Book Review

Victor Adetula, Redie Bereketeab, and Cyril Obi (eds.), Regional Economic Communities and Peace Building in Africa: Lessons from ECOWAS and IGAD.

This book, edited by Victor Adetula, Redie Bereketeab, and Cyril Obi, examines the challenges faced by regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa when it comes to peacebuilding. It takes an interdisciplinary approach and critically analyzes these issues, particularly focusing on a comparative study of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The book delves into specific constraints that hinder their effective involvement in regional initiatives, including insufficient technical capabilities, the involvement of state and non-state actors in regional conflicts, and the domestic politics of member states. It also explores theories and practices related to peacekeeping, security, development, and the nexus between peace-building and these areas. Additionally, the book addresses topics such as provisioning, regionalism, regional peacekeeping interventions, the legal and institutional framework of RECs, and the role of civil society in peace-building. At its core, the book raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of alliances and partnerships in promoting regional peace and security, as well as the extent to which they are compromised by external powers and actors.

The view that peace and development are inherently connected continues to be prominently discussed in mainstream conversations about global governance and conflict transformation. Peace and development are seen as interrelated and mutually reinforcing priorities for achieving continental integration and sustainable development. The United Nations has indicated that violent conflict is a significant factor affecting the Human Development Index, serving as a strong indicator of prolonged underdevelopment. Consequently, there
exists a feedback loop between the absence of development and the presence of conflict. Political conflicts and wars pose threats to development, while economic development has the potential to mitigate such conflicts. However, this positive relationship is contingent upon the inclusion of key factors such as equity, fairness, and inclusivity in development outcomes.

In the post-Cold War era, the intricate nature of conflict dynamics and security challenges necessitates greater cooperation and coordination among states within specific regions. In Africa, for example, numerous countries are either grappling with internal conflicts or emerging from civil wars, which have profound implications for development. Consequently, the ongoing trends of globalization and their repercussions are fostering increased consensus-building and coordination on a regional basis. National governments are joining forces to address issues that possess cross-border, trans-boundary, or transnational dimensions, including conflicts, pandemics, desertification, drought, climate change, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking. These circumstances have further prompted many states to adopt regionalist norms, approaches, and mechanisms.

The authors of the book highlighted the links between regional cooperation and peacebuilding. Regional integration refers to the collaborative endeavor of countries with shared historical and geographical characteristics that strive to attain common objectives, both in terms of economics and politics. Typically, it involves the establishment of a formal agreement that outlines the guiding principles, goals, and targets of these cooperative arrangements. On the other hand, peacebuilding encompasses a series of actions aimed at preventing and resolving violent conflicts, promoting lasting peace after the reduction of violence, and undertaking post-conflict reconstruction efforts to prevent a recurrence of violent upheaval.

A number of studies have investigated African regionalism from the perspective of economic cooperation and conflict management in greater scope. However, the authors of this book specifically emphasized on the performance and challenges of RECs with regard to peace building in due consideration of the experiences from ECOWAS and IGAD in the context of the respective sub-regions of the continent.

The authors emphasized the challenges that hinder the effective functioning of ECOWAS and IGAD in peace-building efforts. They identified several key factors, including the overlapping and conflicting membership of states in multiple regional organizations, which led to competing loyalties and divergent areas of focus. In addition, they highlighted the insufficient technical capabilities, as well as the involvement of both state and non-state actors in regional conflicts, further complicating the operations of the two organizations. The authors also
acknowledged the influence of domestic politics within member states and the intricate interplay between security, development, and peace-building as significant constraints on the effective functioning of ECOWAS and IGAD. Moreover, they examined the impact of regional peacekeeping interventions, the legal and institutional frameworks of the organizations, and the role of civil society in peace-building. The authors sought to assess the effectiveness of these alliances in promoting regional peace and security, as well as the extent to which the involvement of international actors affected the performance of ECOWAS and IGAD in their pursuit of greater cooperation in the economic and security sectors.

The sections from one to three are general introductory sections of the book which discusses the conceptual, theoretical, and legal frameworks on the operation of RECs in general, and ECOWAS and IGAD in particular. In an effort to stress on the necessity of having well-established framework of action in the engagement of RECs, the authors assessed peace operations of other similar arrangements. They stated that one of the lessons learnt from previous peace operations is the need to strengthen the legal and institutional frameworks for collective peace and security systems, clarify roles, and harmonize strategies and programs. Thus, adherence to international law is, furthermore, a precondition for generating political and moral legitimacy of such institutions.

The piece by Jaiyebo and Adetula demonstrates how the existing legal infrastructure puts the RECs at an advantage over the UN and other external actors in the areas of right of access to conflict-raid areas, enforcement of ceasefire agreements, discipline, and oversight of international personnel. The frameworks for continental and regional interventions, like UN Peace Building Commission and APSA, helps to harmonies peace-building efforts. The authors descriptively argue that future peace-building in Africa depends on the transformation of African RECs into functional supranational institutions.

Section four of the book by Ajibewa & Shittu explores the experience of ECOWAS in peace building focusing on the human security-centered peace-building objectives enumerated in Vision 2020 Strategy. It focuses on the intention to transform the West African region from “an ECOWAS of states” to “an ECOWAS of peoples” adopting a bottom-up approach. It is an argument that peace building essentially is socialization process that should consider the indigenous knowledge and practices of the concerned communities. The authors sorely examine the shift from state-centric to community-based approaches to peace-building in the region by focusing on human security approach, which concentrates on the concept of community peace building.

The fifth section “Civil society organization and the ECOWAS Peace and Security Agenda: a case study of the West African Network for Peace building
authored by Chukwuemeka Eze, delves into the nuanced relationship between civil society organizations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the pursuit of their shared peace and security agenda. This part of the book provides a detailed case study of the West African Network for Peace building (WANEP), analyzing its strategic engagement and collaborative partnerships with ECOWAS. It explores the key factors that drive civil society’s active involvement in ECOWAS’s conflict prevention, management, and mediation efforts across the West African region. Furthermore, the chapter examines the ECOWAS – civil society partnership within the broader context of ECOWAS’s Vision 2020, a strategic framework aimed at fostering regional integration and sustainable development. While acknowledging the progress made in this regard, the author underscores the continued need for further work to fully realize the objectives of this ambitious vision.

In the academic discourse surrounding the collaboration between civil society, the state, and intergovernmental organizations in advancing the ECOWAS Peace and Security Agenda, the section advocates for a critical examination of the prevailing notion that peace and security should be the sole responsibility of the state. The discourse suggests expanding this conceptualization beyond its current state-centric focus to embrace a more people-centered and ‘endogenous’ approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of good governance and a renewed international commitment to greater egalitarianism in global decision-making processes. In this regard, the chapter underscores the significance of multi-disciplinary approaches that engage a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in understanding their respective roles and fostering broad-based partnerships. However, the recommendations put forth to achieve this overarching objective, such as the proposal on annual contributions, are presented with a sense of optimism; and the author did not acknowledge that some of the stated objectives have proven to be unrealistic in the context of other regional arrangements as well.

In the sixth section “ECOWAS and the Limits of Peacemaking in West Africa”, Amadu Sesay provides a concise analysis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its achievements in “the significant progress in the areas of conflict prevention, management, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peace enforcement in West Africa”. The chapter also provides a historical perspective on the evolution of ECOWAS, noting that the organization’s “venture into the realm of peacemaking and peace support operations is in many ways fortuitous,” and concluding that while ECOWAS has emerged as a “successful security community,” it has “failed to promote economic development in the member-states”. The central argument presented is that peacemaking and peace support operations are costly and currently beyond the financial
means of ECOWAS, due to the dire economic and security conditions faced by its member states. Sesay appears hesitant to directly criticize the member states for failing to rededicate themselves to the original principles outlined in ECOWAS’s constitutive treaty, which could enable the organization to strengthen its operational capabilities.

Section seven examines the challenges and prospects of triangular Cooperation for peace building taking the experience from Liberia and Sierra Leonean as case studies. Triangular cooperation refers to a version of South-South cooperation involving collaboration between Southern aid providers and Northern donors for the benefit of a third Southern recipient country. It connotes Southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries, supported by developed countries or multilateral organizations. It also infers the pivotal role of several emerging powers in the global South, and the framework seeks to shift the paradigm of development cooperation away from dominant asymmetrical donor-recipient towards global “partnerships” with an emphasis on national and community ownership, equity, inclusiveness, and regional solutions. Considering the peace-building initiatives in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the authors assessed that the efforts were successful initially, partly, because there were trust and harmony between the actors involved. But later, the developing world failed to take ownership and rise own resources which led to resource inadequacy problem manifesting itself in different ways.

The book discusses the role and influence of some member states of ECOWAS and IGAD in series of sections. The pieces from 8 to 15 are case studies regarding The African continent in general, and the West and Horn of Africa regions in particular has registered one of the highest rates of coup d’états in the world. In addition to this, civil wars, ethno-religious conflicts, political crises, radicalization and violent extremism, smuggling, piracy, hostage taking and kidnappings, human trafficking, and money laundering are other problems worsening the regions’ conditions. The sub-regions are also transit hubs of drugs. These crimes are facilitated by chronic corruption, and very weak or fragile states, where oftentimes oppositions claim sovereignty. Despite the effort of the sub-regional organizations, these complex set of problems resulted in huge incalculable consequences. Though still there is wide gap in implementation, protocols and frameworks on issues of Democracy and Good Governance have been signed realizing that issues of governance have been one of the root causes of problems.

The authors also identified selfish interest of some member states of the organizations as major challenge in the performance of institutions. This states tend to consider their exclusive national interest in every of their engagements
with the organizations, and usually use the institutions as an instrument to realize their foreign policy goals. The hegemonic role of Nigeria in ECOWAS, and Ethiopia and Kenya in IGAD could be mentioned as instances of such trend. For example, on section 9 of the book, the author argues that Eritrea stayed away from IGAD due to the country’s prolonged animosity with Ethiopia. And off-course for the proof, IGAD showed willingness to receive Eritrea back following the rapprochement between the two states. In addition to its dominant role in IGAD, the fact that Eritrea has developed hostile relationship with all its neighbors and its internal political condition helped Ethiopia to facilitate the UN imposed arms and travel sanctions on Eretria.

The chapters from one to seven, in general, are exceptionally fundamental because they discuss the general essence of establishing RECS, the conceptual, theoretical and legal frameworks, the need to work on the human security-centered approach to peace-building, the role of none-state actors in peace-building, the technical, institutional and other notable challenges in peace-building engagements, and the newly evolving Triangular Cooperation Framework for peace-building. In the rest of the sections, insightful descriptions can be found regarding the engagements of IGAD and ECOWAS with the member states, the role of each state within the two arrangements, and influence of the national, regional and international political dynamics on the operation of the sub-regional institutions. Accompanied with verities of types, the book is enriched with recent data on every theme in it. Moreover the authors are well informed about the countries profile and their engagement with the sub-regional arrangements.

However, upon closer examination, the book’s analysis of the performance of the two sub regional organizations often appears to be overly optimistic and disconnected from reality. Certain assertions and arguments presented in the book are questionable, and at times hypothetical and illogical. For example, the book claims that ECOWAS has been consistently successful in its missions, and that other regional economic communities (RECS) in Africa have replicated its achievements in conflict mediation, peace-building, and peacekeeping. However, practical cases presented challenge this notion and provide evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, the authors of the book are generous in their recognition of IGAD for playing a “crucial” role in peace-building and conflict resolution in the Greater Horn of Africa. While IGAD may have made some contributions in these areas, it is important to acknowledge that its effectiveness has been subject to debate and scrutiny, with varying degrees of success in different situations.

Nonetheless, the book frequently highlights ECOWAS’s supposed success in its involvement in the Sierra Leone and Liberian crises, as well as IGAD’s
role in the conflicts in Somalia and South Sudan. However, these claims can be subject to substantial challenge. Even in the present day, when conflict occurs in one particular state, it often has far-reaching consequences for the entire region. Yet, the determinant role that IGAD and ECOWAS could potentially play in their respective regions is not readily apparent. In this context, scholars argue that the Conflict Early Warning Mechanisms and post-conflict intervention frameworks of both organizations have not been effectively implemented. They contend that the failure is not due to a lack of adequate Early Warning Systems (EWS) but rather stems from the organizations’ inability to respond promptly to emerging violent conflicts, owing to their own inherent weaknesses and internal political disagreements.

Furthermore, the book tends to focus more on the problems and their destructive consequences rather than delving into the root causes and potential solutions. Almost all the contributors to the book, in various ways, acknowledge that budget-related issues are among the major challenges faced by regional organizations. As a result, these organizations are compelled to seek external funding, which, in turn, often leads them to become mere agents serving the foreign policy interests of their funders rather than actively working towards the promotion of peace and development in their respective sub-regions. Given this trend, it is important to question why these states are unable to finance their own regional entities.

The book, comprising selected papers from a policy dialogue on African regional economic communities, offers valuable insights into the hindrances to peace-building and regional economic cooperation in the continent. African countries have collectively responded to post-Cold War challenges by promoting sub-regional and continent-wide initiatives for conflict resolution and peace-building. The expanded role of regional organizations in peace-building and conflict management enhances the effectiveness of regional integration. With contributions from diverse stakeholders, including experts, policymakers, scholars, and civil societies, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject, drawing on the insights of those actively engaged in these fields.

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