

The Relevance of ECOWAS in the 21ST Century: Questioning Good Governance and Political Stability

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Abstract: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a 15 member nations of the West African states founded in 1975 for primarily promoting economic integration and good governance. This paper interrogates through literature review and secondary sources the relevance of the 'Community' in the 21st century. The paper argues that with socio-economic and politico-legal turmoil by some of the member states, ECOWAS continues to lose its relevance and executing the objectives it was initially founded for. West African states are marked with political instability, humanitarian crimes, civil unrest, corruption, poor or bad governance and lack of transport and communication infrastructures. This paper therefore calls for self-reflection and introspection of ECOWAS if economic integration and good governance are to be achieved. This will not only be for the benefit of the 'Community' and its region but also that of the African continent in general. Using the Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory, the paper probe challenges and possible solutions as confronting ECOWAS.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Economic integration, Good governance, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory

1. Introduction

The formation of the Economic Community of the West Africa States (ECOWAS) was for the primary objectives of promoting economic integration and good governance for the West African Member States (Terwase, Abdul-Talib & Zengeni, 2015). This paper argues that these objectives have not been fully achieved and therefore calls for renewal and self-introspection. Majority of the Member States continue to be entangled in challenges relating to political instability, leadership and governance. This necessitated the interrogation of ECOWAS with a presumed hypothesis that poor or bad governance, political instability, gender disparities, human trafficking, poor or lack of transport and communication infrastructure prevents ECOWAS from fully executing its main objectives of creating a common market and promoting good governance for the region. This paper attempts to prove its theoretical speculation through literature review and the application of the Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory (KMST). This will be done through interrogating the formation and objectives that the Community was established for. In doing so, it is also important for the paper to briefly visit the history of ECOWAS. Furthermore, the paper goes on to zoom into the challenges confronting the Community such as poor or bad governance, political (in)stability, gender

disparities, issues relating to human trafficking and lack of economic infrastructure to facilitate economic integration within the region. The problem stream, policy, political and solutions streams of the KMST are unpacked and applied to the challenges with a view of finding working solutions. Lastly, the paper seeks to question the relevance of ECOWAS in the 21st century and proposing recommendations to the challenges unearthed through engagement with literature.

2. Formation, Objectives and History of ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded in May 1975 with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos (Greer, 1992). The first fifteen West African States to be signatories of the Lagos Treaty were the People's Republic of Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Burkina Faso. Through the creation of a common market, ECOWAS was seen as a machine to increase trade relations and improving economic infrastructure among West African States. As such, the founders of ECOWAS thought that this would be achieved through the free movement of goods, labour and capital within the Member States (Greer, 1992). However, this was to present

its own challenges as tensions between the Member States and former colonies in the form of Britain and France started to emerge and grow. Like any other institution in society, challenges for growth, development and prosperity were imminent in ECOWAS. In the words of Greer (1992), ECOWAS needed to relaunch itself. This paper argues that Greer's words were an indication that ECOWAS had lost relevance and focus, and therefore need for self-introspection and renewal was necessary. Despite policy and institutional challenges, ECOWAS in the 21st century is faced with challenges ranging from poor/bad governance, political instability and lack of economic integration among others. This is to say, if the Community has to remain relevant, these challenges need to be ironed-out while taking into consideration the need for economic integration of the West African region. However, there is always sustained pressure to trade with other countries outside the borders of Africa. Most of this pressure is from the United States. This is so taking into consideration the political history of the Member States of ECOWAS, which means that regional and economic integration would prove to be a daunting task. This challenge presents itself despite the fact that West Africa is immensely rich with natural resources. Other challenges that make regional integration not smooth are bad governance and political instability. The focus of the paper is now turned into interrogating these challenges in perspective.

3. Good or Bad Governance, Democracy and Elections

According to Wohlmuth (1998), the end of the 1980s was marked with the domination in debates surrounding the meaning of good governance in the African context. However, the challenge in attempting to comprehend the concept necessitated the conceptualisation of the concept 'governance' which in nature is not easy to define as it is attached to a variety of concepts and interpretations. Because of this complexity of trying to differentiate governance and good governance, it becomes imperative to demonstrate that governance only has to do with the marshalling of government resources without taking into account the consequences of such actions while good governance is aimed at perfecting the art of governance in order to yield the desired results. In essence, good governance is goal-oriented while governance is the general act of governing. However, this differentiation is not sufficient.

Defining a concept such as governance which is complex and often lend itself to a variety of interpretations can be difficult. This is so because scholars from different Schools of Thought tend to equate the concept to government. It is for this reason that this paper seeks to conceptualise governance as an activity or business of running government affairs. The Dictionary meaning of governance is that it is an activity of governing a country in order to ensure efficient, effective and economic delivery of resources and proper functioning of State institutions. According to Ogundiya (2010), governance refers to the 'art' of running government and governing people within a particular State through processes that are aimed at achieving the primary roles of that particular State. Not considering the type of a particular system used in a particular country, the end of a State has always been to create and administers administrative justice with a view of promoting the socio-economic needs of the people. By this, it can therefore be deduced that governance seeks to forge a relationship and understanding between government, its institutions and systems together with the society it governs while the interest of the people on the ground receive the deserved preference.

Gray and Khan (2010) contend that governance can be measured by the quality of government, which is sometimes difficult due to other complexities and the absence of Key Performance Indicators. However, governance requires a State that is capable of upholding the rule of law and maintaining stability in both property and human rights. With all this being said, the focus should be to understand what good governance as opposed to bad or poor governance is all about. Good governance according to Ene, Abam, Williams and Dunnamah (2013), can be understood in terms of characteristics that African States need to imbibe to. Such features are; the respect for the rule of law, constitutional checks and balances, the supply of a system of economic programmes which is growth oriented, citizens must feel involved in the nation's life, accountability, transparency, and government operations must be democratic with free, fair and credible elections (Ene, Abam, Williams & Dunnamah, 2013). With all these features required for a government system to be well or 'good' governed, it would prove difficult if not impossible to refer to African States in general and West African States in particular as ones that possesses a system of good governance (Afegbua & Adejuwon, 2012).

Scholars tend to define democracy in terms of their own perception because of the ambiguity surrounded by the concept (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). It is for this contention that authors such as Karl Popper (n.d.) said, 'democracy is the word for something that does not exist'. According to Becker and Raveloson (2008), democracy can best be understood as the government that comes from the people and is exercised by them for their own interest. It is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Drawing from these conceptions, one can closely relate the concept of democracy to elections and the power of the citizenry to choose their own representatives and ultimately their government. However, democracy is a combination of several elements such as equality, consensus, participation, access, free and fair elections, responsiveness, majority rule, parliamentary sovereignty, pluralism, checks and balances etc. However, it is noteworthy that democracies are different from each other and none can be considered to be the best. This is supported by the words of Karl Popper who contend that; 'democracy is never perfect and never complete' (Popper, n.d.).

Elections are a major factor in 'the stabilisation and democratisation of emerging democracies and post-colonial countries' (Kuhne, 2010). However, elections can also undermine the stabilisation of democracies if they are followed by violence and war. Literature suggests that many African countries have generally found it difficult and at times impossible to conduct, free, fair, transparent and credible elections. Elections in many countries are usually followed by violence that results in the killings and displacement of civilians (Vorrath, 2011). The cause of all this is the unwillingness of certain leaders to let off their hands on the machinery and government resources. Although it can be acknowledged that elections improve the strengthening and quality of democracy, a question that needs to be asked is whether regular elections in an African context improve such democracy quality? Vorrath (2011) holds that voting in Africa 'produces an ambiguous picture'. The fact that African countries are holding frequent elections does not underscore their impetus on democratisation particularly of those fragile democracies. For example, elections have been used in countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe,

Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire to legitimise autocratic regimes and ensure 'dynastic succession on the continent' (International Peace Institute, 2011). This in all probability has the potency of stigmatising the citizenry about the flaws of participatory democracy and therefore loses faith on democracy as a process. Hence countries such as the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, and Egypt just to mention a few, have in the past led revolutions to remove presidents who were deemed autocratic and undermine democratisation.

4. Political Instability in ECOWAS

Africa, and particularly West Africa, has been characterised by political instability for the past four decades (Ogundiya, 2010). This however is not the only challenge as issues relating to civil wars and genocide remain prevalent. According to Ogundiya (2010), these societal ills require human guts and people with integrity to uphold the rule of law. A question can therefore arise as to whether ECOWAS possess character and mechanisms to deal with challenges confronting West Africa? The answer is likely to be 'no', since these challenges has been existent for many decades. It is with no doubt that political instability is a consequence of bad governance (*Ibid*). Other symptoms that could result in political instability, as is the case in ECOWAS countries, are corruption (Ene *et al.*, 2013). Several examples can be made of the African continent and not of the West alone whereby political leaders cling onto power for longer than what the public can accept. Such has also been identified as a major factor that can breed political instability. The consequences of such cases of instability are in many instances assassinations, guerrilla warfare, succession movements, revolutions, civil war, anti-government riots, constitutional crisis and politically motivated strikes. These and other examples are in one way or the other prevalent in West African States. According to Fagbadebo (2007), power struggles, bad governance and political instability are major hindrances to Africa's development. Since the major objectives of ECOWAS have been to achieve economic integration and promote good governance, why has this been ignored for the sake of prosperity for West Africa? The focus in this regard would have been to focus on leadership issues and putting systems in place that would in turn promote good governance for the region as a whole. This is so because political leadership and governance systems are in shamble

and therefore lead to civil unrest. The discourse on political stability at ECOWAS level must take priority not only because the Community need to remain relevant in the 21st century but because this was part of the 1975 Lagos Treaty. With all this being said, the focus of the paper focuses on a theoretical framework which can be applied to the problem as identified by the paper and subsequently seek for a swift solution.

5. Theoretical Framework: Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory

A most critical part of a social science research is a theoretical framework which provides both the structure and boundaries within which the study is conducted. This assists the researcher to maintain focus on the phenomena being investigated as opposed to any haphazard inquiry. A theory is understood as an ordered set of assertions about a generic behaviour or structure assumed to hold throughout a significantly broad range of specific instances. It can also be defined as a statement of relationships between units observed or approximated in the empirical world (Wacker, 1998:364). As opposed to a conceptual framework, a theoretical framework refers to the theory that a researcher chooses to guide the research or hypothesis and the application of such a theory or sets of concepts drawn from one theory to offer an explanation for a phenomena or research problem (Imenda, 2014:189). This paper adopts the Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory (KMST) to understand the relevance of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the 21st century, using good governance and political stability as units of analysis. Having adopted the KMST as a theoretical framework to guide the argument of the paper, it is interesting to learn that the theory has not been applied in the study of good governance and political stability in general and specifically in the context of the African continent. The KMST has its origins in the work of the American political scientist John Kingdon. The theory has usually been used in the analysis of national policy development with the aim of understanding policy and decision making processes under conditions of ambiguity (Rossiter & Price, 2013). However, according to Riddle (2009:938), the theory can be extended and have the potential to lead to the formulation of several theoretical propositions.

Schurink (2009:807) states that a theoretical framework is used to inform the research design and guide

the methodological approach. Public Administration as a discipline and applied science has to relate to theory/ies applied in practice (Thornhill & Van Dijk, 2010:97). The Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory (KMST) is used in this paper to understand the objectives of ECOWAS and interrogate their relevance in the current discourse. Therefore, the KMST can be used as a framework to predict for future policy trends (Lovell, 2010) in regional coordination and perhaps applied in continental policy frameworks.

Traditionally, the KMST consist of the following structural elements; the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream (Burgess, 2002; Larkin, 2012; Rossiter & Price, 2013). However, there are additional elements such as; policy window and coupling (Zhou & Feng, 2014), policy entrepreneur (Rossiter & Price, 2013), and window of opportunity (Riddle, 2009) which Lovell (2010) refers to as the coming window. Due to the nature and scope of this paper, the traditional elements of the KMST will be discussed and applied in relation to governance and political stability or lack thereof in the context of ECOWAS together with the solutions stream as advocated by (Teodorovic, 2008).

5.1 The Problem Stream

The problem stream seeks to evaluate the notion of political and social problems which calls for the creation of new policies if it can reasonably be argued that they are solving a problem (Lovell, 2010). According to Rossiter and Price (2013:855), the problem stream relates to the manner in which issues are acknowledged as challenges requiring a policy response. Central to the problem streams, Kingdon (1995) asked this question;

'Why do some problems come to occupy the attention of decision-makers rather than other problems?'

The response to this question relates to a manner in which policy makers learn about conditions around them through indicators, crisis, experience and research (Rossiter & Price, 2013). According to Zhou and Feng (2014:2), these mechanisms of learning about conditions must be urgent and easily attract government official's attention to addressing the problem. In this view it can be argued that the state of governance and lack of political stability in the majority of West African countries and be viewed as both political and as societal problem that

requires policy intervention. In this vein, governance is both political and social issue in the same way that political instability is. West African States, majority of those who are member states of ECOWAS have been known for their civil unrest which in most instances is fuelled by lack of political leadership and therefore the public register their grievances by the use of force and violence. According to Porter (1995) in Teodorovic (2008), for a societal condition to be a problem, it must be perceived as such and be seen as a condition enabling government action. There is a plethora of literature and empirical evidence pointing out that the crisis in West Africa necessitates that policies at ECOWAS level be designed and implemented if this challenges are to be addressed and maintaining the main objectives of the Community of economic integration and good governance. Poor governance and political instability in ECOWAS has with no doubt calls for policy makers attention and conditions around the matter requires adequate thoughtfulness.

5.2 The Policy Stream

According to Rossiter and Price (2013:857), the policy stream describes activities relating to the identification of potential policy solution(s). It is along these lines that this paper firmly argues that poor governance and political instability in ECOWAS and its Member States rings a bell to policymakers directorate of the organisation for the formulation or even the amendment of existing policies on pieces of legislation applicable to all affiliates, policy frameworks and codes of conduct. The policy stream contains all the possible solutions to the problems as brought to the picture by policy experts, scholars, government officials and politicians (Chow, 2014:56). However, this argument does not seek to impose that the stream or the theoretical framework should be viewed as providing all the answers to a problem as issues of good governance and political stability can at times prove very difficult and complex to deal with. The policy stream advocates for the legislator to produce alternatives and proposals which are viable and seek to address the realities and ideals on the ground. This is so because such policy must be technically feasible and value accepted for it to survive. In that view, ideas may be proposed, developed, reworked and combined on an ongoing basis (Rossiter and Price, 2013) on good governance and political stability until such time as they receive the necessary attention for a lasting solution.

There is no doubt that ECOWAS has a branch mandated to formulate and revise policies and therefore imperative on this body to start acknowledging challenges affection West African States and act swiftly. A common error that is usually committed by policy makers is taking time to respond to matters of national importance by procrastinating until the problem manifests itself. This must not be the case in ECOWAS if the Community is to remain relevant in the 21st century and beyond. The aim should be to serve the interests of the region and that of the African continent in general.

5.3 The Political Stream

Similar to the problem stream, the political stream can be understood as flowing along independently of the problem and policy streams composed with public mood, campaigns from pressure groups, elections, partisanship, change in administration, change in jurisdiction, turnover in positions which has the potential to gradually strengthen the urgency of the problem (Burgess, 2002; Kroliczek, 2013; Chow, 2014; Zhou & Feng, 2014). According to Burgess (2002), the political stream reflects the ongoing breakdown between policy and monopoly. It is in this regard that issues of governance and political stability whereby political power and willingness vested to those with the ability to exercise is used as a mechanism to enforce good governance and reduce or completely curb civil unrest in the West African region. Hence all this give rise to the question of political leadership and political will. It must be borne in mind that politicians are responsible for policy making including policies which are at times not favourable to all the citizenry within a nation-state. Majority of the challenges confronting ECOWAS and in particular bad governance and political instability often results in finger-pointing whereby high ranking officials in ECOWAS politicians refuse to take responsibility and therefore be held accountable for their failures. Although the political stream of the KMST seeks to separate the problem stream and the policy stream from the political stream, this paper argues for the integration of the streams if policy initiatives are to address challenges as argued above.

5.4 The Solutions Stream

Besides the orthodox structural elements of the KMST of the problem stream, policy stream, and the political stream, Teodorovic (2008) proposed the solutions stream. This is in line with the view that in

as much as all streams can be applied to a societal and political problems such as bad governance and political instability, solutions must be sought for.

6. ECOWAS' Relevance: Questioning Its Existence

The relevance of ECOWAS in the 21st century is questionable. This is so as its primary objectives have become extraneous for the member States. Studies indicate that while the 'Community' continues seeking to engage in its primary business, many of its resolutions are not implemented (West Africa Network for Peace Building, 2012). However, this observation cannot be allowed to overshadow certain successful elements embodied by ECOWAS. A free trade area for member States has been established, intra-regional passengers transport has been facilitated and infrastructure improved to some extent. However, central to the argument of this paper are the issues of good governance and political stability. Can it be honestly said that West African States in general and ECOWAS in particular 'well' governed or at least politically stable? This question is simply answered by this paper with a firm *No*. It is therefore argued that to talk of ECOWAS's existence and relevance, one needs to narrate it in relation to good governance and political stability.

This paper argues that that all other objectives of ECOWAS as in any regional community or at least a State can stem and flow as a result of particularly good governance. It is not the aim of this paper to distort a notion that ECOWAS is completely 'useless' but to point to the fact that is a State of economic integration and prosperity, there is a desired need for civil servants and political office bearers to govern in a transparent and accountable fashion while also ensuring that there is peace and stability among civilians. There is therefore a need for self-introspection and renewal within ECOWAS if relevance is to be maintained if the Community is to remain within context for the member States, the African continent and the international community.

7. Conclusion

This paper sought to interrogate the relevance of ECOWAS in the 21st century. This was done through questioning its role particularly in relation to promoting good governance and maintaining political stability. This was done through the application of the Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory. The paper

was not therefore focusing on all the objectives of ECOWAS. It is in this vein that the paper concludes that the existence of ECOWAS remains critical for member States, West Africa and the African continent. However, the lack of implementation of resolutions and failure to act in instances of crisis, to promote good governance and political stability renders the Community irrelevant in this century. Therefore, there is a dear need to reflect at initial intentions and benchmark them with best governance practice around the world.

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