, collaboration, and coordination between the continental (AU) and regional level (RECs/Regional Mechanisms) is crucial for the success of the APSA in delivering on its objectives. This two-tiered architecture has strong historical roots that sometimes explain a form of competition between the AU and ECOWAS (Gnanguenon, 2021) to benefit from EU financial support and the EU cannot ignore it.

As recalled at the ECOWAS Commission by the director of the Directorate of Peacekeeping and Regional Security (DPKRS), "supporting 'regional ownership' means first to accept the leadership of the process by the existing regional organisation. We should also take into consideration the specific requirements for effective intervention in the different stages of a conflict cycle in order to identify the appropriate actor to lead the process. It is imperative to build on or strengthen regional dynamics and mechanisms where they do exist rather than creating what could be seen as parallel initiative or duplication of efforts" (Agnekethom, 2019).

ECOWAS's surprise is understandable. After all, the EU has been structuring its discourse to legitimise ECOWAS and recognise it as a key actor in West Africa for more than three decades. Creating mechanisms for conflict prevention and management and ensuring mutual trust between member states have been ECOWAS priorities (Gnanguenon, 2014). This justified the need for the

14 The Accra Initiative was created in September 2017. Its members are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Togo. Nigeria joined as observer in April 2022. For more details, see https://ecfr.eu/special/african-cooperation/accra-initiative/

15 As articulated in the 2002 Protocol relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), it consists of the PSC, standing decision-making organ; the African Standby Force (ASF), on-call units structured in five regional standby forces; the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) to anticipate risk of conflict; a five-person Panel of the Wise (PoW) for prevention and mediation purposes; an advisory Military Staff Committee (MSC) and the Peace Fund

EU to help build ECOWAS's conflict prevention and resolution capacities as a precondition for regional integration.

Even if it is a source of concern, the adoption of NDICI is also an opportunity to address the dissatisfactions on both sides to move towards a "mutually beneficial partnership of equals" (EU, 2021) between the ECOWAS and the EU.

### 5.2 Questioning ownership in the wake of NDICI

Addressing ECOWAS, but also other RECs and the AU, the EU discourse is centred on ownership, partnership, and joint responsibility. It is present in every agreement and official documents on EU-Africa and EU-ECOWAS relations (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 18). The NDICI-Global Europe regulation is not an exception, and it mentions that the EU seeks to enhance partnerships. The reason behind this principle is that the EU needs to invest in long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships (Veron and Sergejeff, 2021) with a wider scope of international and local actors (Sergejeff et al., 2022). Yet, the implementation of NDICI is likely to create an additional strain as it contradicts both the EU's policy-first approach and the subsequent assertive focus on EU strategic priorities, and the emphasis on ownership and alignment with ECOWAS's needs lies at the heart of development effectiveness principles.

The ECOWAS Vision 2050 defines ownership and shared responsibility as "the involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation, definition, and implementation process" (ECOWAS, 2022). The partnership with the EU under the EDF RIP is quoted as a good example of the ECOWAS approach: "Building partnership means to agree where our different interests meet to create the 'common interest' which will be the basis of our relations and collaboration. Often it is done through a process where we review together the peace and security situation, agree on a diagnostic and define possible solutions to address what is foreseen as threats or challenges and finally agree on the required means, including political, technical and financial" (Agnekethom, 2019).

Historically, while the Cotonou Agreement referred to the principle of ownership[16], there has never been an agreement between the EU and ECOWAS on what ownership should mean (Lopez-Lucia, 2012, p. 25). Regarding peace and security, ownership was often associated with the empty rhetoric of "African solutions to African problems", thereby serving both sides as a convenient cover story for their self-interested activities (Esmenjaud and Franke, 2009). The lack of a clear joint definition has operational consequences for the EU-ECOWAS relations. As mentioned in our previous sections, while the EU is trying to apply local ownership, the tension between this concept and the operational and institutional weakness of ECOWAS compared to EU standards, accountability, and transparency demands, makes it difficult for the EU and ECOWAS to translate it into reality (Lucia Lopez, 2012, p. 25).

Now, "with NDICI, budgetary resources follow different mechanisms, a different methodology and different principles. Resources are exclusively the responsibility of the Commission and the Member States and although it is still possible to sit as a partner, the biggest change is that joint programming no longer exists" (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023b). "Ownership is not just about sitting back and giving your opinion, but the degree of involvement of AROs from formulation to implementation" (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2023c). ECOWAS already has tools to foster political dialogue which it should further strengthen.

Since 2000, the EU and ECOWAS have held ministerial-level meetings once or twice a year. These meetings are complemented by EU-ECOWAS meetings at the delegation level and by trilateral dialogue involving the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) (Nivet 2006, p. 20). The constant communication channel between the two organisations allows for addressing common peace and security concerns and enables representatives of ECOWAS and the EU to share their views.

In November 2021, the ECOWAS, WAEMU, and EU launched a tripartite concertation mechanism for NDICI. The tripartite consultation framework, which is led by the wishes of WAEMU and ECOWAS leaders given the specificity of the region, is intended to complement the dialogue platform set up at the continental level between the EU and the RECs (ECOWAS Development Partners' Coordination Cell, 2021). It aims to strengthen the strategic partnership between the EU and West Africa and to ensure the coherence of the programming of development actions, which provides for actions at national, regional, and continental levels (WAEMU, 2021). Participants discussed ongoing initiatives at the regional and EU levels to identify

16 Article 11 of the Cotonou Agreement promised agential capacity in broad strokes: "[the] parties shall pursue an active, comprehensive and integrated policy of peace building and conflict prevention and resolution, and human security, and shall address situations of fragility... This policy shall be based on the principle of ownership [...]" (ACP-EC, 2000).

development actions under the six priority areas of the NDICI. The outcomes of the discussions informed the development of NDICI's 2022 and 2023 annual action plans.

Following the 23rd EU-ECOWAS ministerial dialogue, "both sides undertake to further strengthen dialogue through the EU-RECs Dialogue Platform, Thematic working groups and continue regular dialogue including in Tripartite format: EU, ECOWAS and WAEMU in order to further ensure the ownership and coherent implementation of actions at the regional level" (EU-ECOWAS, 2023b).

Eventually, ECOWAS should consider the adoption of NDICI as a momentum to leverage a renewal of its partnership with the EU. While the NDICI aims to promote the EU's interests in a context of increasing geopolitical competition, ECOWAS could clarify its expectations vis-à-vis the EU and simultaneously promote its added value to other partners who are more willing to listen to its needs.

## 6. Conclusion

As a pilot case, this paper explores both the challenges and opportunities raised by the adoption in 2021 of the new EU financial instrument (NDICI) through the lens of EU-ECOWAS relations. Based on the EEC experience, the EU has been both a model and a support resource for improving ECOWAS's objectives in terms of economic and political integration, good governance, and regional stability.

Over the past decades, ECOWAS has made substantial institutional and political progress. In 2000, the organisation was the first ARO to establish a community levy, a self-financing mechanism covering 80% of ECOWAS's annual operational budget. In the area of peace and security, the West African organisation was the first ARO to deploy a regional force (ECOMOG) in the 1990s, and it has been a pioneer in early warnings with the launch of its ECOWARN mechanism in 2003. However, ECOWAS's progress in promoting the human security agenda has been hampered by a lack of resources and capabilities, while the organisation relies on external funding to support its programmes. As a main partner, the EU was engaged as a supporting actor through the EDF RIP with a consistently increasing envelope from 2002 (9th EDF RIP) to 2020 (11th EDF RIP). Over the years, the scope of this financial support was extended from regional economic integration activities towards peace and security cooperation between West African countries.

The study points out that the relationship with the EU under the EDF RIP was a good example of the ECOWAS's expectations in terms of partnership regarding formulation, definition, and implementation process and alignment with its priorities. First, the pillars and sectoral priorities of the successive EDFs were aligned with the objectives of the ECOWAS agenda and its 2020 Vision. As part of its political dialogue with the EU, the ECOWAS Commission was involved in the formulation, definition, and implementation of project processes. The EDF RIP is considered a significant progress towards ownership and responsibility of regional organisations in the implementation of the European Commission's support. Nevertheless, assessments, evaluations, and audits conducted over the years have pointed to the lack of compliance by ECOWAS with international standards on financial and administrative management. Both ECOWAS and the EU acknowledge that a more efficient use of European funding to support the West African agenda depends on several factors. This includes ECOWAS's capacity to: provide the necessary impetus, coordinate the overall process, dedicate human resources to manage the activities, cooperate with other AROs, and get political buy-in from its member states. From an ECOWAS perspective, the lack of absorption capacities can be partially explained by the EU's rules and procedures, which are extremely cumbersome for the ECOWAS Commission since it has to navigate different, occasionally overlapping European programmes and funding. ECOWAS representatives notably questioned how the EU can promote ECOWAS ownership and, at the same time, allow EU member states' national implementing agencies to benefit from significant overheads as a source of funding in implementing ECOWAS programmes.

Against this background, this study finds that the adoption of NDICI raises serious concerns about whether this new instrument is learning from the shortcomings of the past experience, or if it is simply a shift towards the interests of the EU without being better grounded in local understanding and building on ECOWAS's legitimacy. First, in terms of communication, while NDICI aims to mark a profound transformation of EU development policy and spending, the EU has not clearly explained the concrete implications of these changes yet. Secondly, implementing the four NDICI guiding principles (policy first, geographisation, subsidiarity, and simplification) might have negative, even counterproductive effects if it does not take into consideration the complexity and the quick evolution of the West African institutional landscape. With NDICI, the EU assumes that the RECs and the AU will not be the only beneficiaries as the EU wants to explore other types of regional cooperation based on their added value. Keeping in mind the EU experience in the "Sahel region" and its growing interest in the Accra Initiative, ECOWAS questions about the EU's consistency of focus are understandable. In January 2024, the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to move from the G5 to the G3 framework and to withdraw from ECOWAS sent shockwaves through the region. The pending question is now what the ECOWAS – EU partnership will look like if the three departing states proceed with their exit in January 2025.

Obviously, the NDICI represents the EU's ambition to reconstruct the relationship with its current and future African partners. Yet, it is unclear to what extent it will serve to strengthen relations between the EU and ECOWAS, and to avoid repeating challenges and shortcomings from previous European support. The key challenge remains in addressing the trade-off to ensure that cooperation responds concretely to the priorities of both the EU and ECOWAS and genuinely pursues mutual interests.

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