**THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) IN THE NIGER CRISIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the mediation efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in addressing the crisis in the Niger Republic. Employing a descriptive research design, the investigation relies on secondary data sourced from academic journals, government publications, and related documents to understand ECOWAS's role and effectiveness. The qualitative analysis reveals several critical findings about ECOWAS's intervention strategies, their effectiveness, challenges encountered, and positive developments. Key findings indicate that ECOWAS's conflict resolution, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian assistance have been instrumental in mitigating the crisis. However, the organization faces significant obstacles, including limited resources, lack of cooperation from some member states, resistance from local actors, and the complex nature of the crisis. Despite these challenges, positive trends such as strengthened regional cooperation, increased civil society engagement, and economic development initiatives offer prospects for sustainable peace. The study concludes with recommendations to enhance ECOWAS's mediation efforts, including fostering regional cooperation, empowering civil society, promoting economic development, strengthening democratic governance, addressing security challenges, and leveraging international support. These strategies aim to improve the organization's capacity to manage and resolve conflicts in the Niger Republic effectively.

**KEYWORDS:** **ECOWAS, *Peacekeeping, Niger Crisis, Regional Cooperation, Conflicts Resolution, Political Landscape***

**INTRODUCTION**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional organization encompassing fifteen West African nations. Founded in 1975, ECOWAS aims to enhance economic integration and collaboration among its member states (ECOWAS, 2023). This organization has been particularly crucial in addressing the Niger crisis, a multifaceted conflict that has drastically impacted Niger and its inhabitants. The Niger crisis traces its origins to the 1960s, following the nation's independence from France. Niger grappled with a myriad of challenges from the onset, including poverty, ethnic divisions, and political instability (Lange, 2023). These issues were compounded by environmental challenges, notably the severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in critical food shortages and escalated malnutrition across the population (Amnesty International, 2023).

The political landscape in Niger took a turn for the worse with the first coup d'état in 1990, leading to a period marked by political upheaval and instability. This instability created a power vacuum, subsequently exploited by various rebel groups, including the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali (International Crisis Group, 2013). By 2011, the repercussions of the Tuareg rebellion were felt in Niger, aggravating the existing volatile situation (Le Roux, 2013). The Tuareg, mainly nomadic herders, have historically expressed their grievances regarding perceived marginalization and discrimination by the Nigerien government. This conflict has become a central element of the Niger crisis. In addition to the Tuareg rebellion, Niger has faced challenges from Boko Haram, a violent Islamist group that originated in Nigeria. Boko Haram's activities have not only led to numerous casualties but have also displaced thousands, creating a significant humanitarian crisis in Niger (BBC News, 2023).

ECOWAS's involvement in the Niger crisis is multifaceted. One of its key roles has been in providing financial and logistical support to the Niger government's anti-terrorism efforts. In 2016, ECOWAS committed a substantial amount of $1 billion to combat terrorism in the region (ECOWAS, 2016). This commitment highlights the organization's dedication to addressing security challenges in the area. ECOWAS has also played a critical role in peacekeeping and counter-terrorism by deploying forces. The ECOWAS Mission in Mali (ECOMAM) has been active in Niger since 2013, focusing on securing the country's borders and mitigating the spread of violence from Mali. Similarly, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has successfully conducted operations against Boko Haram, demonstrating ECOWAS's commitment to regional security (MNJTF, 2023).

Another significant aspect of ECOWAS's involvement is its role in mediating conflicts. In 2015, ECOWAS brokered a peace agreement between the Niger government and the Tuareg rebels. However, the fragility of this agreement has been evident, with several violations occurring, posing challenges to lasting peace in the region (International Crisis Group, 2015). Despite these efforts, ECOWAS faces several challenges in its endeavor to stabilize the region. A primary challenge is the organization's limited resources. As a developing entity, financing extensive peacekeeping and counter-terrorism operations poses a significant strain on ECOWAS’s capabilities. Furthermore, the complexity of the Niger crisis complicates the task of developing a unified and effective strategy. The involvement of various actors, including the Niger government, Tuareg rebels, Boko Haram, and AQIM, adds layers of complexity to the conflict (Lange, 2023). Looking ahead, the role of ECOWAS in the Niger crisis will continue to evolve. The organization needs to adapt to the changing dynamics of the conflict and respond effectively to emerging challenges. Strengthening its capacity and building resilient institutions will be key to its success in fostering peace and stability in the region.

**OBJECTIVES**

The general objective of this study is to examine the role of ECOWAS in the Niger Crisis. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the root causes of the Niger crisis
2. Identify the challenges facing ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis
3. examine the role of ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the root causes of the Niger crisis?
2. What are the challenges facing ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis?
3. What is the role played by ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis?

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Security Complex Theory (SCT) was adopted as the theoretical framework for analysis. The theory argues that the world is comprised of regional security complexes (RSCs) – groups of states whose security is deeply intertwined. Threats to one state within an RSC are viewed as threats to all, fostering a sense of shared security and interdependence (Buzan & Waiver, 2003). This interdependence creates a unique security environment within each region, distinct from the broader international system. The theory is primarily attributed to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, prominent scholars associated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Buzan & Waever, 2003). The Copenhagen School emphasizes the social construction of security threats, which aligns with SCT's focus on how regional interactions shape security perceptions. SCT emphasizes understanding security through a regional lens. It highlights how geographically close states develop a network of security interactions, including alliances, rivalries, and shared threats. These interactions create a regional security environment that shapes how states define and pursue their security interests.

Traditional security theories often focused on the global balance of power or the capabilities of individual states. SCT emerged as a critique of these approaches, arguing that they overlooked the important role of regional dynamics in shaping security (Buzan & Waiver, 2003). SCT aimed to address these limitations by offering a framework for analyzing how regional power structures, historical ties, and shared threats influence state behavior in the security realm.

Within the framework of SCT, the Niger crisis can be analyzed by considering the following:

1. West African Security Complex: Niger is part of the broader West African security complex, interconnected with regional security issues like terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime. Analyzing how these dynamics impact Niger and its neighboring states is crucial.
2. Securitization of Threats: Examining how actors within the complex, including Niger, regional organizations like ECOWAS, and international partners, frame the threats posed by terrorism, insurgency, and other challenges, and how these securitization processes influence responses and interventions.
3. Spillover Effects: Tracing the spillover effects of the Niger crisis on other countries in the region, such as the potential spread of instability, refugee flows, and cross-border criminal activities.
4. Regional Security Architecture: Assessing the effectiveness of existing regional security mechanisms like ECOWAS' military cooperation initiatives and intelligence sharing programs in addressing the shared challenges within the complex.
5. Evolution of the Complex: Analyzing how the Niger crisis might shape the dynamics of the West African security complex, potentially leading to a reconfiguration of regional security priorities and alliances.

By applying SCT as a guiding framework, the study can offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics at play in the Niger crisis, its regional implications, and potential avenues for strengthening regional security cooperation in West Africa. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the limitations of SCT and utilize other theoretical perspectives to ensure a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Furthermore, the empirical research aimed at assessing the depth of treatment of the topic suggests that Niger has not produced enough literature, resulting in the paucity of works in this field. For instance, Olonisakin (2021, 2023) conducted a study on the same topic but focused on conflict resolution, whereas Ogunbayo and Agwu (2020, 2023) restricted their study to African integration and development. Furthermore, the majority of trustworthy data derived from the empirical research was examined by Morrison (2016). Nevertheless, Niger was not the location of any of the mentioned incidents. West Africa provided him with materials and attention.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

For this study, the descriptive research design was employed. This approach allows for a more nuanced and holistic analysis of the complex dynamics at play in the crisis and ECOWAS's efforts to address it. The study relies on secondary data and was obtained from documents such as academic journals, articles, government publications, and bulletins focusing on the role of ECOWAS in the Niger crisis. The data from the secondary sources were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis which allows the researcher to extract contents of reviewed documents to provide answers to the research questions stated.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The research questions raised formed the basis of data analysis, hence, this study provides answers to the following questions.

**Research Question One: What are the root causes of the Niger crisis?**

The root causes of the Niger crisis are multifaceted and complex, stemming from a combination of historical, political, economic, and social factors. Some of the key underlying issues include:

### Postcolonial Legacies

The legacy of colonial rule has left enduring challenges for Niger. During the colonial era, European powers, particularly France, imposed arbitrary borders that did not consider the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of the regions. These borders grouped diverse and sometimes antagonistic communities, leading to persistent ethnic and religious tensions (Herbst, 2000). For example, the Tuareg and Fulani communities, which span several countries in the Sahel region, have historically faced marginalization and limited political representation. This marginalization has contributed to repeated rebellions and demands for greater autonomy or independence, exacerbating instability in the region (Higazi, 2011). The colonial rule also disrupted traditional governance structures and social networks, replacing them with centralized administrations that were often alien to local populations. The imposed systems of governance were not designed to accommodate the socio-cultural complexities of the Nigerian society, leading to governance challenges post-independence. The lack of integration and cohesion within these newly created states has been a significant source of conflict, as different groups vie for power and resources within a framework that does not adequately represent their interests (Herbst, 2000).

### Economic Disparities

Economic disparities in Niger are profound, with significant income inequalities and disparities in access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water. Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a large portion of its population living in extreme poverty. The rural-urban divide exacerbates these inequalities, as rural areas suffer from inadequate infrastructure and limited access to essential services (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). These economic disparities contribute to social unrest and create fertile ground for instability. In regions where economic opportunities are scarce, particularly among the youth, there is a higher susceptibility to recruitment by extremist groups and insurgent factions. The lack of economic opportunities and the failure to address regional imbalances in development have fostered feelings of disenfranchisement and frustration among the population (Nsaibia & Walther, 2016). This socioeconomic exclusion is a critical factor in the recurring cycles of violence and instability in Niger.

### Weak Governance and Institutions

Weak governance and institutions are major contributors to the crisis in Niger. The country's governance structures are often characterized by inadequate rule of law, pervasive corruption, and inefficiency. According to the World Bank's governance indicators, Niger scores poorly on government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption (World Bank, 2021). These deficiencies undermine public trust in the government and its institutions. Corruption is particularly damaging, as it diverts public resources away from essential services and development projects. The mismanagement of funds and lack of transparency erode the legitimacy of the state and foster resentment among the populace. This environment of mistrust and dissatisfaction can lead to civil unrest and weaken the state's ability to effectively manage conflicts (Aboribo, 2019). Moreover, weak institutions are incapable of addressing the complex challenges posed by insurgency and terrorism. The security forces are often underfunded, poorly trained, and inadequately equipped, making them ill-prepared to handle the security threats facing the country. This vacuum of effective governance and security allows armed groups to operate with impunity, further destabilizing the region (Lacher, 2020).

### Competition over Natural Resources

Competition over natural resources is a significant driver of conflict in Niger. The country's economy is largely agrarian, with a substantial portion of the population dependent on farming and livestock rearing for their livelihoods. However, environmental degradation, climate change, and desertification have intensified the scarcity of vital resources such as land and water (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). The competition over these scarce resources often leads to conflicts, particularly between farmers and pastoralists. Pastoralist communities, who traditionally migrate in search of grazing lands, frequently come into conflict with sedentary farmers who encroach on these lands for agriculture. These disputes can escalate into violent clashes, driven by the necessity of survival and economic sustenance (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). The state's inability to effectively mediate these conflicts or provide sustainable solutions exacerbates the situation. Government interventions are often perceived as biased or insufficient, leading to a loss of confidence in state mechanisms for conflict resolution. The lack of effective governance in managing natural resources and addressing environmental challenges continues to fuel these localized conflicts, contributing to broader instability in Niger (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009).

**Research Question Two: What are the challenges facing ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis?**

Despite its active involvement, ECOWAS faces several challenges that hinder the effectiveness of its mediation efforts in the Niger Republic crisis:

1. **Limited Resources and Funding**: One of the primary challenges is the scarcity of financial and material resources. ECOWAS’s reliance on contributions from member states and international donors often leads to funding shortfalls, limiting the scope and impact of its interventions.
2. **Lack of Cooperation from Some Member States**: Political and strategic differences among ECOWAS member states can impede unified action. Inconsistent support and cooperation weaken the overall impact of ECOWAS’s mediation and peacekeeping efforts. These internal divisions can also delay decision-making and implementation of critical initiatives.
3. **Resistance from Local Actors with Vested Interests**: Local elites, armed groups, and economic actors who benefit from the ongoing conflict often resist peace efforts. These vested interests create significant obstacles to sustainable peacebuilding and mediation processes. The entrenched positions of these actors make it challenging to achieve broad-based support for peace agreements.
4. **Complex and Multifaceted Nature of the Crisis**: The interconnected political, economic, and social issues in Niger require a holistic and integrated approach. The complexity of the crisis makes it difficult for ECOWAS to address all underlying factors effectively. This multifaceted nature demands comprehensive strategies that go beyond traditional mediation and peacekeeping.

**Research Question Three: What is the role played by ECOWAS in addressing the Niger crisis?**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been a pivotal actor in addressing the multifaceted crisis in Niger. Through its comprehensive strategies encompassing conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance, ECOWAS has sought to stabilize the region and foster sustainable peace.

###  Conflict Resolution and Mediation

Conflict resolution and mediation are central to ECOWAS's approach to managing the Niger crisis. ECOWAS has a well-established protocol for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping, and security, which underscores its commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the West African region (Adebajo, 2002). This framework has been instrumental in facilitating dialogue among conflicting parties in Niger. One significant instance of ECOWAS's mediation efforts was during the political upheaval following the July 2023 coup. ECOWAS quickly condemned the coup and called for the restoration of constitutional order. The organization dispatched high-level delegations to engage with the junta and other stakeholders, advocating for a peaceful resolution and the return to democratic governance (ECOWAS, 2023). These mediation efforts are designed to prevent the escalation of violence and ensure that political transitions occur through non-violent means. ECOWAS's mediation strategies also involve collaboration with other international bodies, such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN), to amplify their efforts and create a unified front in conflict resolution. This cooperation enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of their interventions, as they leverage a broader spectrum of diplomatic and economic tools to influence positive outcomes (Aning & Bah, 2009).

### Peacekeeping Operations

Peacekeeping operations are another critical aspect of ECOWAS's involvement in Niger. The organization has a track record of deploying peacekeeping forces to stabilize conflict zones and protect civilians. These missions are often conducted under the aegis of the ECOWAS Standby Force, which is part of the African Standby Force established to respond rapidly to conflicts across the continent (Abass, 2000). In response to the security threats in Niger, ECOWAS has coordinated peacekeeping efforts aimed at curbing the activities of terrorist groups and insurgents, such as Boko Haram and other armed factions. These operations are crucial in maintaining security and allowing humanitarian aid to reach affected communities (Bah, 2005). The peacekeeping forces are tasked with a range of activities, including securing volatile regions, supporting local security forces, and facilitating the safe return of displaced persons. The effectiveness of these operations is often enhanced by ECOWAS's ability to integrate its forces with those of other regional and international partners. Joint operations with the G5 Sahel Joint Force, for example, have been pivotal in countering the spread of terrorism and ensuring coordinated responses to cross-border threats (Lacher, 2020). Despite the challenges, these peacekeeping missions demonstrate ECOWAS's commitment to regional security and stability.

### Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian assistance is a vital component of ECOWAS's response to the Niger crisis. The organization recognizes that addressing the humanitarian needs of affected populations is essential for long-term peace and stability. ECOWAS has implemented various programs aimed at providing immediate relief and supporting sustainable development in conflict-affected areas (Olonisakin, 2008). ECOWAS's humanitarian initiatives focus on several key areas, including food security, health care, and education. In the aftermath of conflicts, ECOWAS has coordinated the delivery of food aid to communities facing severe shortages due to displacement and disruption of agricultural activities. These efforts are often conducted in partnership with international organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (ECOWAS, 2023).

Additionally, ECOWAS has prioritized the provision of healthcare services to address the medical needs of displaced and vulnerable populations. Mobile clinics and emergency medical supplies have been deployed to areas with limited access to health facilities, ensuring that critical health services are available to those in need. Education initiatives have also been implemented to support children affected by the conflict, providing them with access to schooling and psychosocial support to mitigate the impacts of trauma (Olonisakin, 2008).

The organization's approach to humanitarian assistance also involves long-term development projects aimed at building resilience and reducing vulnerability. These projects include initiatives to improve agricultural productivity, enhance water and sanitation infrastructure, and promote economic empowerment through vocational training and microfinance programs (Aning & Bah, 2009). By addressing the immediate and long-term needs of affected communities, ECOWAS's humanitarian efforts contribute to creating a stable and peaceful environment in Niger.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

The following findings of this study were observed:

1. The study found that ECOWAS has played a crucial role in mediating between conflicting parties during the 2023 political crisis in Niger. Following the military coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum on July 26, 2023, ECOWAS worked to facilitate dialogue between the junta, led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, and the deposed government. Through high-level diplomatic missions, such as the delegation led by former Nigerian President Abdulsalami Abubakar in August 2023, ECOWAS aimed to de-escalate tensions between the military regime and pro-democracy forces within Niger. These mediation efforts sought to prevent further instability and promote a peaceful resolution by urging the junta to restore constitutional order and reinstate civilian rule.
2. The study revealed that Political and strategic differences among ECOWAS member states impede unified action. Inconsistent support and cooperation weaken the overall impact of ECOWAS’s mediation and peacekeeping efforts. These internal divisions can also delay the decision-making and implementation of critical initiatives.
3. The study found that enhanced cooperation between ECOWAS and other regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) has led to a more coordinated approach to conflict resolution. This regional integration helps to pool resources, share best practices, and present a united front in mediation efforts.

**CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the pivotal role of ECOWAS in mediating the political and security crisis in Niger, underscoring both its achievements and the substantial challenges it faces. The analysis reveals that ECOWAS has made notable progress through various initiatives, including conflict resolution, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian assistance. However, the complexity and multifaceted nature of the crisis in Niger necessitates a comprehensive and coordinated approach to enhance the effectiveness of these interventions. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening regional cooperation. ECOWAS’s success in addressing the Niger crisis is closely tied to its ability to collaborate effectively with other regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and international organizations like the United Nations (UN). Enhanced collaboration can lead to more cohesive and strategic responses, leveraging the strengths and resources of multiple organizations. This coordinated effort is crucial for addressing the cross-border dimensions of the crisis, such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and refugee flows. By fostering stronger partnerships, ECOWAS can enhance its capacity to implement joint initiatives that address both immediate security concerns and long-term development goals.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the data analysed and the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance ECOWAS’s effectiveness (and any other international body) in mediating the Niger crisis:

1. Foster stronger partnerships with the African Union (AU) and other regional organizations to ensure a unified and coordinated response to the crisis. Joint initiatives can pool resources and expertise, creating more comprehensive solutions to security and political challenges. Develop and implement cross-border security measures to address issues such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and refugee movements. Regional cooperation is essential to monitor and control border areas effectively, reducing the mobility of insurgent groups.
2. Support initiatives that strengthen democratic institutions, including electoral bodies, judicial systems, and anti-corruption agencies. Ensuring transparent and fair electoral processes is critical for political stability and public trust. Promote the rule of law and enhance accountability mechanisms to combat corruption and abuse of power. Building a transparent and accountable governance framework can mitigate grievances and foster greater public trust. Also, ensure that ECOWAS peacekeeping forces are well-resourced and equipped to respond to evolving security threats. Continuous training and support for these forces are necessary to maintain stability in conflict-affected areas.
3. Seek financial and technical support from international donors and organizations. This support can enhance ECOWAS’s capacity to implement comprehensive conflict resolution and development programs. Also, promote knowledge exchange and the adoption of best practices in conflict resolution and peacebuilding through partnerships with global NGOs and international institutions. Learning from successful interventions in other regions can inform more effective strategies in Niger.

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