

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION. LESSONS FROM THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS)

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Abstract

Conflict prevention has become an important doctrine within conflict management policies in international and regional organizations, especially since the end of the Cold War. There has been an evolution in the last three decades in the context of peace and security that has made conflict prevention gains relevance. In the current context, with the arrival of António Guterres to the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), conflict prevention doctrine could be encouraged, since he has pointed out that it should be the priority of the organization.

Conflict prevention offers several advantages to face crisis contexts, since it works on avoiding violence situations escalating towards armed conflicts and helping to control the spread of security threats. By using preventive measures, the structural causes of conflicts can be dealt with in the most durable and efficient manner since the final goal of preventive actions is to transform actually or potentially violent conflict into non-violent processes of social and political change.

While conflict prevention has gained greater importance, another trend has been promoted; security regionalization. Since the mid-nineties, there has been a transition in international peacekeeping missions, aimed to warrant peace and security all over the world that has focused on regional actors. This practice has been particularly welcomed in Africa.

Both trends –conflict prevention and security regionalization– will be the object of study in this article, using as a practical scenario the region of West Africa. It is a geographic area where a series of cross-border threats are concentrated, hence becoming a zone of international concern. Moreover, the experience on conflict prevention of the regional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is interesting. Indeed, ECOWAS has carried out a significant activity regarding preventive diplomacy and mediation in conflicts.

Thus, the objectives of this research are: (1) to study the evolution of conflict prevention doctrine; (2) to assess the link between conflict prevention policies and security regionalization; and (3) to use the case of ECOWAS as an illustration, since the organization is at the forefront of conflict prevention initiatives in the African continent.

Keywords

Conflict prevention, diplomacy, regionalization of security, West Africa, ECOWAS.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION. LESSONS FROM THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) ¹

Jara Cuadrado

1. Introduction

The dynamics of the armed conflicts that have taken place since the decade of the nineties have forced the development of different measures capable of addressing the challenges that arise in the international scenario. Thus, the advances made in conflict management respond to the changes in the normative and conceptual framework, marked by the need to solve a series of increasingly complex contexts.

In this sense, policies aiming at prevention are an indispensable tool for the management of armed conflicts, since they can help to control the spread of security threats. This set of measures works on preventing situations of violence and insecurity that can lead to an armed conflict as well as transforming those situations in which there are factors that threaten the safety of people and turning them into peaceful and stable processes (García Izquierdo, 2002).

Despite the advantages offered by this type of measures, as it is the "most pragmatic and cost-effective option" (United Nations, 2015, p.4), it has not received much attention, overshadowed by others measures that focus on more direct actions, such as peacekeeping missions. However, this doctrine could acquire more interest in the future from the UN, especially since the arrival of the new Secretary General, António Guterres, on 1 January 2017, who proposes to return to the origins of the organization, which was founded with the objective of taking "effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace" (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, article 1).

In this context, the article tries to emphasize, firstly, the need to assess prevention as one of the priorities in the field of security and peace, since it offers important advantages for the management of situations of violence and conflict. Secondly, it also aims to highlight an aspect considered essential for the progress of prevention policies: the promotion of the regionalization of security. In the nineties, with the end of the Cold War, theories about regional security began to emerge, since new actors appeared in the international scene that presented a "challenge to international relations (IR) theory" and

¹ Special issue of articles presented at the 1st International Conference on Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies that took place at UAL on the 29th and 30th of November 2018.



that “revolves around the autonomy of a regional level of analysis between the state and the globe” (Kelly, 2007, p.197).

Thus, this article tries to answer the question of whether regional actors can play a fundamental role in the prevention of conflicts within their regional security complexes (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998) and how they do it. For this purpose, the case of ECOWAS is analysed, as a regional organization with experience in conflict prevention.

The paper is structured in four sections. Firstly, it defines the concept of conflict prevention and examines its evolution in the last three decades. Secondly, the phenomenon of security regionalization is studied, with special attention to the African continent. Thirdly, the article will focus on the case of ECOWAS and its experience in conflict prevention. Finally, some of the conclusions of the research on conflict prevention are presented.

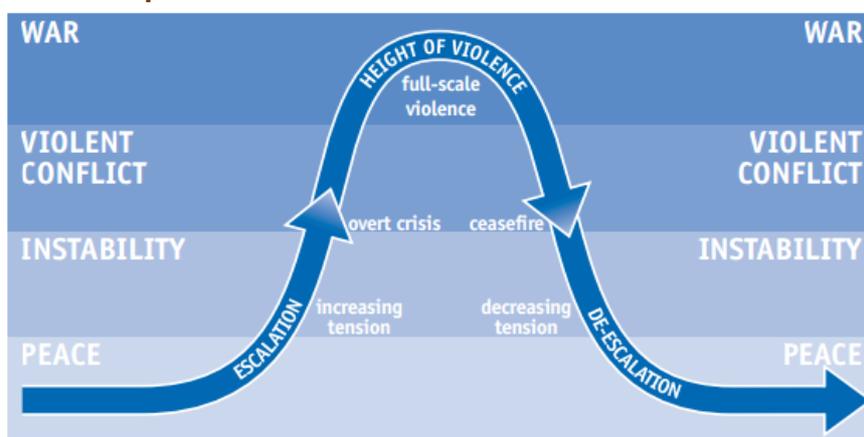
2. The (re)emergence of a culture of prevention?

What is conflict prevention?

In this article, the concept of conflict prevention is understood as the set of measures that are destined to: avoid the triggering of violence; avoid an active conflict worsens; and that works over contexts before tensions arise. It pursues, as the ultimate goal, the transformation of “real or potentially violent conflicts into peaceful processes of political and social change” (Ramsbotham, Miall & Woodhouse, 2011, p.113).

Although conflict prevention is especially applied at the beginning of the conflict, when tensions and disputes are escalating into violent conflict (graphic 1), it must be present throughout the crisis. The efforts should be focus not only on trying to contain or stop a situation of armed violence, but also on resolving the factors that lead to that situation.

Graph 1. Phases of conflict in the Lund conflict curve



Source: Lund (1993, p.38).

Preventive policies are developed from different areas (from the community, from the local level, from national governments or from international spheres), so there is a wide range of possibilities to use them. From tools such as preventive diplomacy, good offices and mediation as preventive instruments in situations of war, it has been an evolution



into another type of more complete actions, adapted to the complexity of the current contexts.

This is how they were classified² in the Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflicts, entitled *Preventing Deadly Conflict* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997) –a document of reference–, which distinguished between:

- Operational measures, which are launched in the face of an impending crisis. They act against risk factors and are direct and short-term measures.
- Structural measures, which address the sources of conflicts, the underlying causes, and involve broad and long-term change processes. These are measures for economic, social and political stability.

This is the categorization used by most studies, but the concept of conflict prevention as well as its scope of action have generated an intense and interesting debate –which is not the object of study of this article–, giving rise to different interpretations on what is and is not the prevention of conflicts (Menkhaus, 2004; Lund, 2009, p.289; Igaripé Institute, 2018).

Preventive measures, both operational and structural, represent an interesting field of action in the management of troubled contexts and they can be employed simultaneously throughout the conflict cycle. This is the case of preventive diplomacy, which took up an important place in the UN's agenda in the nineties. This concept is living a resurgence in the present, (United Nations, 2017a). Preventive diplomacy is very useful at the first stage of the conflict cycle, since it works before violence erupts through good offices and negotiations, when a third party assists to parties in conflict to solve their problems. In these cases, the role played by highly respected personalities in the international political sphere is key. For instance, one of the main organs within ECOWAS peace and security architecture is the Council of the Wise, made up of eminent personalities who act as mediators (El Abdellaoui, 2009). Preventive diplomacy has been a very common practice in conflictual electoral contexts –with more or less success–; such as in some cases in West Africa, such as Côte d'Ivoire (2011), Senegal (2012), Nigeria (2015) or Gambia (2017). Preventive diplomacy has also been used after coups d'États, like in Mali 2012.

As a kind of coercitive diplomatic measure, economic sanctions –authorized by the Article 41 of the UN Charter– are used when tensions have arisen and there is an overt crisis. They are used when mediation do not work and before considering a military intervention. They have been used at different types of conflicts, from Liberia, to Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau or Mali.

When conflict is imminent, preventive deployment becomes a useful tool as a dissuasive measure. There has been much discussion regarding the maintenance of a rapid-deployment peacekeeping force in different international and regional organizations (Darkwa, 2017; Lotze, 2015; Rappa, 2017). In West Africa there is the ECOWAS Standby Force that it is part of the African Union Standby Force (ASF), which is "a multi-disciplinary, continental peacekeeping force comprised of military, police and civilian components, which are on standby in their regions of origin and available to the African

² This classification is then adopted by other institutions like the UN, the European Union (EU) or the African Union (AU).



Union for deployment in times of crisis” (Institute for Security Studies, 2015). This option was used in Gambia, for example, through the deployment of the Economic Community of West African States Military Intervention in Gambia (ECOMIG) to enforce the election results in 2017, with a positive impact (Hartmann, 2017).

This type of measures, applied before the armed conflict breaks out, are operational and direct; however, it is even more important to develop structural measures at the first signs of tensions as well as throughout the entire cycle of the conflict. Actions focus on the underlying factors of tensions are critical in contexts of political violence. These are measures aimed at economic, political and social stability, whose development entails longer-term plans than operational measures, and they focus on aspects like governance, development and human rights (De Carvalho, 2017). However, in this article the focus is on the operational measures.

Evolution and future

Until recently, preventive policies have been relegated to a second place on the agendas of international and regional organizations, where attention has been directed predominantly towards the contexts of active civil wars as well as to the activities of post-conflict reconstruction.

However, since the end of the Cold War, conflict prevention has begun gaining a greater role in the conflict management policies of international and regional organizations (Cuadrado, 2018; Ramsbotham, Miall & Woodhouse, 2011), as evidenced by the more often reference to it in the official documents³. Thus, regional organizations –such as ECOWAS– have made conflict prevention one of their priorities.

Studies on the prevention of armed conflicts have proliferated in the last three decades, marked by the failure of the UN in the nineties to anticipate and respond effectively to contexts such as Somalia, Bosnia or Rwanda (United Nations, 2014a). These humanitarian catastrophes showed the importance of prevention and the need to overcome a culture of reaction, where actions take place after the violence has broken out, which has featured the history of the UN (Dorn & Matloff, 2000).

Since the former Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, adopted the concept of ‘culture of prevention’ in his report entitled *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, of June 2001, where he already talked about passing ‘culture of reaction’ and advancing to a ‘culture of prevention’, there has been an evolution. Conflict prevention has lived different stages, ups and downs.

Currently, it can be said that there is a new enthusiasm for prevention. In the agenda of the present Secretary General, António Guterres, prevention occupies a high priority (Leone, 2017). As the Secretary General has reflected, “the world spends much more

³ For example, the Report of the Secretary General entitled *Armed Conflict Prevention of 2001*, where a classification of the type of preventive measures is made, Security Council Resolution 1366 of August 30, 2001 on the role of the Council in the prevention of armed conflicts, the Report of the General Assembly (A / RES / 57/337) of July 18, 2003 on the prevention of armed conflicts, or the Secretary-General's Report on the implementation of the Security Council resolution 1625 (2005) on the prevention of conflicts, in particular in Africa, of 2008.



energy and resources managing crises than preventing them. Thus the UN must uphold a strategic commitment to a 'culture of prevention'" (United Nations, 2016, p.3).

In spite of this new enthusiasm that seems to exist within the UN for the prevention of conflicts, there are important barriers that can hinder its success and that must be overcome in the future. The reality is that "the Security Council's agenda is already overburdened by managing ongoing conflicts [which] makes [...] difficult [...] to devote time to crises bubbling below the surface" (Roberts, 2017).

Traditionally, the attention has been put on the management of immediate crises and large-scale conflicts (United Nations, 2018). The efforts that active conflicts require in all senses decreases the possibilities of focusing on prevention, even though these efforts could be reduced if they were "able to focus on prevention" (Roberts, 2017).

The typical dynamics of international power relations can also influence the success or failure of prevention. Thus, for example, it is important to take into account the reluctance of some countries concerning the limits of sovereignty or that the Council Security's "interest in acting in a preventive capacity [is] already limited in cases when a powerful member was involved in a looming conflict" (Roberts, 2017). Other aspects have to do with "the difficulty in [...] demonstrating that a given action resulted in conflict not taking place" (United Nations, 2018, p.1).

Thus, as Stephanie Sugars (2017) points out, so that the enthusiasm that Guterres is demonstrating translates into success, it is necessary "a fundamental break with the UN's current approach, not to mention sizeable reforms to address the body's its sluggish response time to conflicts [or] its burgeoning bureaucracy".

Added to this, it is the lack of political will to deploy measures that respond early to alerts. Several authors (Stanton, 2005; Wulf & Debiel, 2009; Evans, 2016) have indicated that political will is the key, either for the time to develop an accurate analysis, for not being aware of the type of skills needed to handle the problem, or for the lack of interest in specific topics or regions.

These obstacles, which make it difficult to carry out measures with a preventive effect, could be overcome or reduced, to some extent, if the prevention of conflicts is further promoted by regional organizations.

3. Regionalization as an opportunity: taking advantage of local actors to promote prevention

The regionalization of security, a trend that has gained importance in the last three decades (Berman, 2002; Francis, 2006; Moller, 2009), could help to encourage conflict prevention. It is increasingly common for regional bodies, as ECOWAS, to assume the management of their peace and security problems, through the development of new policies and mechanisms (Tavares, 2009). The region of West Africa encompasses a series of security threats that can have a destabilization effect throughout the region – as it occurs with terrorism and organized crime, or with climate change and violence related to resource scarcity. This produces a security interdependence, since national security concerns of West African states are very similar and are so close that they can not be addressed independently (Persson, 2012). Thus, regional problems are managed



from a regional co-operation (Buzan, Waever & Wilder, 2003) under the ECOWAS architecture.

The involvement of regional organizations in security issues has significant advantages, such as a better knowledge of the context and of the causes of conflict. They are actors who know the terrain better so they understand the situation from another perspective and have a direct interest in the repercussions and solutions of the conflict. Moreover, "regional political actors [...] have both greater legitimacy and a much greater political stake in taking a diplomatic lead" (Gowan, 2017, p.6).

Consequently, regional and local actors, with the support of the international community, play a leading role in conflict prevention. As Guterres has outlined, regional organizations are essential actors in conflict prevention and resolution, in peace operations and promotion of development and human rights (United Nations, 2016, p.4).

However, this option is not always the best. One of the problem is the competition between some regional actors that can affect prevention success. For instance, the traditional rivalry of Nigeria and South Africa "have prevented consensus within the AU on key preventive diplomacy efforts" (Hara, 2011). The leadership role developed by Nigeria has awakened mistrust in other ECOWAS members at different conflictual situations, like the civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone (Adebajo, 2002), which has made difficult to come to an agreement within the regional organization.

Furthermore, personal ties between political leaders determinate the position that governments adopt in the face of a crisis, therefore there is not impartiality. This has occurred in several occasions within ECOWAS. While overwhelming measures were taken after the coups d'État in Guinea in 2008 or in the Gambian context in 2017, a weaker attitude has been shown during the recent crisis in Togo (RFI Afrique, 2017)⁴. Different reactions are explained by the individual interests of each Member State, which have diverse strategic views that hinder a common decision-making and effective responses. Thus, this clash of interests can be detrimental to the advance of the empowerment of regional organizations in sensitive issues like security.

Moreover, regional actors like ECOWAS have shortage of material, financial and human resources, showing a dependence on external actors that limits the success of security regionalization. In this sense, the African continent is one of the priorities for the UN. The organization is aware of the need to cooperate with Africa's regional organizations for the promotion of preventive measures; this cooperation is essential to overcome the lack of resources. Accordingly, the UN "reaffirms its intention to consider further steps to promote closer and more operational cooperation between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations in the fields of early warning, conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding" (United Nations, 2014b). In 2002 the Ad hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa was created (United Nations, 2002). More recently, it was established a Cluster on Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management by the UN Office for the African Union (UNOAU), which is a strategic partnership in conflict prevention and mediation, working "throughout all phases of the conflict cycle", between the UN and the AU (United Nations Office to the African Union, n.d.).

Cooperation between different actors in the field of peace and security has been a trend that has evolved and grown. That implies sometimes an "institutional overlap of actors"

⁴ These cases will be addressed in a later section.



which “operate and intervene in the same geographical area [...] in the same crisis at the same time or replacing each other” (Sousa, 2017, p.572). Thus, a lack of alignment is frequent as well as a tendency for divergence, contradictions and duplicity of efforts and resources. Africa has been setting of disputes between the UN, the AU, and the regional organizations (Nathan, 2017, p.151).

Operations launched by regional organizations need authorization by the Security Council prior to deployment (UN Charter, Chapter VIII, Art. 53), causing in many occasions “disagreements [...] at various levels of decision-making” between the UN and the AU (Desmidt & Hauck, 2017, p.15), but also with ECOWAS, which does “not explicitly acknowledge the supremacy of the UNSC [the United Nations Security Council] if it comes to peace and security” (Jetschke & Schlipphak, 2019, p.4). As Williams has highlighted (2017, p.129), it is necessary that “the UN develops appropriate support mechanisms” for regional organizations in Africa, especially because of the lack of “predictable, sustainable, and flexible funding” they have (Williams, 2017, p.129).

At the same time, divergence appears between the AU and the regional organizations, like ECOWAS, where a “lack of clarity on subsidiarity and division of labor [...] often lead to ad-hoc and pragmatic solutions” (Desmidt, 2019, p.2), affecting the deployment of preventive measures. From the AU, the concept of primacy is standed up (Desmidt, 2019, p.4), however, the principle of subsidiarity “states that responses to conflict should be formulated by organizations with closest proximity” (Desmidt, 2019, p.12); thus, as Nathan (2017, p.157) has highlighted, policy documents “are ambiguous or contradictory” when tackling crisis management.

On the whole, although security regionalization offers a great opportunity to encourage conflict prevention policies, there is still a dependence on external actors. This has caused an overlap and confusion between all stakeholders that intervene in a crisis, difficulting the capacity of action to intervene or act preventively.

4. The experience of ECOWAS in conflict prevention

The West African region is a great example to analyse these issues, since it has experienced an interesting process of security regionalization and has also lived interventions from different actors.

This region has attracted a great interest and concern, due to the number of conflicts that have been in the area. For this reason, in 2000, a regional conflict resolution office was established in Senegal, currently the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS⁵), whose objectives are to develop regional diplomacy to manage political instability within the region (Gowan, 2017, p.9). UNOWAS has developed activities coordinated with ECOWAS, specially in the field of conflict prevention. This collaborative work had had great results in the cases of Guinea or Burkina Faso, for example.

The area of West Africa has also been selected because interesting lessons can be obtained from the activities related to conflict prevention of its regional organization. Undoubtedly, the model developed by ECOWAS is the most interesting example in the

⁵ Before known as the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA).



continent (Wulf & Debiel, 2009).

At the end of 1990, the organization adopted the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (The Mechanism), agreed on the Lome Summit on 10 December 1999, which is "the most important legal and normative instrument for ECOWAS in all matters relating to peace and security" (ECOWAS, 2018, p.16).

This legal instrument demonstrates that the prevention of conflicts acquires a great importance for the organization, since among the objectives of the Mechanism are the prevention of: internal and inter-State conflicts; serious and massive violations of human rights; or an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government.

A next step was the approval of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted on 21 December 2001 and signed in Dakar, with the goal of incorporating provisions regarding topics such as prevention of internal crises (United Nations, n.d.).

The most recent agreement on preventive policies has been the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), adopted by the Mediation and Security Council (the central organ of the Mechanism) on January 16 2008, in Ouagadougou. The ECPF sought to be the definitive impulse for the prevention of conflicts, acting as an strategic framework for conflict prevention and human security and looking for a more pro-active and operational conflict prevention posture from Member States (ECOWAS, 2008, p.12).

Finally, as a result of the agreements reached after the launch of the ECPF, in 2015 the ECOWAS Mediation Facilitation Division (MFD) was established under the Directorate of Political Affairs, with the aim of promoting preventive diplomacy in the region (ECOWAS, 2018).

This legal framework places ECOWAS as one of the most advanced regional organizations of Africa in conflict prevention. However, more than a decade after the ECPF was adopted, there are important constraints that limit its potential on the ground. The ECPF is an structure that is still in the course of being implemented and needs a long process of operationalization. One of the main challenges is the lack of funding, which depends on Member States ("Peace building experts, others, urge ECOWAS to animate the implementation of its Conflict Prevention Framework", 2019). The limited human and financial resources affect the development of the framework and makes the regional organization has to select in what contexts or in what situations intervene. Thus, in a region where there are significant challenges to peace and security, the lack of resources makes some risk factors do not get enough attention and that the actions focus on the most immediate threats (Yabi, 2010, p.55).

Together with resources constraints, there are other obstacles that conditionate the implementation of conflict prevention in the region, which will be analyse in the next section.

Prevention on the ground

Under this normative framework that has evolved and adapted to the changes and needs of the region's security scenario, ECOWAS has developed an important activity in preventive diplomacy and mediation in different contexts. With the objective of illustrating the conflict prevention policies of ECOWAS, some cases of study have been



selected (Table 1), analysing factors like the different contexts in which preventive measures were developed, the actors who participated together with ECOWAS or the type of actions that those actors carried out.

Table 1. Case studies of ECOWAS conflict prevention measures

Cases ⁶	Type of conflict	Preventive measures
Liberia (1989)	Escalation to civil war	Diplomatic and mediation efforts Military intervention
Guinea (2008)	Coup d'État	Institutional incentives Imposition of sanctions Suspension of Guinea as a member of ECOWAS
Côte d'Ivoire (2010)	Electoral violence	Suspension of Côte d'Ivoire as a member of ECOWAS Imposition of sanctions Sent of diplomatic delegations Threat of use of force
Burkina Faso (2014)	Public demonstrations	Imposition of sanctions Arms embargo Early warning mission
The Gambia (2016)	Electoral violence	Diplomatic and mediation efforts Preventive deployment
Togo (2017)	Public demonstrations	Mediation efforts Monitoring activities

Source: author's elaboration

Due to the theoretical framework that has been established to analyze the evolution of conflict prevention doctrine in this article begins with the end of the Cold War, the first selected case of analysis is *Liberia* (1989). It is, moreover, the first civil war in the region that test the ECOWAS crisis management capacities.

The first Liberian civil war began when rebels led by Charles Taylor crossed the border from Côte d'Ivoire to fight against Samuel Doe's government. At that time, the legal instruments⁷ used by ECOWAS did not contemplate the prevention of internal conflicts, but rather between States. Some of the first steps made by the regional organization were focus on diplomatic attempts, creating the Standing Committee on Mediation in May 1990 (Suifon, n.d., p.3). However, those efforts failed and ECOWAS decided to act because the crisis was considered a regional problem (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

Despite the fact that ECOWAS intervention occurred once the war has broken out –that is why the intervention was considered “largely reactive” (ECOWAS, 2018, p.35)– it was the only actor who adopted an active attitude in the conflict and, as some authors have pointed out, the military intervention was successful “at least for a short period, preventing the situation from degenerating into genocidal proportions” like that of

⁶ The dates that are included in parentheses reflect the year in which the violence begins.

⁷ At that time only existed the Protocol on Non-Aggression of 1978 and the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defense of 1981.



Rwanda (Draman & Carment, 2003, p.17).

Another example is the crisis opened in *Guinea* with the Lansana Conté's succession. After his death, in December 2008, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara and fellow military officers led a coup d'État. The situation started worsening when he decided to present himself to next presidential election, an announcement that provoked strong protests in September 2009 that culminated with the massacre occurred at the National Stadium of Conakry, committed by soldiers under the command of the military junta (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The government received "pressure and incentives [by ECOWAS] to allow elections to take place and to enable an international investigation into the massacre (Day & Pichler Fong, 2017, p.8).

Both ECOWAS and the AU used coercitive tools, such as the imposition of sanctions and the suspension of Guinea as member of the regional organization. Moreover, there was an important external pressure and preventive measures like threats of prosecution by the International Criminal Court were used (Day & Pichler Fong, 2017, p.7). This had an effective effect on some fellows of Camara, who suffered an assassination attempt that forced his leave, facilitating the transition to civilian rule.

The UN also took a preventive attitude in this crisis through its regional office, UNOWAS (then the United Nations Office for West Africa –UNOWA), and the Regional Coordinator, who developed "intensive preventive diplomacy efforts" (Von Einsiedel et al., 2018, p.15), acting as mediator with different stakeholders. Moreover, UNOWA provided logistical and technical support to ECOWAS, that had the real leadership as mediator, and more particularly, one of its Member States, Burkina Faso, whose president convinced the transitional government to organize elections. Thus, "the engagement of ECOWAS [...] was largely considered a successful effort to avert further violence or escalation to civil war" (Hara, 2011).

Another interesting experience for the regional organization was the civil war that arises in *Côte d'Ivoire* after the 2010's presidential elections. While the Electoral Commission, as well as the international community, declared Alassane Ouattara the winner, Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept the result as the Constitutional Council announced that he was the real victor because he had obtained a larger percentage than his rival (Cook, 2011). Given this scenario, ECOWAS asked the parties to respect the results and to celebrate an extraordinary meeting, although they clearly showed their support for Ouattara.

Some of the first steps taken by the regional organization were the suspension of Côte d'Ivoire as a member at the beginning of December, in addition to the UA, forcing Gbagbo to accept the results (Cook, 2011) and the imposition of sanctions, following article 45 of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Both organizations sent diplomatic delegations, such as the one led by the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, who traveled to the country to make a generic call for peace and democracy, but without issuing an important statement (Al Jazeera, 2010).

In the absence of action of the UN –that received a lot of criticism from different organizations for its indifference– ECOWAS decided to take action. At the end of December 2010, ECOWAS gave an ultimatum to Gbagbo, using the threat of the use of force, that was ignored it, for which the organization found itself without options, and had to contemplate other measures, including the use of force (Cook, 2011). On December 31, a Nigerian defense spokesman announced that ECOWAS military chiefs from several member countries had "prepared plans to 'forcefully take over power' from



Gbagbo using a grouping of troops called the ECOWAS standby force [...] if diplomatic efforts to pressure him to cede the presidency fail” (Cook, 2011, p.39). However, military intervention was finally conducted “by French, UN and pro-Ouattara ‘Republican’ forces” (Yabi, 2012, p.3).

Despite the slowness with which preventive measures were carried out and despite the external dependence to act, as some studies point out, it is interesting to highlight that the second civil war in the Côte d’Ivoire would be one of the clearest examples in which ECOWAS made use of preventive diplomacy (Kwabena, 2015).

The following example is found in *Burkina Faso*, which in 2014 experienced a stage of public opposition due to President’s intentions to extend his term limit. This provoked mass demonstrations that led to the resignation of then-President Blaise Compaoré (Taoko, Cowell & Callimachi, 2014). Subsequently there was an attempted coup d’État against the transition authorities.

There were important preventive measures, such as the imposition of sanctions asked by ECOWAS to the AU (“UNOWA head Mohammed Ibn Chambas to brief on Burkina Faso”, 2015), who also “decided to suspend the participation of Burkina Faso from all AU activities” (Desmidt, 2019, p.12). As some studies have pointed out (Day & Pichler Fong, 2017, p.7), these pressures were one of the key factors for “averting further chaos and a high risk of violence”. ECOWAS decided to impose an arms embargo in September (“ECOWAS arms embargo on Guinea”, n.d.).

Moreover, civil society organizations played an important preventive role in the crisis, since they organized several workshops throughout the previous year of the elections on monitoring and preventing violence, in which politicians and media were involved.

Despite these preventive measures, Compaoré refused to leave the power, and ECOWAS decided to intervene together with UNOWA and deployed a joint early warning mission with the aim of promoting a national dialogue between national political actors and civil society. However, the president kept strong while tensions continued rising. This provoked a new intervention of both actors to which the AU decided to join.

Finally, joint efforts resulted in “a new Constitution and a one-year civilian-led transition that would culminate with general elections in November 2015” (United Nations, 2018, p.6). The support of ECOWAS and its mediation efforts during the transition period were key for the successful of the national dialogue. Equally important was the collaborations with UNOWA, that gave its support to the regional organization, and with the AU, since in spite of initial disagreements, in the end there was a collaborative work.

The same circumstances occurred in *The Gambia* at the end of 2016, when President Yahya Jammeh refused to accept his defeat in the December elections. This provoked a climate of tension in the country that led ECOWAS to get involved, initiating diplomatic and mediation work with President Jammeh to accept the results of the elections (ECOWAS, 2017). There were several occasions in which the leaders of the region met with both Jammeh and the elected president, Adama Barrow (Alfa Shaban, 2017).

Before considering a preventive deployment, ECOWAS’ Members developed mediation efforts through high-level delegation visits in December 2016 (Desmidt, 2019, p.7). Finally, ECOWAS decided to intervene on January 19 2017 according with the Article 25 of the ECOWAS Mechanism and with the support of the UN and the AU (Day & Pichler Fong, 2017). The deployment of the ECOMIG would be applauded by the international



community (Alfa Shaban, 2017). The good coordination between the UN and ECOWAS was reflected by the role played by UNOWAS, that held “meetings with representatives of the government, opposition parties, civil society and women and youth organizations” (“Peaceful and credible elections: A case of UNOWAS’ holistic coordination”, 2017, p.7).

The Gambia has been an example of the success of ECOWAS preventive policies and could be highlighted as a paradigm for future crises in the region; this preventive deployment has served to prevent a post-electoral context of tension leading to an escalation of violence.

Anti-government protests were also echoed in another country of the region, *Togo*, where at the end of August 2017 a wave of demonstrations demanding constitutional reforms and the resignation of the President Faure Gnassingbé Eyadéma⁸ broken out, which were harshly repressed (RFI Afrique, 2017). The regional organization called then for peace “upon all political stakeholders and the people of Togo to exercise restraint and refrain from violence, and dialogue in order to preserve peace” (RFI Afrique, 2017).

ECOWAS’ countries intervened, beginning a dialogue process between the ruling party and the opposition that was initiated with the Presidents of Ghana and Guinea as the lead mediators (United Nations, 2017b). Within ECOWAS, there was satisfaction for the preventive efforts made by these two leaders (“ECOWAS hails Akufo-Addo, Alpha Condé over Togo intervention”, 2018). The regional organization set the celebration of parliamentary elections on December 2018. For that purpose, the “organization urged the Togolese government to proceed with the complete revision of the electoral roll prior to these legislative” (Gbenyedji, 2018). Parliamentary elections were finally celebrated on December 20, with a victory of the ruling party, who ignored the recommendations from the regional organization.

5. Conclusions

These contexts of political and social instability are some examples in which the preventive tools of ECOWAS and its coordination with other actors have been tested as well as they have served to improve the management of its security challenges. Through the study of these cases, it has been possible to see some of the tools the organization can use to prevent conflicts, such as preventive diplomacy –through mediation and dialogue between the parties–, the imposition of sanctions, the suspension from membership of a Member State, or the threat of the use of force as a deterrent. The analysis of these experiences showed that ECOWAS has had an important activity on conflict prevention.

But these experiences have also revealed the main challenges that the organization face in terms of prevention. Crises such as the one currently taking place in Togo or past cases like Côte d’Ivoire have revealed the vulnerabilities of its policies.

Some of the main obstacles detected in the ECOWAS conflict prevention policies can be summarised as follows. Firstly, there is a group of factors related to aspects like the fight for political power, the personal relationships, or typical dynamics of power structures. Within this group is the divergence of stakeholder’s interests. As it has been observed, the agents involved in those scenarios maintained different attitudes to the crises. This

⁸ His family is the longest in a West African government.



lack of agreement or understanding among crucial actors explains the slowness with which the measures were applied once the early warnings were identified.

The clash of interest between ECOWAS Member States was present during the First Liberian War. Nigeria wanted to play a leadership role while the government of Burkina Faso had personal interest in the crisis due to his ties with Liberian dissidents (Murison, 2004, 603), which affected the decision-making.

There have also been clashes of interests between the regional organization and the continental organization, the AU, which had repercussions on the ground, turning the decision-making about the management of crises difficult. During the previous context of the Liberian civil war, for example, the countries of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), predecessor of the AU, showed a different position than the one that ECOWAS had. The OAU was opposed to a military intervention in Liberia, especially those countries that supported Charles Taylor, the rebel leader (Wippman, 1993, p.165). This lack of a common action between the two organizations was also present in the Côte d'Ivoire's electoral crisis of 2010, since within the AU there were disparity of positions on the support to the two political leaders, Ouattara and Gbagbo, ECOWAS kept a posture of unity.

Moreover, partiality was present in some cases. Some of the Member States of ECOWAS had significant influence in the political context of Côte d'Ivoire, such as the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, who could have put more pressure on the parties. The role played by his government was seen as not neutral by other ECOWAS Member States, since he "has been strongly identified as an ally of Ouattara and accused of being a key mover behind the initial insurgency in [Côte d'Ivoire] in September 2002" (The Guardian, 2011). This lack of impartiality existed also in Togo. One of the main obstacles for the dialogue experts saw (RFI Afrique, 2017) was that the president of Togo had been chairman of ECOWAS for one-year, until June 2018. This is an important factor to consider, since the regional organization was not revealing a neutral position to this crisis and there was a certain lack of political will to act. As some organizations have described, there was abuse of power and dictatorial measures during the electoral contexts (Bailey, 2019), but both ECOWAS and the AU have call the elections as "free and transparent" ("Togo President's Party Wins Majority in Parliament", 2018).

Added to this, it is the lack of political will to deploy measures. A clear example is Guinea, since despite the successful final result, with a pacific transitional government, it is necessary to highlight that the crisis and specially the deaths of civilians could have been prevented if stakeholders, mainly ECOWAS, had reacted more immediately to the coup d'État. Thus, between the coup d'État and the massacre of September 2009 some other measures could have been used, such as imposition of sanctions and an arms embargo, which were launched immediately after the high death of civilians.

In addition, contradictions often occur in the approaches and functions to be performed when collaborating with the AU. Strong disagreements between both organizations were presented during the crisis in Burkina Faso. However, there are some examples in which the cooperation between them had positive impacts on the ground, like in Guinea o The Gambia (Kreß & Nußberger, 2017).

Secondly, it is necessary to have in mind a group of factors related to more operational or logistic aspects that are present in organizations like ECOWAS, like the complex bureaucracy, which makes decision-making difficult, and prolongs the time that elapses



from the decision to implement a preventive measure up to the application of that measure. In addition, this sometimes makes it difficult to design a strategic approach (Yabi, 2010, p.13), as it occurred, for example, in the case of Côte d'Ivoire. At the end of 2010, when the electoral crisis was driving to an escalation of violence, ECOWAS threatened with the use of force, but in January the mission had not been yet launched, so the suspicion was confirmed that an intervention by force would be difficult to deploy since it lacked a plan and it would require additional resources (Kwabena, 2015, p.32).

This last aspect is a very important constraint that has been present in all the cases analysed in this article. The lack of human and financial resources in ECOWAS makes it has dependency on the external actors to be able to intervene preventively.

Finally, it is important to highlight the need to incorporate the work of civil society organizations (CSO), as it has been underlined in recent political meetings ("Peace building experts, others, urge ECOWAS to animate the implementation of its Conflict Prevention Framework", 2019). Collaboration between ECOWAS and CSO has proved to be very useful in contexts such as Burkina Faso (Somé, 2014).

In conclusion, the organization still has a long way to go to become an effective actor, given the complexity of the challenges it faces, many of which do not only have an internal character, but also feed on external factors. Currently, it seems that regional political actors in West Africa have a commitment to implement the organization's framework of action in conflict prevention (African Media Agency, 2019; "Peace building experts, others, urge ECOWAS to animate the implementation of its Conflict Prevention Framework", 2019). Thanks to the management developed in cases such as The Gambia, ECOWAS has received the applause from the international community. This regional actor plays undoubtedly a key role in implementing conflict prevention and among its priorities it is to continue developing and improving preventive policies ("ECOWAS launches Plans of Action for its Conflict Prevention Framework", 2019). The history of this regional organization offers interesting lessons on the importance that the regionalization of security has for the African continent, where conflict prevention could become the main challenge.

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