

**THE REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE SESSION ON 'NAVIGATING CHALLENGES
IN THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS)'
ORGANISED BY THE GUSAU INSTITUTE (GI) AT THE GI OFFICE, ABUJA, ON 4
FEBRUARY 2025**

1. Background

1.1 The Gusau Institute (GI) was established by Lt. Gen. Aliyu Gusau Mohammed (Rtd.), former Nigerian National Security Adviser (NSA) and Honourable Minister of Defence (HMOD), with the goal of making meaningful contributions to security management and promoting good governance in Nigeria, Africa, and globally. The GI Roundtable Series provides a neutral platform and networking opportunity for representatives from the diplomatic community, private sector, and both federal and state governments in Abuja, Nigeria, to engage in dialogue on issues of mutual interest. The series focuses on developing strategies for enhanced collaboration and cooperation. To foster an environment of open and candid discussion, the Chatham House Rule (which ensures speaker anonymity) is applied.

2. Rationale for Hosting a Session on Challenges Facing ECOWAS

2.1 The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975, was established with the primary objective of promoting economic integration and regional stability among its member nations. However, ECOWAS presently faces a range of complex challenges, including the withdrawal of three member states, that jeopardize its goals and threaten regional cohesion. The roundtable endeavoured to create a forum for high-level stakeholders to engage in dialogue, addressing these critical issues and exploring cooperative solutions.

2.2 As ECOWAS prepares to commemorate its 50th anniversary on May 28, 2025, it is essential to identify strategies that will strengthen unity and contribute to the realization of its overarching goals of peace and prosperity for all member states. Achieving these aspirations requires candid and open discussions. The roundtable served as a neutral platform to facilitate such discourse on the factors hindering success.

3. Participation

3.1 The hybrid event offered both in-person and virtual participation. General Yakubu Gowon, the only surviving founding member of ECOWAS, attended in person, while three former presidents— His Excellencies Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim B. Babangida, and John A. Kufuor—participated virtually.

3.2 A total of forty-six participants attended the event, including the four former heads of state. Dr. Mohammad Ibn Chambas and Ambassador Usman Sarki served as co-

chairmen. The speakers represented Nigeria, Senegal, Algeria, Ghana, South Africa, The Gambia, and Kenya. A strong delegation from the ECOWAS Commission was also in attendance.

4. Methodology

- 4.1 The roundtable was a four-hour meeting conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The event began with introductory remarks from the chair. This was followed by goodwill statements from the former presidents, after which representatives from the ECOWAS Commission and Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs each delivered opening remarks. Speakers from across the continent then presented introductory statements to set the stage for the discussions, which were organized into four thematic clusters. While the proceedings were conducted in English, French interpreters provided real-time translation.

5. Overview

- 5.1 The meeting focused on discussing challenges and opportunities within ECOWAS as it approaches its 50th anniversary, with participants emphasizing the importance of unity, dialogue, and regional integration. Key topics included the following:
- Regional Governance Challenges: Assessing the impact of governance issues on regional stability.
 - Regional Economic Integration and Development Challenges: Evaluating the effectiveness of current economic policies in fostering integration and sustainable development.
 - Regional Security Challenges: Discussing tactics to enhance regional security frameworks and cooperation to counter terrorism and radicalization.
 - Regional Unity and the Way Forward: Identifying strategies to enhance regional unity.
- 5.2 General Yakubu Gowon, the last surviving founding member of ECOWAS, opened the proceedings by reflecting on the organization's history and current challenges as it approaches its 50th anniversary. He emphasized the importance of dialogue and unity, advising against the use of force or sanctions against member states. Gen. Gowon acknowledged the recent withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger but remains optimistic about ECOWAS's future, stating that the organization is not dead, and encouraging continued engagement with the departed members. He suggested inviting these countries to the 50th-anniversary celebration, hoping for their eventual return to the fold.
- 5.3 General Gowon's remarks were followed by goodwill messages from the three former presidents who participated virtually. All expressed optimism and hope for a resolution to the current crisis within ECOWAS. They acknowledged the

contributions of the founding fathers and emphasized the importance of unity and solidarity.

- President Obasanjo highlighted the need for common interests and security among ECOWAS members, regardless of their current standing within the organization. He also stressed the significance of shared cultural ties and the necessity of focusing on common goals rather than engaging in blame games.
- President Babangida underscored the importance of reigniting the spirit of collaboration among ECOWAS member states, as seen in the past, and advocated for keeping the door open for states wishing to rejoin the organization.
- President Kufuor referred to his proposal for the establishment of the Africa Public Interest Media Initiative, aimed at addressing the lack of meaningful intergenerational dialogue through new technologies. He advised that both leaders and grassroots movements must align to establish common ground and a shared vision for the future. The need for a better understanding of geopolitics and negotiation skills to navigate the challenges of globalization was emphasized. Additionally, the importance of pragmatism and critical thinking in addressing the region's challenges was acknowledged.

5.4 Senior representatives from ECOWAS and the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nigeria delivered introductory remarks, emphasizing the need for dialogue and unity among member states. The importance of leveraging instruments such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to add value to the region's abundant natural and human resources was highlighted. The significance of deeply reflecting on the region's future and transforming the youth bulge into a demographic dividend was also underscored. The discussion concluded with a focus on the need for reform within ECOWAS' normative and institutional frameworks to facilitate regional integration in the current era. It was stressed that ECOWAS, as an international institution, is a rule-based organization. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs has appointed an advisory group to engage in quiet diplomacy with the three countries that had withdrawn from ECOWAS. The opening session ended with a hopeful outlook that these three countries would eventually rejoin, and that the organization would emerge stronger than before.

5.5 A long-term forecasting model for Africa's future, highlighting the continent's slow growth and increasing inequality, was presented as an introduction to the discussions. It was noted that Africa's growth is fuelled by the commodity super cycle and that the continent's reliance on small domestic markets and commodity exports is a significant challenge. The impact of global developments on Africa was also discussed, emphasizing the need for geopolitical stability and sustainable growth. A model that shows the potential impact of various sectoral transitions on

poverty reduction and economic growth in Africa was presented. The challenges faced by African countries, including weak institutional systems, flawed elections, and a crisis of legitimacy, were highlighted. The speaker concluded by emphasizing the need for capable states in Africa that can deliver on good governance and socio-economic development. (*More details about these forecast models can be found at <https://futures.issafrica.org>.*)

- 5.6 More detailed perspectives on good governance and socio-economic development in West Africa followed. In examining the potential causes of the three recent *coups d'état*, it was argued that shared factors include unresolved structural and foundational issues that have persisted since independence, weak electoral systems that have led to crises of legitimacy, and ineffective institutions. These challenges have been exacerbated by the political alienation of youth and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. The discussant proposed that to support ECOWAS in fulfilling its mandate, any unconstitutional change of government must be strongly condemned, and the responsible countries should face sanctions. Additionally, the growing issue of youth alienation from political processes must be urgently addressed. While good governance is crucial, it alone is insufficient to drive development. The link between governance and development must, therefore, be reinforced. Presently, governments are failing to consider the contextual realities of the times. ECOWAS is only as strong as its member states, and these states must be equipped to deliver socio-economic development.
- 5.7 During the following interactive session, it was suggested that ECOWAS needs rebranding and should adopt a more open and candid approach in its discussions. The ECOWAS Commission also faced strong criticism from one participant for not adequately addressing the challenges faced by Sahelian countries. One proposal was for military officers from coastal states to engage in mediation efforts with the Sahelian nations since military officers universally share an *esprit de corps*. Additionally, another participant put forward ideas to tackle regional economic integration and development challenges, stressing the importance of simultaneous actions. Overall, the participants expressed optimism about ECOWAS's future while acknowledging the need for reforms and stronger leadership to resolve current crises and promote sustainable growth in the region.
- 5.8 In discussing regional economic integration and development challenges, the importance of leveraging instruments such as ETLIS and AfCFTA was highlighted once again. The idea of adopting the Nigerian currency as a common currency for the region was also proposed, along with utilizing pension funds to finance infrastructure projects. Additionally, there was a suggestion to appeal to MTN to remove roaming charges for mobile phone usage across the region.
- 5.9 A participant, providing an East African perspective, emphasized the importance of measuring progress in regional integration by assessing organizational

performance and policy implementation. He highlighted that the East African Community (EAC) had made 73% progress toward integration and advocated for tracking specific metrics to direct efforts toward areas with slower development. The speaker noted that states often focus on outcomes rather than indices that measure progress. The speaker stressed that measuring change based on agreed-upon indices is crucial for tracking progress in specific areas. Translating policies into actionable programmes is essential, as is aligning domestic laws with regional commitments.

- 5.10 The discussion within the cluster on security challenges centred on the growing proliferation of security threats in the region, including terrorism, insurgencies, and proxy conflicts. Emphasis was placed on the need to strengthen regional security frameworks, foster cross-border collaboration, and build partnerships with international organizations. The importance of addressing underlying issues, such as youth unemployment and weak governance, was also highlighted, along with the need to balance immediate security concerns with long-term development strategies.
- 5.11 The speaker addressing the impact of youth unemployment and radicalization on regional security emphasized the importance of youth engagement in peace and security issues in West Africa. Three areas for discussion were proposed: strengthening dialogue with stakeholders, establishing platforms for youth engagement, and focusing on common interests.
- 5.12 The meeting also discussed the need for regional integration, addressing security challenges, and the importance of peer review for better performance. The participants expressed gratitude for the insightful contributions and looked forward to continuing the conversation since very little time was available for interactive discussion.

6. Summary of Recommendations / Observations

- 6.1 Participants made the following recommendations:
- ECOWAS Commission to undertake deep reflection on the future of regional integration, including bottom-up consultations with citizens.
 - ECOWAS to prioritize organizational performance and policy domestication.
 - ECOWAS to keep dialogue open with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to encourage their return to the organization. Military officers from coastal states to engage in mediation efforts with the Sahelian nations.
 - ECOWAS to strengthen regional security frameworks and enhance mechanisms like the ECOWAS Standby Force. This includes investing in intelligence-sharing mechanisms, joint operations, and rapid-response capabilities.
 - ECOWAS to promote cross-border collaboration to address transnational security threats. Initiatives that promote trust and cooperation among member states—

such as integrated border security programmes and harmonized legal frameworks—are essential to addressing the root causes of transnational crime and terrorism.

- ECOWAS to engage in robust partnerships. Partnerships with the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and other international organizations are vital to providing the technical, financial, and logistical support needed to address the complex security challenges. Joint initiatives to counter the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and weaponized drones are crucial, given the evolving threat landscape.
- ECOWAS to support resilience and development. Security measures must be intertwined with socio-economic strategies that address poverty, unemployment, and political disenfranchisement.
- ECOWAS to develop a regional youth peacebuilding and development strategy to ensure that youths are at the centre of peacebuilding and development processes.
- ECOWAS to establish platforms for systematic engagement between youth and policymakers and include youths in governance and decision-making.
- ECOWAS to strengthen dialogue and consultations with stakeholders to garner holistic insight into salient challenges and resilience factors pertaining to youths in the region.
- ECOWAS to explore adopting the Nigerian Naira as a transitional common currency to deepen regional integration and test monetary union feasibility.
- ECOWAS to consider using pension funds across West Africa to finance regional infrastructure development to accelerate economic growth and job creation.
- MTN and other telecom companies to consider removing roaming charges across West Africa.
- ECOWAS to support the creative industry and use culture to promote regional integration.
- Fast-track AfCFTA in West Africa by recognizing ECOWAS free trade as AfCFTA trade.
- Ensure macroeconomic stability and policy coordination to address inflation and exchange rate volatility.
- Strengthen financial infrastructure (Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), and other trade finance mechanisms) to support seamless transactions.
- Engage Francophone ECOWAS countries in dialogue to ensure smooth monetary transition.
- Continue efforts in improving trade facilitation, investing in infrastructure, governance reforms, and the pursuit of macro and fiscal discipline, as well as peace and security.

7. Concluding Remarks

- 7.1 The chair thanked the GI for organizing the roundtable and reiterated that the event was organised with the aim of finding viable solutions for regional unity in

West Africa. He urged attendees to explore areas of cooperation, collaboration, and assistance.

- 7.2 The founder of the GI delivered the final vote of thanks.
- 7.3 The proceedings ended at approximately 14:30 hrs WAT.

Ends