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DEPARTMENT OF STATE WASHINGTON DC OFFICE OF EXTERNAL--ETC F/6 5/4
ECOWAS AND OTHER WEST AFRICAN REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, (U)
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12 JAN 1987
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UNITAR

Prepared for Conference on ECOWAS

Department of State

11 9 Jun 1986

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*This is an updated and revised version of material which first
appeared in the author's Multinational Cooperation for Development
in West Africa (Elmsford: Pergamon Press, 1979).

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I. Introduction

I have been asked to discuss linkages between ECOWAS and other African regional organizations such as ECA, ADB, CEAO, and others. I do not intend to give "equal time" to all of these organizations. Instead I will focus on West African organizations, some of which are economic and some of which are not. This in no way implies that relationships between ECOWAS and some of the continental organizations such as ECA and ADB are not important. ECA, for example, played a very important role in the creation of ECOWAS and continues to be a strong supporter of ECOWAS. The potential for a close and fruitful relationship also exists with ADB. I will not discuss these relationships precisely because they present no immediate problems and more interesting observations can be made about ECOWAS and other West African organizations.

II. Regionalism in West Africa

We can begin with a general view of regionalism in West Africa. ECOWAS is now the largest and most important West African organization but it is certainly not the only one or the first one. With the collapse of the East African Community and in view of the absence of serious integrative efforts on the rest of the continent, West Africa is today the focus of the most important integrative and co-operative activities in Africa.

There are now over thirty regional organizations in West Africa with exclusively or predominantly West African memberships. These organizations are involved in promoting integration or co-operation of various types between West African countries.

These 30 or so organizations can be divided or classified into six different categories.

The first category are organizations active in the area of trade and finance. ECOWAS along with CEAO and more specialized organizations such as the West African Clearing House would be examples.

A second category are development authorities. These can be of two types. One type is multisectional authorities concerned with the comprehensive development of a given geographic area. The river basin commissions or CILSS

would be examples. The other type are sectoral authorities such as the Port Management Association of West and Central Africa.

A third category of West African organizations are in the agricultural research and development area. The prime example of such an organization is WARDA.

Education and training is the fourth category. Organizations such as the West African Examinations Council illustrate the work being performed by such organizations.

The fifth category consists of organizations involved with health. The Secretariat of Health for West Africa is an example.

The sixth and final category are primary commodity arrangements like the African Groundnut Council or the Cocoa Producers Alliance.

All of these organizations can be seen as responses to the widely held perception that many of the developmental problems faced by West African countries could best be handled in a co-operative or joint fashion. This perception is of course related to the fact that most West African countries are quite small and suffer from manpower shortages, technical and information gaps, lack of administrative infrastructure, etc.

For these reasons then it is not surprising that regional organizations were created. These organizations emerged in two distinct phases. The first phase was the immediate post-independence period, largely in the 1960s.

With the exception of overtly political organizations such as the Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union, the organizations that came into being during this first phase were carryovers from the colonial era. The organizations might have been given new names or additional functions but most were essentially the same old associations that were formed between the colonial territories. It was to be expected then that most of these organizations were exclusively either Anglophonic or Francophonic. There were somewhat more of the Francophonic organizations since the ties between the French territories were somewhat stronger than those between the four British colonial territories in West Africa.

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The second phase, beginning in the early 1970s, was different in that genuinely new organizations were formed by the West African countries. There was also a noticeable increase in the number of organizations. A majority of the existing organizations were in fact formed after 1970. Many of these new organizations included both Francophonic and Anglophonic states as members. The erosion of the division between these two groups of states could be noticed.

While it is possible to view the large network of diverse regional organizations as a sign of vitality, a more questioning viewpoint is more prevalent. Most observers would insist on distinguishing between activity and purpose. There are a large number of regional organizations in West Africa. But some are "paper organizations" and others lack effectiveness. Furthermore there are serious problems of duplication and overlap of memberships as well as dispersal of scarce resources. West Africa has a multitude of organizations but lacks a coherent network of organizations.

III. Future Challenges

What are the problems and challenges of the future and how can they be met?

ECOWAS, being a comprehensive umbrella organization embracing all of West Africa, has both an opportunity and an obligation to try to develop a coherent set of West African organizations. To this end ECOWAS may eventually absorb some of the existing organizations. It may want to establish good working relationships with others. ECOWAS does have a great deal to gain by co-operating with the more viable and effective organizations. Such co-operation will relieve some of the pressure on the ECCOWAS Secretariat and take advantage of the longer experience and expertise of some of the other organizations. With regard to many of the other West African organizations, the problem of developing mutually beneficial relationships with ECOWAS is not a serious one. With patience and good will productive relationships can emerge.

Potential problems are more acute with regard to other West African organizations in the trade and finance field. The two most important of these are the Mano River Union and CEAO. Both of these organizations have

aims virtually identical to those of ECOWAS. Since it is a small and relatively new organization, one can perhaps envisage the Mano River Union being integrated into ECOWAS without too many difficulties.

The difficulties will be more acute with regard to CEAO. CEAO was formed in 1973 and has six members: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast. Complementary to CEAO are a variety of other organizations linking the same six countries. These include UMOA, BOAD, and BCEAO.

It is generally agreed that CEAO is a viable, relatively effective organization. Its institutions are firmly established and functioning. Furthermore it has some of the requisites often considered necessary for successful integration, such as a common heritage, a common language, a common currency, etc.

For the past several years, CEAO has been successively operating a regional co-operation tax and fund. The poorer members of CEAO benefit from these mechanisms and CEAO is thus dealing with one of the most intractable problems integration schemes face: the distribution of benefits.

CEAO is in effect doing for 6 countries what ECOWAS seeks to do for 16. There is some speculation that the CEAO/^{countries} can act somewhat like the BENELUX countries in the EEC. But even in the most optimistic projections, this would be a long way down the road. Since it does duplicate ECOWAS and since the membership overlaps, CEAO does present a serious potential future problem for ECOWAS. One cannot expect the CEAO countries to disband the organization or even change their areas of emphasis to be more accommodating to ECOWAS until ECOWAS has proven itself. Until, in other words, they are certain the benefits to be derived from membership in ECOWAS equal, if not excel, those to be derived from membership in CEAO.

The ECOWAS Treaty had anticipated this problem. Article 59 states that members can be members of other associations provided it does not derogate from the provisions of the ECOWAS Treaty. But it is stated that members must eliminate incompatibilities which exist in any such agreements.

The CEAO countries are already practicing free trade, financing common projects and operating a common fund. To the extent that these activities

limit their participation in ECOWAS, they can be said to derogate from the ECOWAS Treaty. For example, to conform with the ECOWAS Treaty, it would appear that the CEAO customs union must be gradually dissolved or the preferences must be extended to all of the ECOWAS countries.

While this problem may not be an immediate one, it must be dealt with fairly soon in view of the fact that ECOWAS is now implementing its own customs union. Ideally, one would like to see CEAO transform itself from a competitor to a complement of ECOWAS. But this would involve a drastic change in the present CEAO mode of operations. The CEAO members are not yet prepared to give up their historic ties to each other and to France for ties to their West African neighbors.

The solution is at once simple and complex. In short it comes down to the old adage "nothing succeeds like success". If ECCWAS firmly establishes itself and can be seen to be working in an effective manner, it is much more likely that the CEAO countries will agree to integrate themselves fully into ECOWAS or at least will begin to act as a complement to ECCWAS. This would be the most desirable outcome from the standpoint of rational development in West Africa.

In any case it is incumbent that ECOWAS address itself to the host of problems created by the existence of a multitude of other regional organizations in West Africa.