

10 - West Africa and International Organizations

Since the end of the Second World War the nations of the world have worked together to ensure that the catastrophe that this war brought to humankind is never repeated. It was out of such a context that international bodies such as the United Nations Organization (UN) were created to foster peace and stability in the world. The UN's mandate and structure has since the early 1960s also spawned similar associations in Africa including the continental Organisation of African Unity (OAU), its successor Africa Union (AU), and half a dozen other sub-regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its peace keeping arms, the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

It's also important to recognize other kinds of international organizations and the relationship of West Africa to them. These include big NGOs such as Oxfam and MSF, and also private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. All these organisations together relate in different ways to West Africa's relationships to the world.

West Africa and the UN

The UN Charter which sets out the role, structure and vision of the body came into force in October 1945. The UN set out to 'maintain international peace and security'; 'develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples'; 'achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character' and be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends'. These are ideals which every member country has to abide by in theory and practice.

The links between the UN and West Africa started with Liberia's entry as a full member in November 1945. Indeed, in many ways Liberia can proudly regard itself as one of the founding members of the UN as it was the only African country at the time which was fully independent and sovereign. In 1957, Ghana was admitted into the UN few months after she gained her independence from Britain. Guinea-Conakry joined soon after she threw out the French colonial rulers in October 1958. Nigeria joined the UN in 1960, Sierra Leone in 1961 and Gambia in 1965.

Yet, West African countries soon made their mark on the UN in various ways. In 1960 for example, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah made a poignant and highly praised speech at the UN General Assembly at which he stated clearly his wish for Africa to be treated as an equal partner in the comity of nations, suggesting that 'a permanent seat should be created for Africa on the Security Council in view not only of the growing number of African members of the United Nations, but also of the increasing importance of the African continent in world affairs'. Nkrumah was also instrumental in the UN sending a peace keeping force into the Congo in the summer of 1960 to help put an end to a secessionist

movement in Katanga (southern DRC, rich in copper) instigated by the ex-colonial power Belgium. Ghana, Guinea, Liberia were among the countries which contributed forces to that peace keeping force.

West African countries continued to contribute to the development of the UN in other ways such as diplomacy. Ghanaian diplomat Dr. Robert Gardiner was assistant UN Secretary General for many years; while Sierra Leonean diplomat and scholar Dr. Davidson Nicol also occupied such post in the 1960s. In 1964, Ghana's Alex Quayson Sackey became the first African to be elected President (chair) of the UN General Assembly and won much praise for the efficiency and decorum he brought to this apex body of the organization.

Other West African diplomats such as Ms. Angie Brooks (Liberia); Amara Essy (Ivory Coast), Joseph Garba (Nigeria) also had the singular honour of being elected president of the 25 member UN Security Council. To crown the achievements of West Africans in the UN, Dr Kofi Annan from Ghana was elected UN Secretary General in 1996 and served two full terms.



Angie Brooks (1928-2007). First African female President of the United Nations General Assembly. <https://www.un.org/ga/55/president/bio24.htm>

West African countries also benefit from the UN through the multilateral support offered by UN bodies such as United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), especially for support in teacher training and cultural activities; the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in seed variety improvement and irrigation; and the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) which supports child care activities.

West Africa and the OAU/AU

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was formed in May 1963 by the independent African countries to serve as a platform where African states could enhance unity and cooperation, stand together to remove the vestiges of colonialism in the continent and to end apartheid (racial segregation) rule in South Africa, minority rule in then Rhodesia, and Portuguese colonial rule, which continued in its colonies until 1974. These were noble objectives and at the time also very appropriate and timely because the newly independent states were drifting apart into numerous power blocks which threatened to bring disunity among them.

For example, at independence in the 1960s the continent was divided into political blocs namely the:

Monrovia group: Liberia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ethiopia, Senegal

Casablanca group: Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Morocco, Egypt, Libya,

Brazzaville group: Congo (Brazzaville), Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mauritania, Upper Volta, Niger, Dahomey (Benin), Chad, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Cameroun and Madagascar.

Each of these groupings pulled in different directions and their rulers were not hesitant to pour vitriol on one another in public, including at the UN General Assembly.

The Congo conflict of September 1960 to 1965; Nigerian Independence in 1960 which led to the start of the unhealthy Ghana-Nigeria rivalry for regional dominance, and the Mauritania-Morocco border dispute of 1960, were some of the factors for this fissure. Neo-colonial intrigues were of course also at full play as the ex-colonial masters sought to exert overt control over their former colonies.

Indeed by October 1960, all of independent Africa was divided into these blocs. There was a great risk of further Balkanization of the continent instead of unity as espoused by the Pan African spirit sowed a few years earlier. Add to this cleavage collapse of the Mali Federation in 1960, which brought together Senegal and Mali in short-lived unity, and the despair mounted among Pan Africanists of Africa ever uniting.

The political blocs persisted and of course pleased the detractors, mainly former colonial masters, who revelled in the looming prospect of a divided and weakened Africa unable to take its proper place as a powerful counter force to neo-colonialism and imperialism. For the spirit of Pan-Africanism to be restored, these blocs had to be merged into one super continental organisation dedicated to building a single African voice.

Hope was restored albeit gradually. In 1961 independent African countries met with other emerging Third World countries in Yugoslavia to form the Non Aligned Movement, a strong body which sought to clear away from either the western or eastern blocs involved in the Cold War. The new organization became a meeting point for all the three main African blocs, and helped nudge African states to form a united front, especially against colonialism and apartheid.

Other factors why African leaders decided to end the bloc system was the spate of foreign inspired coups against newly independent African states, the rise and strengthening of apartheid in South Africa, and the emergence of anti-colonial wars in Portuguese colonies. The rise of the Civil Rights movement in the USA and diplomatic efforts of Emperor Haile Sellasie of Ethiopia also helped to coalesce African leaders into one group called the OAU formed on May 25 1963.

A second achievement of the Pan African spirit, aside ending colonial rule on the continent, is therefore the establishment of the OAU. Soon the OAU became the single most important vanguard towards realising the aims and aspirations of the Pan African project. The OAU soon established a Liberation Committee and Fund which sought to assist liberation movement to remove all forms of colonial rule in Africa. Indeed, by 1975 all of Africa except South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe was free of foreign rule. The OAU also united Africans in the fight against apartheid in South Africa by requiring its member states to have nothing to do with South Africa and insisting on economic and cultural boycott of the apartheid state, in addition to the assistance it gives to the ANC and other anti apartheid forces through the Liberation Fund. The release of Mandela in 1990 and the end of White minority rule in 1994 were indeed the apotheosis of OAU success.

But the OAU was unable to achieve its prime objective of forging unity leading to the proverbial United States of Africa which is why in 2000, African leaders met in Sirte Libya to re-orient the OAU into a new body called the African Union (AU) which seeks to work towards achieving continental unity. Now that Africa did not have the odious apartheid regime or colonialism to worry about in the continent, it was deemed timely to move faster towards unity. This is why the AU has a Pan-African Parliament based in Cape Town, South Africa, a Peace and Security Council and a Human Rights Commission among other organs. These organs are tasked with the formulation of laws, maintenance of peace and stability and ensuring the protection of basic human rights on the continent. Various West African countries such as Gambia (2006), Nigeria (2003) have hosted the AU twice a year summits of heads of state. Alpha Omar Konare of Mali and Amara Essy of Ivory Coast had served as Chairpersons of the AU secretariat. Presidents Alpha Conde of Guinea (2017-2018); John Kufour of Ghana (2006-2007), and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria (2003-2004) had served a chairman of the AU Assembly of Heads of State.

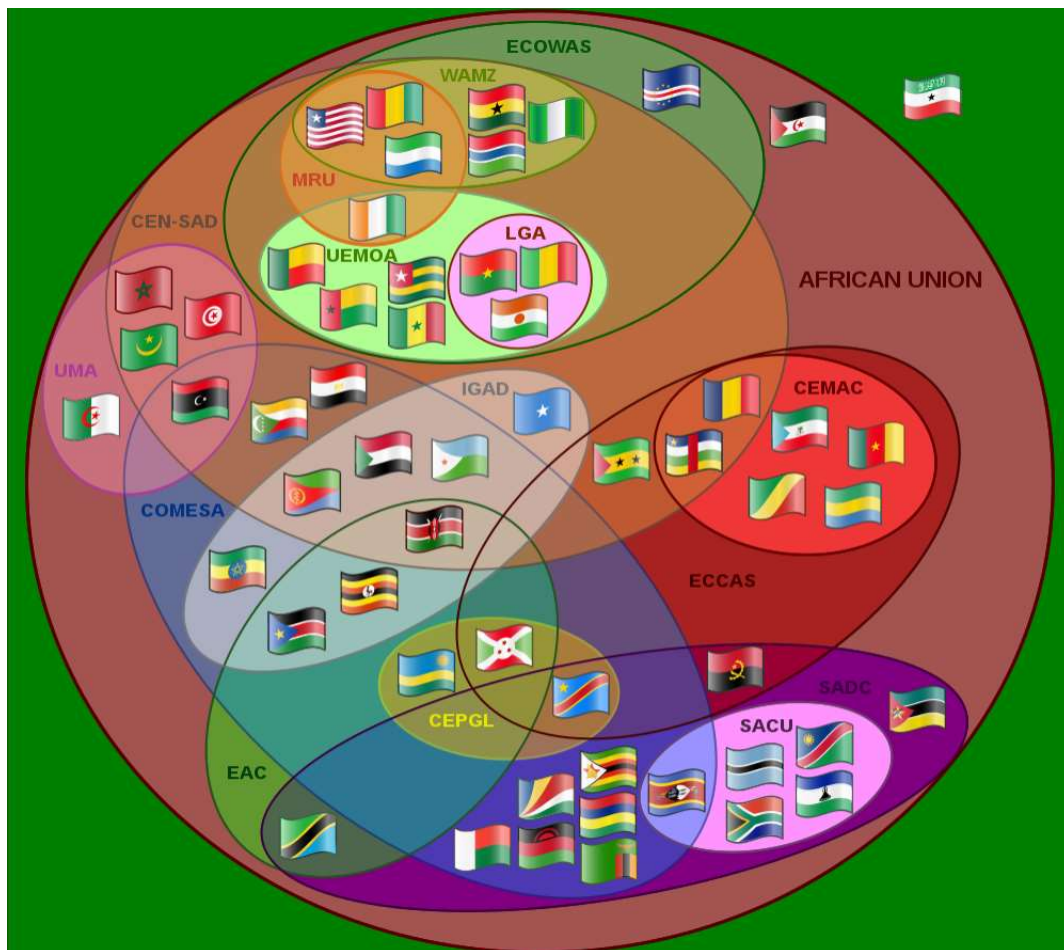
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

In May 1975, West African leaders under the chairmanship of President Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria met in Lagos to create a sub-regional economic and political organization which became known as ECOWAS. As the names suggests, this body was meant to serve as a catalyst to fast economic and monetary cooperation among the 15 states in West Africa such as free movement of goods and people. There were at the time divisions based on colonial history, since the French colonies had bequeathed a standard currency (the CFA) to their colonies, except for Guinea-Conakry.

ECOWAS therefore, started with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region. Another objective of ECOWAS is to foster 'collective self-sufficiency for its member states by creating a single large trading bloc by building a full economic and trading union'.

Visas were abolished for citizens visiting ECOWAS member states and trade barriers were removed between member states. However, the outbreak of the civil war in Liberia in 1989, compelled ECOWAS to expand its horizons beyond mere economic integration to peace keeping and the promotion of democracy and rule of law in member states.

Consequently, in 1990 at its summit in Banjul, The Gambia, ECOWAS leaders agreed to form a peace keeping force called Ecowas Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to help restore peace to Liberia. The success of ECOMOG in bringing about a ceasefire and restoration of democracy in Liberia encouraged ECOWAS leaders to retain ECOMOG as a permanent component of the organization and has since then intervened militarily to restore democracy in Sierra Leone (1998), Ivory Coast (2003), Guinea-Bissau(2012) and The Gambia(2017). ECOWAS has also created a Parliament, a Community Court of Justice and has declared zero tolerance for military coups and similar illegal seizures of power in order to boost the region's (once the hotbed of army coups) democratic credentials.



Euler diagram showing the relationships between various multinational African entities (the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the East African Community

(EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Wikipedia. GNU Lesser General Public License.

Commonwealth and West Africa

The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone belong to the Commonwealth, the loose association of former British colonies which today boasts 52 member states. All members have an equal say – regardless of size or economic stature. This ensures even the smallest member countries have a voice in shaping the Commonwealth. All members subscribe to the Commonwealth's values and principles outlined in The Commonwealth Charter.

The core principles of the Charter are the respect for human rights, democratic values and the rule of law. Member states must be seen to be abiding by the spirit and letter of the Charter to retain their membership. Indeed, what unites Commonwealth member states besides the use of English language are these core values.

Leaders of member countries shape Commonwealth policies and priorities. Every two years, they meet to discuss issues affecting the Commonwealth and the wider world at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). Although Queen Elizabeth of England is head of the Commonwealth, this is rather a symbolic position than anything else. The Commonwealth Secretariat in London, led by a Secretary General, runs the daily affairs of the organization. A Nigerian diplomat Chief Emeka Anyouku was Secretary General from 1990-2000.

President Yahya Jammeh unilaterally withdrew The Gambia from the Commonwealth in October 2013. However, newly elected president Adama Barrow has pledged to return the country to the organisation in mid 2018. Ghanaian and Nigerian athletes have performed with distinction in the Commonwealth Games held every four years, while writers such as Ben Okri and the novelist Helon Habila (both from Nigeria) and the Sierra Leone poet Syl Cheney Coker have won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Non-Aligned Movement and West Africa

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is a group of states that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc. As of 2012, the movement has 120 members, making it the second biggest international grouping apart from the UN. All African countries, except South Sudan, belong to the organization. Founded in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961, Presidents Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Toure of Guinea were among the founders of the organization which seeks to ensure 'the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries'.

The Movement was largely a product of the Cold War which pitted Soviet Communist bloc against the West. Members of the Movement claimed to be neutral in this US-Soviet Union struggle for domination and hegemony.

The Movement supported members in their 'struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics.'

The demise of the Cold War and the end of apartheid made the Movement to re-orient its position and now concentrates on issues such as reform of the UN Security Council, sustainable development, debt relief for poor countries and cultural rights.

Organization of Islamic Conference/Cooperation (OIC)

The Organization of Islamic Conference was formed in 1969 following the burning of the Al-Asqa mosque, (the second most venerated mosque in Islam), in Jerusalem, Israel occupied Palestine by a deranged militant. The fire caused so much anger in the Muslim world that the grand Imam of Jerusalem called for an emergency meeting of Muslim heads of state to discuss the incident. This gathering of heads of state from mainly Arab speaking countries was birth of the OIC. Today it has 57 members including The Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. One key requirement for membership is that 30 per cent of the country's population must profess to Islam as a religion. Its headquarters are in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The organisation sees itself as "the collective voice of the Muslim World" and works to "safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony'. The OIC aims to preserve Islamic social and economic values; promote solidarity amongst member states; and uphold international peace and security. It also works in advancing education, particularly in the fields of science and technology through its arm called Islamic Science, Education, Cultural Organization (ISESCO).

Unlike the UN or the Commonwealth, OIC does not promote issues of democracy and human rights in its member's states. This is why it usually comes under attack from human rights organizations who accuse it of shielding its members such as Iran and Saudi Arabia who have very poor human rights records, from critical appraisal. But the OIC still mobilizes international opinion against the Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians. West African countries like Senegal have played key roles in the OIC. In 2008, Dakar, hosted the OIC summit; during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988, Gambian president Sir Dawda Jawara was chairman of the OIC peace mission tasked with bringing peace between the two neighbouring OIC members. The OIC was renamed Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2011. In 2019, The Gambia will be hosting the OIC summit.

NGOs: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Many international NGOs are now present in West Africa, working alongside the established and very effective local NGOs. Their role is contested, as in some cases they have intervened

directly to fund political campaigns (as was the case recently with Oxfam in Senegal). In other cases, they can have a role in health emergencies, as has been the case with the Ebola epidemic of 2014.

Private foundations are also involved. One example is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Also called the Gates Foundation, it is a private humanitarian foundation founded by computer mogul and billionaire Bill Gates and his wife Melinda in 2000. The couple have used a significant part of their wealth to respond to urgent international health and social crises such as malaria control, Aids prevention and polio vaccination. The foundation also has a strong objective of fighting poverty and improving girls' access to education.

Through its flagship support programme called the Global Fund Against Tuberculosis Aids and Malaria (GFATM) West African countries have been able to reduce by half malaria and Aids infection in their countries. Nigeria recently received US dollars 76 million from the foundation to pay for anti-polio vaccination campaigns in the North of the country where the diseases remains prevalent.

Conclusion

While membership of these organizations continue to benefit countries in West Africa, lack of funding hampers the smooth operations of bodies like the UN and the AU. Another hindrance facing the smooth running of these organizations is their domination by big powers as evident in the Veto power of the five Permanent members of the UN Security Council. Moreover, increasingly these organization are being criticized for being bureaucratic and wasteful and for their inability to remain relevant to pressing issues of today such as religious radicalism, youth unemployment and the spread of diseases such as Ebola.

Hassoum Ceesay