

ECOWAS, the Media and Peace in West Africa: The Case of Ghana

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Abstract

West Africa has witnessed several disturbing conflicts in contemporary times. Most of these conflicts have resulted in the destruction of whole countries and the displacement of thousands of people. In order to help prevent the occurrence of such conflicts, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), began the implementation of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008. This paper assesses the implementation of the media component of the framework in Ghana (a Member State of the regional body). The findings imply that, there will be the need to undertake some major actions to ensure that the policy achieves its intended impact. The paper recommends streamlining of the training for media personnel; a look at their conditions of service; accesses to working capital in the sector; and a critical look at issues bordering on media ethics.

Keywords: ECOWAS, ECPF, Media, Ghana

1. Introduction

The West African sub-region, with its rich cultural complexity and diversity, unambiguously, has enormous potential. Just like the other parts of the continent, the region is blessed with an enviable abundance of natural resources and human capital. Despite these nice attributes, the region is plagued by an endless array of challenges. West Africa finds itself moving in and out of various forms of conflict situations, leaving in its trail the deepening of poverty and untold hardships. This unfortunate situation is further exacerbated by very weak economies, weak state institutions and poor leadership. Writers like Meredith (2005) attribute this trend mainly to the colonial narrative, while others like Jeng (Jeng, 2009) place it at the door of military regimes and the lawlessness and erosion of civil liberties that they come with. Using the social fragmentation argument, Jeng, for example, contends that conflicts in Africa are caused mainly by the break down in law and order. Writers on the subject like Richards (Richards, 1996) also attribute the incidence of conflicts in the sub-region to patrimonialism and ethnicity. Patrimonialism in this sense involves redistributing national resources as rewards for personal favour to followers who respond with loyalty to the leader instead of the institution that the leader represents (Richards, 1996). According to Richards, in such a system, persons at the apex of political power compete to command some share of the national cake, which they then redistribute through their own networks of followers. Kaplan's New barbarism thesis (Kaplan, 1993), perhaps, presents a relatively wider scope for the comprehension and analysis of the incidence of conflicts in the sub-region. His posit is cast within the post cold war milieu, which have seen states loose the monopoly of military violence. Kaplan in his work argues that, the prevalence of different cultures with distinct characteristics, and the competition for resources coupled with the impact of environmental breakdown, normally, provokes a rash of small, localized and essentially uncontrollable armed conflicts (Kaplan, 1993). What begins as a localized conflict then begins to engulf a whole country and the region.

For example, the conflict in Sierra Leone begun as an insurgency by a small lightly armed rebel group in the forest districts of the southern and eastern parts of the country to overthrow what was perceived as patrimonial rule by President Seidu Momoh and the All People's Congress. This small pockets of insurgency had very little territorial base under its control and obtained resources by mining diamonds in the forest and forcibly conscripting young people to join in the fight for their course. Most of these young people were brutally terrorized at the time of their capture to psychologically weaken them for easy control by the rebels (Richards, 1996).

This movement later spread to other parts and engulfed the whole country, leading to the displacement of about 40 percent of the population and the death of almost 15,000 civilians (Musa, 1993). The war in Sierra Leone was very brutal and led to the destruction of the country together with the aspirations of her citizens.

Although the cause of the conflict and its spread into the whole country is well explained by Kaplan's new barbarism theory, subjecting the conflict to Meredith's colonialism narrative also adds to the explanation, but since this is not the essence of the current exercise, it will be shelved for now. Studies by Al-hassan Conteh et al also present a very distinct analysis of the Liberian conflict by using the clustering analytical method. They contend that the conflict in Liberia can be placed in 5 distinct categories as follows:

A. The systems analysis perspective:

According to this perspective, the inability of the Liberian political system to meet the legitimate demands of its members constituted the primary cause of the civil conflict.

B. The principle of distributive justice:

Under this category, injustices against the norms, values and expressive symbols of the Liberian society are believed to have restricted the level of participation in the decision-making processes and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth.

C. Stage of power cycle:

According to this principle what is labeled as the 'conflict' was a normal stage in the struggle for power.

D. The theological argument:

This argument contends that the conflict was a punishment by the divine for the sins of the Liberian people. The argument is deeply rooted in the assertion that the Liberian State was founded under Christian principles and the conflict was a punishment for neglecting such established principles.

E. The Identity problem:

Under this argument, the cause of the conflict is attributable to the history of the Liberian State and the fact that there is nothing like a common Liberian identity.

Al-hassan et al argue that stability or order in any given country or society is possible only when people share common norms, values and expressive symbols. My contention with this assertion is that, the very nature of a sub-region like West Africa, with its complex social structure, value systems and expressive symbols make it very difficult for such a 'universal net value system' to be found in any one country. Countries in the sub-region are made up of several ethnic groups that are linguistically heterogeneous and culturally distinct, with histories that invoke more divisions than unity. This reality calls for a comprehensive and concerted effort at peace and security consolidation in the sub-region. Based on this reality, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) noted a number of structural and indirect factors, which serve as triggers and accelerators of conflict in the region. Such cultural 'aggravators' or exacerbating factors are rooted in unavoidable issues relating to ideology, class, ethnicity, race, religion, patriarchy and gender (ECPF, 2008). It is however good to note that, consciously, the regional body approaches the matter of peace and security with these West African 'realities' in mind.

2. The ECOWAS Peace Architecture

The nature of the ECOWAS peace and security architecture is defined by the protocol on the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security adopted at Lome, on the 10th of December, 1999 (Aboagye, 2004).

The following main operational organs were created by the protocol:

- A defense and Security Council (DSC), consisting of chiefs of defense staff, experts on internal affairs, security, and foreign affairs.
- A council of elders, comprising eminent personalities who act as mediators, conciliators, and facilitators in conflict situations.
- ECOMOG, a structure comprising standby multipurpose national modules (civilian and military) for preventive deployment, intervention, and other peace-building tasks.

Aboagye (2004) argues that, most of the interventions made by ECOWAS using the above operational organs have been very commendable for their far-sightedness, boldness of initiative, and tenacity of purpose. Currently, plans are far advanced for the operationalization of a Mediation Facilitation Division within ECOWAS to further strengthen the overall peace architecture (ECOWAS, 2012).

2.1 The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopted the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008. The framework is a comprehensive operational conflict prevention and peace-building strategy that enables the ECOWAS system and Member States to draw upon human and financial resources at the regional (including civil society and the private sector) and international levels in their efforts to creatively transform conflicts (ECPF, 2008). The final crafting of the ECPF draws on the foundations provided by other legal documents from the AU, NEPAD and the UN. Drawing from these diverse regional and international normative frameworks for peace and security, the document comprehensively touches on a broad range of pressing issues and highlights the alacrity that the regional body attaches to conflict prevention in West Africa. The framework strategically targeted the following key thematic areas for the consolidation of peace within the sub-region:

- A. Early warning;
- B. Preventive diplomacy;
- C. Democracy and political governance;
- D. Human rights and the rule of law;
- E. Media;
- F. Natural resource governance;
- G. Cross-border initiatives.
- H. Governance;
- I. Practical disarmament;
- J. Women, peace and security;
- K. Youth empowerment;
- L. ECOWAS Standby Force;
- M. Humanitarian assistance; and
- N. Peace education

The prudence in approaching the issue of regional peace and security in such a comprehensive manner is well highlighted by several scholars. In the past, the absence of a comprehensive and collective framework like the ECPF, had facilitated the easy transitioning from relative peace to upheavals and armed conflicts in most countries — a fact that is vividly corroborated by recent history. It, therefore, becomes very heartwarming to note that the framework creates the needed mechanism within the ECOWAS system and in the respective Member States for this to be realized. Such an arrangement makes room for cooperative interactions in pushing conflict prevention and peace-building issues up the political agenda of Member States in a manner that will trigger timely and targeted multi-actor and multi-dimensional actions to defuse or eliminate potential threats to security (ECPF, 2008).

The broad objectives of the framework include the following:

1. Mainstreaming conflict prevention into ECOWAS policies and programmes;
2. Increasing understanding of the conceptual basis of conflict prevention;
3. Build awareness and anticipation, and strengthen capacity within member states and civil society to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peace-building;
4. Increasing understanding of opportunities, tools and resources related to conflict prevention and peace-building;
5. Increase awareness and preparedness for cooperative ventures between ECOWAS, member states, civil society and external partners in pursuit of conflict prevention and peace-building;
6. Strengthen capacity within ECOWAS to pursue concrete and integrated conflict prevention and peace-building;
7. Enhance ECOWAS' anticipation and planning capabilities in relation to regional tensions;

8. Extend opportunities for conflict prevention to post-conflict environments through targeted restructuring of political governance, conflict-sensitive reconstruction and development, as well as humanitarian crisis prevention and preparedness, and related peace-building initiatives: and
9. Generate a more pro-active and operational conflict prevention posture from member states and the ECOWAS system.

As already highlighted, In order to enhance the impact of the operationalization of the framework at the country level, 14 key operational and structural areas were targeted to be simultaneously strengthened by all Member State for the prevention of conflicts in the sub-region (ECPF, 2008). Notable among these was the inclusion of the media because of its strategic importance in the peace consolidation process.

In practice, the media play a very crucial and complementary role in ensuring peace and security in any society. McNair (1999) suggests five functions of the communication media in any 'ideal type' democratic society. First, to inform citizens of what is happening around them; second, to educate them as to the meaning and significance of the 'facts; third, to provide a platform for public political discourse that must include the provision of space for the expression of dissent; fourth, to give publicity to governmental and political institutions; and finally to serve as a channel for the advocacy of political viewpoints (McNair, 1999).

A study by Common Ground (an organization specialized in cross-cultural integration) in 2002, did prove that, with the ability to reach and influence large numbers of people, the media carry immense power in shaping the course of conflicts. As Terzis (2002) puts it, "instead of reflecting pluralism in the social and political structures and thereby contributing to the creation of an informed critical citizenry within a country, the media has the potential to act as a mouthpiece for power circles". This situation can lead to the deliberate and continuous distortion of news coverage for particular interests and gradually facilitate the ripening of conflict triggering factors (Terzis 2000).

A report by the International Media Group in 2006 shows that the mass media often play a key role in most contemporary conflicts. Basically, their role can take two different and opposed forms. Either the media takes an active part in the conflict and has responsibility for the increased violence, or stay independent and out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of the conflict and alleviation of violence. The role that the media takes in a given conflict depends on a complex set of factors. This includes the relationship that it has with actors in the conflict and the extent of control by power holders in the society (International Media Group, 2006).

The role of the media as highlighted shows how critical it is to the maintenance of peace within the sub-region. This very important role was factored into the operationalization of Articles 65 and 66 of the revised ECOWAS Treaty and Articles 1 (K), 32 and 37 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (ECPF, 2008). Technically, the objective of the Media component of the ECPF is to facilitate an enabling West African information landscape of freedom, transparency and accountability, where the electronic and print media will become veritable watchdogs of human security, and platforms for mobilization and discourse on peace-building processes (ECPF, 2008). It is also expected to promote human rights and the rule of law, common citizenry, social cohesion and integration, social harmony, democracy and development. In order to enhance the realization of these milestones, the framework outlines the activities to be engaged by the ECOWAS Commission and the respective Member States as follows:

3. Activities to be undertaken by The ECOWAS Commission

1. To facilitate the emergence of a network of media practitioners in the region, including the Media Commissions, journalists associations, media owners and oversight bodies as a vehicle for the establishment of ECOWAS minimum norms and standards for media practice and the promotion of interaction and cooperation among journalists and media practitioners in the region;
2. Conduct feasibility studies with a view to promoting the establishment of a region-wide news channel 'ECOTV' and 'ECORADIO' in cooperation with regional media houses and with the active support of the private sector;
3. Promote and defend media practice by facilitating the enactment, enforcement and propagation of freedom of information laws and codes of conduct for media practitioners across the region;
4. To enhance the capacity of West African media to lend visibility to ECOWAS activities and interventions. To this end, ECOWAS shall develop a scheme to invite journalists and media houses on a rotational basis to be part of ECOWAS missions and activities;

5. To facilitate workshops for journalists through Regional and National Journalists Associations to enhance their capacity to interpret and inform about ECOWAS policies and activities in regional integration, democracy, peace and security; and
6. With the active involvement of Member States, promote the establishment of 'EcoPeace' Community Radios along sensitive borders to promote community spirit, regional integration and combat cross-border crime.

4. Responsibility of Member States

1. To adopt, apply and ensure respect for freedom of information laws and discourage the persecution of media practitioners by ensuring strict adherence to the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law and due process;
2. Facilitate the acquisition of media equipment, newsprint and other relevant materials by media houses;
3. Enforce targeted laws to combat hate media and shall promote programmes in support of national reconciliation and regional integration based on common citizenship and justice, particularly in post-conflict settings; and
4. See to the creation of regulatory and ethical bodies to oversee and monitor compliance with codes of conduct and other laws relating to media practice (ECPF, 2008).

The policy also specified key yardsticks to be used in assessing the progress during implementation. These include the following: an assessment of the availability of and adherence to an ECOWAS code of conduct for the media in Member States and the promulgation of freedom of information laws; the diverse and vibrant nature of the media landscape; the extent to which the incidence of persecution of journalists have reduced; the level of objectivity and fairness in general reportage; and how the media in general promotes regional integration, peace and security. The responsibility of Member States under the framework expressly included the need to support the media financially, and also as part of a country-wide strategy, organize periodic workshops for media practitioners. The most salient part of this need for support was the call on Member States to provide appropriate support for disadvantaged media to encourage pluralism.

5. The Implementation of the ECPF in Ghana

Ghana is a Member State of the ECOWAS, and a signatory to the ECPF. Prior to the formulation and final adoption of the framework by member States in 2008, Ghana had already made significant strides at improving her media landscape. The introduction of the 1992 constitution, which resuscitated multiparty democracy in the country after years of military rule, together with the repeal of the criminal libel law in August 2001, provided a very fertile ground for the growth of the media in the country. A look at how the country has implemented the policy so far shows that, apart from some few laudable milestones, a lot is yet to be done. Structurally, The National Media Commission; the Ministry of Information and Media Relations; and the National Communication Authority are the three main constitutionally mandated institutions that deal directly with issues concerning the media. At the policy level, the 1992 constitution guarantees the unrestricted operations of the media explicitly as follows (Chapter 12 of the Ghanaian constitution (Articles 162 to 173) :

- Freedom and independence of the media are hereby guaranteed.
- Subject to this Constitution and any other law not inconsistent with this Constitution, there shall be no censorship in Ghana.
- There shall be no impediments to the establishment of private press or media; and in particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a license as a prerequisite to the establishment or operation of a newspaper, journal or other media for mass communication or information.
- Editors and publishers of newspapers and other institutions of the mass media shall not be subject to control or interference by Government, nor shall they be penalized or harassed for their editorial opinions and views, or the content of their publications.
- All agencies of the mass media shall, at all times, be free to uphold the principles, provisions and objectives of this Constitution, and shall uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people of Ghana.
- Any medium for the dissemination of information to the public which publishes a statement about or against any person shall be obliged to publish a rejoinder, if any, from the person in respect of whom the publication was made.

- All state-owned media shall afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinions.
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5.1 The Ghana Media Commission

The National Media Commission was set up on July 7, 1993 by an act of Parliament (National Media Commission Act 1993, Act 449). The creation of the commission was necessitated by the need to satisfy salient provisions of chapter 12 of the constitution as stated above. The mission statement of the commission is stated as follows:

"... to promote a free independent, dynamic and public spirited media that will provide access for all, and not only some of our people, to participate freely, fully and creatively at the community, national and global levels in the expression, exchange and discussion of knowledge, information and ideas and the management and operations of the institutions thereof so as to build a just prosperous and equitable society enriched by our diversity and informed by our and to interact as equals and to mutual benefit with other citizens of the world". (National Media Commission, Ghana).

Based on the above mission statement, the commission set to promote the media landscape through the following functions:

- (a) To promote and ensure the freedom and independence of the media for mass communication or information;
- (b) To take all appropriate measures to ensure the establishment and maintenance of the highest journalistic standards in the mass media, including the investigation, mediation and settlement of complaints made against or by the press or other mass media;
- (c) To insulate the state-owned media from governmental control;
- (d) To make regulations by constitutional instrument for the registration of newspapers and other publications, except that the regulations shall not provide for the exercise of any direction or control over the professional functions of a person engaged in the production of newspapers or other means of mass communication; and
- (e) To perform such other functions as may be prescribed by law not inconsistent with this Constitution.

5.2 The Ministry of Information and Media Relations

The Ministry of Information and media relations facilitates a two-way free flow of timely and reliable information and feedback between the Government and its various publics and assists in the development, co-ordination of policy; to monitor and evaluate the implementation of programmes and activities by the Sectors Agencies. (Ministry of Information, G.O.G.)

The main objectives of the Ministry

1. To strengthen institutional capacity for effective policy formulation and execution.
2. To ensure free flow of public information in pursuance of the open Government policy.
3. To effectively and efficiently monitor and evaluate public responses to Government policies, programmes and activities and provide timely feedback to Government.
4. To project the image of the country in collaboration with other agencies to attract foreign investment in consonance with Government policy.
5. To co-ordinate activities of the Presidency towards ensuring uniformity and focus in executing policies, programmes and activities.

The ministry has four main agencies (The Information Services Department; Ghana News Agency; Ghana Broadcasting Corporation; and the National Film and Television Institute). Currently, only the Ghana News Agency and the Broadcasting Corporation are directly engaged in activities involving the media. The Ghana News Agency uses its electronic platform to collect, analyse and share global information with all players in the Ghanaian media. The agency also contributes to the political, social and economic development of the nation through data-gathering, processing and dissemination through wire service.

The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation was established under the National Liberation Council Decree (NLC Decree 266) in 1968.

It was given the mandate to inform, educate and entertain as well as engage in commercial broadcasting through the sale of paid adverts and exploitation of other sources of revenue related to the broadcast enterprise. As a public service broadcaster, the corporation has performed creditably well in making information available to both the literate and illiterate Ghanaian population. (NLC Decree 266 of 1968)

5.3 National Communication Authority

The National Communication Authority Act 769 of 2008 led to the creation of the Authority as the central body authorized to license and regulate communications activities and services in the country. Functions of the Authority include the formulation and implementation of industry standards; the granting of licenses and frequencies; ensuring fair competition in the industry and helping to address industry related disputes (The National Communication Authority Act 769 of 2008).

As at 2013, the Authority had authorized 247 FM radio stations and 28 TV stations to operate in Ghana. Out of the 247 authorized radio stations, 34 are Public radio stations, 37 are Community radio stations, 11 are Campus radio stations and 166 are Commercial radio stations (217 of the stations are operational). Out of the total of 28 TV stations authorized, 20 are Free-on-air, seven (7) are Pay-Per-View and one registered for research purpose only. (National Communication Authority, 2013). For the print media, the Media Commission in 2013 recorded a total of 30 newspapers comprising dailies, weeklies and Bi-weeklies in various categories ranging from sports to leisure.

The importance of the media as an agent for peace-building and democratic consolidation cannot be over emphasized. The media in Ghana and West Africa in general, perform the following peace engendering roles in the sub-region: they serve as key actors in the fight against corruption in Member States, by exposing corrupt officials and prompting investigations into official wrong doings; they play a major role in the education of the citizenry on electoral rules and promote accountability at the polls during elections. The media also serve as the main vehicle for the dissemination of information to the public as well as the platform for the collation of views from the citizens for the agenda setting process.

6. Challenges Faced by the Media in Ghana

The media in Ghana currently faces a number of challenges. The issue of political polarization within the wider Ghanaian society has gradually taken roots in the media landscape. Most of the major newspapers and radio stations are organized along political lines, making it very difficult for them to be very objective in their reportage. The terms of employment and remuneration of journalists are also very poor, making them very vulnerable to corrupt practices. Most of them receive very low salaries and depend largely on a system of patronage to survive.

General journalistic standards are also very low due partly to the fact that the country does not have any official policy that standardizes the educational requirement for media practice. The situation has opened the flood gates for several people to enter the profession. Most have very little or no formal training in journalism and lack what it takes to deliver very quality media outputs that can meet the needs of the Ghanaian society and also help safeguard the peace that the country is enjoying. With the exception of some few radio stations and newspapers, most of the media houses do not have the necessary financial backbone needed to function properly in the industry. Production costs are very high and most media houses also lack the requisite logistics for field assignments. Majority of the print media rely on private printing houses for their daily productions and are compelled to outsource key components of their production process at prohibitive rates.

7. Conclusion

The uniqueness of Ghana and the West African sub-region with its cultural diversity, though beautiful and admirable, has the potential of creating various forms of tensions and conflicts. As highlighted earlier by the works of Kaplan (1993) and Richards (2008), the same cherished diversity that makes each country unique can easily become conflict triggers and accelerators. It, therefore, becomes very imperative for Member States to take the implementation of the media component of the ECPF very serious. The media is currently an invaluable vehicle for ensuring social harmony and can also easily be used to diffuse tensions. A well positioned media can also facilitate good governance by encouraging participation, consensus building, accountability and inclusiveness. Although Ghana has chalked some level of success in the implementation of the media component of the ECPF, a lot still needs to be done.

There is the need to streamline laws relating to the minimum qualification needed for media practice. Such a law should also be very explicit on what should constitute proper media conduct. The current situation has the Ghana Journalist Association self-regulating its members with very little muscle to impose any realistic punitive sanctions (a situation that is the same for the Media Commission). The absence of proper punitive measures makes room for sensational journalism, which defeats the very essence of the profession. The problem of poor remuneration and conditions of service will also have to be comprehensively addressed in order to curtail the incidence of patronage and corruption. As part of their contribution towards peace-building, commercial banks in the country should also make concessionary loans available to the industry to enable them procure modern production equipments. Although most countries in the sub-region have passed the Right to Information Act, Ghana is yet to do so. This directly violates the spirit behind the ECPF and impedes the ease with which journalists can go about their work. The early passing of the Act will go a long way to enhance the watchdog role of the media. Finally, all stakeholders in the industry should do all that it takes to ensure that media content and general practice are rooted in the broader picture of public trust, truth, fairness and equity. The very nature of the sub-region requires that practitioners adhere to the principles of balance reporting to engender tolerance for diverse viewpoints. In-house editorial policies should also bear in mind factors that can serve as conflict triggers and avoid creating the necessary platforms for hate speech and conflict mongering. The major role played by the media in the 'avoidable' Rwandan genocide shows how destructive the mass media can become if practitioners are allowed to have their way without any in-built checks and balances.

In general, the media in Ghana and West Africa have a very huge potential for conflict prevention and social development and should be further enhanced; as Kilimwiko rightly puts it :

"... it is through the mass media that a nation communes with itself and with other nations beyond. It is in that way that the authorities within a nation [...] sense the problems and aspirations of the people they are established to serve. Conversely, it is through the same channel that the people sense the capacity and policies of those authorities." (Kilimwiko, 1997)

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