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Question: Examine the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and its effectiveness since 2008 in the prevention of major conflict in West Africa.

As part of the search for a lasting solution to the numerous security problems that confront the West African sub-region, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in 2008, adopted the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), to serve as strategic framework for improving conflict prevention and human security. The adoption of the ECPF is an addition to several initiatives in the form of key protocols and conventions that aim at building a stable West Africa as prerequisite for social, political and economic development. Some of the earlier initiatives by ECOWAS to promote stability in the sub-region include the Protocol on Non-Aggression (1978), the Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence (1982); ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993); the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (hereafter the Mechanism); Declaration of Political Principles(1991); and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001).

Over the years, with the mandate provided under these protocols, ECOWAS has made significant contributions to the promotion of peace and security in Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, where violent conflicts took place. Also, ECOWAS’ preventive diplomacy initiatives averted large scale violence in countries such as Niger, Guinea and Togo. Given that several initiatives have been undertaken by ECOWAS to promote conflict prevention since it was founded in 1975, it is important to raise a number of questions with regard to the ECPF. First, how relevant is the ECPF in respect of conflict prevention? Second, how different is it from existing initiatives that equally seek to promote sub-regional stability? Third, how is the ECPF to be implemented? And, what are the prospects and challenges of its successful implementation? This policy paper answers the above questions by examining the ECPF. It also makes policy recommendations on steps that need to be taken to ensure the successful implementation of the ECPF.

The relevance of the ECPF lies in its objectives, the outputs it attempts to attain, the issues it seeks to address and the method(s) with which it seeks to achieve its objectives:

The objectives of the ECPF include the following;

• Mainstream conflict prevention into ECOWAS policies and programmes;

• Increase understanding of the conceptual basis of conflict prevention;

• Build awareness and anticipation, and strengthen capacity within member states and civil society to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding;

• Increase understanding of opportunities, tools and resources related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding;

• Increase awareness and preparedness for cooperative ventures between ECOWAS, member states, civil society and external partners in pursuit of conflict prevention and peacebuilding;

• Strengthen capacity within ECOWAS to pursue concrete and integrated conflict prevention and peacebuilding;

• Enhance ECOWAS’ anticipation and planning capabilities in relation to regional tensions; and • Generate a more pro-active and operational conflict prevention posture from member states and the ECOWAS system.3

The ECPF in its existing form is markedly different from past ECOWAS initiatives in several ways that need to be emphasized. First, the ECPF adopts a comprehensive approach to social, economic, political and security challenges in West Africa. This it does by establishing linkages between social, economic and political issues as the basis of conflict prevention in the subregion. The document is therefore based on the perspective that addressing these issues simultaneously would help in preventing conflicts in West Africa. Second, in addition to the wider scope it covers, it targets a wide range of actors (ECOWAS, states, civil society, donors, international organisations, the private sectors etc.). These actors are considered partners in the implementation of the ECPF. Third, unlike other documents, the ECPF provide specific details on the issues it seeks to address. These include activities, benchmarks for measuring progress and capacity requirements for undertaking the stated activities. In addition, plans of action for implementation would be developed on all the 14 components to ensure that issues relating to each component are adequately addressed. Finally, the ECPF, unlike other documents, brings together all existing ECOWAS initiatives to make their implementation very easy.

The achievement of the ECPF’s priorities and intended objectives would naturally derive from its successful implementation. But what are the possibilities that its implementation would be successful? It is the view of this policy brief that there are a number of opportunities for implementing the ECPF. The issues that the document seeks to address make it ‘attractive’ and could be used to mobilize funds from the donor community. Already there is growing donor interest to support the document. For instance, the Government of Denmark, under its Africa Programme for Peace (APP) supports activities at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) and ECOWAS aimed at implementing the ECPF. Also, German Technical Cooperation’s (GTZ) assistance to the ECOWAS Commission includes support and coordination for activities on the ECPF at ECOWAS. Apart from the donor community, since conflict prevention is prominent on the agenda of the African Union (AU) and the UN, support for implementing the ECPF is likely to come from these organisations. The ECPF revolves around activities for which there are existing initiatives. This means that there is no need to re-invent the wheel. Moreover, there are civil society groups and institutions already working on some of the issue areas and could therefore be identified as partners in the implementation of the ECPF. Finally, at the just ended ECOWAS conference to assess its 35 years of existence, participants (including former and sitting heads of state, academics and policy makers) called for the immediate implementation of the ECPF.8 With such an endorsement, it is hoped that the implementation of the ECPF would enjoy broader support.

In spite of the opportunities discussed above, implementing the ECPF could be beset by a number of challenges. First, there is low level of awareness regarding the document in the sub-region among policy makers and the general population. Another challenge is how to overcome the problem of lack of commitment of member states of ECOWAS to the implementation of documents they have signed. States in WestAfrica are usually quick to sign regional document but they often do not back signatures with commitment to implementation. Given the history of member states of ECOWAS, the ECPF could suffer the same fate. Another challenge, which relate to the above, is how to create national ownership of the ECPF and integrate it into national projects. Improving national ownership of the document would help ensure that state-level institutions and stakeholders are committed to implement activities identified in the document and the accompanying Plans of Action. Another possible challenge relates to the raising of adequate financial resources to fund the implementation of the project. As a project to be implemented throughout the subregion, and over a long period of time, the required financial commitment would be huge. But raising adequate funds for the implementation of the project may be difficult. However, if member states show commitment to implementation, funds could be raised at the national level to support state-level implementation.