

4 April 2023

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Peace, security and democracy support in West Africa

Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

Publications of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2023:2

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Anitta Kynsilehto, Prince Duah Agyei and Karim Maïche

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland Helsinki 2023

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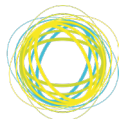
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Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

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ISBN pdf: 978-952-281-362-6

ISSN pdf: 2737-0844

Layout: Government Administration Department, Publications

Helsinki 2023 Finland

Peace, security and democracy support in West Africa

Publications of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2023:2

Publisher Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Author(s) Anitta Kynsilehto, Prince Duah Agyei, Karim Maïche
Language English **Pages** 36

Abstract

West Africa is a diverse, multilingual, and heavily populated region that is relatively unfamiliar in Finland. Its population is very young and there are diverse natural resources in the region. The effects of global warming and climate change are highly visible across the region, especially in the Sahel. The media represent the region largely through conflicts, and numerous coups have occurred in many countries in the region, including in recent years.

In this study, we examine the possibilities and conditions for peace, security, and democracy in West Africa. In 2022 Finland opened an embassy to Dakar, Senegal. This study offers recommendations for future Finnish actions in the West African region within the context of Finland's Africa Strategy. We approach peace in its broad sense: not just as an absence of armed conflicts but as a manifold societal condition in which it is possible for differently positioned individuals and groups to live a secure and meaningful life. Our approach to security is equally broad: human security. Combining these approaches, we argue that a decent livelihood and participation in political life are the central dimensions of peace and security.

Provision

This report is commissioned as part of UniPID Development Policy Studies (UniPID DPS), funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) and managed by the Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID). UniPID is a network of Finnish universities established to strengthen universities' global responsibility and collaboration with partners from the Global South, in support of sustainable development. The UniPID DPS instrument strengthens knowledge-based development policy by identifying the most suitable available researchers to respond to the timely knowledge needs of the MFA and by facilitating a framework for dialogue between researchers and ministry officials. The content of this report does not reflect the official opinion of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The responsibility for the information and views expressed in the report lies entirely with the authors.

Keywords Peace, conflict, security, democracy, participation, equality, social justice, youth

ISBN PDF 978-952-281-362-6 **ISSN PDF** 2737-0844

URN address <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-281-362-6>

Rauha, turvallisuus ja demokratiatuki Länsi-Afrikassa

Ulkoministeriön julkaisu 2023:2

Julkaisija Ulkoministeriö

Tekijä/t
Kieli Anitta Kynsilehto, Prince Duah Agyei, Karim Maiche
englanti Sivumäärä 36

Tiivistelmä

Länsi-Afrikka on monipuolinen, monikielinen ja väkirikas alue, joka tunnetaan Suomessa suhteellisen heikosti. Alueen väestö on keskimäärin hyvin nuorta ja alueella on monenlaisia luonnonvaroja. Länsi-Afrikassa, erityisesti Sahelin alueella ilmaston lämpenemisen vaikutukset näkyvät selvästi. Mediassa alue esitetään lähinnä konfliktien kautta ja alueen maissa on tapahtunut lukuisia vallankaappauksia vuosikymmenten varrella, myös viime vuosina.

Tässä selvityksessä tarkastelemme rauhan, turvallisuuden ja demokratian mahdollisuuksia ja edellytyksiä Länsi-Afrikassa. Vuonna 2022 Suomi avasi lähetystön Dakariin, Senegaliin. Tämä selvitys tarjoaa suosituksia Suomen tulevaisuuden toimille Länsi-Afrikan alueella Suomen Afrikka -strategian kontekstissa. Ymmärrämme rauhan laajassa merkityksessä: ei vain aseellisten konfliktien poissaolona vaan monisyisenä yhteiskunnallisena tilana, missä eri tavoin paikantuneilla ihmisillä ja ihmisryhmillä on mahdollista elää turvallista ja mielekästä elämää. Turvallisuutta tarkastelemme niin ikään laajassa mielessä inhimillisenä turvallisuutena. Näitä lähestymistapoja yhdistellen toteamme, että riittävä toimeentulo ja osallistumismahdollisuudet poliittiseen päätöksentekoon ovat keskeinen osa rauhan ja turvallisuuden rakentumisessa.

Klausuuli

Tämä raportti on osa ulkoministeriön rahoittamia ja UniPID-verkoston hallinnoimia kehityspoliittisia selvityksiä (UniPID Development Policy Studies). Finnish University Partnership for International Development, UniPID, on suomalaisten yliopistojen verkosto, joka edistää yliopistojen globaalivastuuta ja yhteistyötä globaalin etelän kumppanien kanssa kestäväen kehityksen saralla. Kehityspoliittinen selvitysyhteistyö vahvistaa kehityspoliittikan tietoperustaisuutta. UniPID identifioi sopivia tutkijoita vastaamaan ulkoministeriön ajankohtaisiin tiedontarpeisiin ja fasilitoi puitteet tutkijoiden ja ministeriön virkahenkilöiden väliselle dialogille. Tämän raportin sisältö ei vastaa ulkoministeriön virallista kantaa. Vastuu raportissa esitetystä tiedosta ja näkökulmista on raportin laatijoilla.

Asiasanat rauha, konflikti, turvallisuus, demokratia, osallisuus, tasa-arvo, sosiaalinen oikeudenmukaisuus, nuoret

ISBN PDF 978-952-281-362-6

ISSN PDF 2737-0844

Julkaisun osoite <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-281-362-6>

Fred, säkerhet och demokratibidrag i Väst Afrika

Utrikesministeriets publikationer 2023:2

Utgivare Utrikesministeriet

Författare Anitta Kynsilehto, Prince Duah Agyei, Karim Maïche

Språk engelska

Sidantal

36

Referat

Västafrika är en mångsidig, flerspråkig och tätbefolkad region som man i Finland har relativt sett ganska lite kunskap om. Dess befolkning är mycket ung och det finns en mängd naturresurser i regionen. Effekterna av den globala uppvärmningen och klimatförändringarna är mycket synliga i hela regionen, särskilt i Sahel. I media uppmärksammas regionen mestadels genom de konflikter och många statskupper som har inträffat i länderna, bland annat under de senaste åren.

I denna studie undersöker vi möjligheter och förutsättningar för fred, säkerhet och demokrati i Västafrika. År 2022 öppnade Finland en ambassad i Dakar, Senegal. Denna studie ger rekommendationer för framtida finländska åtgärder i den västafrikanska regionen inom ramen för Finlands Afrikastrategi. Vi använder begreppet fred i en vid bemärkelse: inte bara som en frånvaro av väpnade konflikter utan som ett mångsidigt samhällsförhållande där det är möjligt för individer och grupper att leva ett säkert och meningsfullt liv. Vårt syn på säkerhet är lika bred: mänsklig säkerhet. Genom att kombinera dessa synsätt hävdar vi att anständig försörjning och deltagande i det politiska livet är centrala dimensioner för fred och säkerhet.

Klausul

Denna rapport är beställd som en del av UniPID Development Policy Studies (UniPID DPS), finansierad av Finlands Utrikesministerium (MFA), och hanterad av Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID). UniPID är ett nätverk av finska universitet som etablerats för att stärka universitetens globala ansvar och samarbete med partner från det södra halvklotet, till stöd för en hållbar utveckling. UniPID DPS-verktyget stärker en kunskapsbaserad utvecklingspolicy genom att identifiera de mest lämpliga, tillgängliga forskarna för att svara på utrikesministeriets kunskapsbehov i rätt tid och att underlätta ett ramverk för en dialog mellan forskare och departementstjänstemän. Innehållet i denna rapport återspeglar inte Finlands utrikesministeriums officiella uppfattning. Ansvar för informationen och åsikterna i rapporten ligger helt på författarna.

Nyckelord fred, konflikt, säkerhet, demokrati, delaktighet, jämlikhet, social rättvisa, ungdom

ISBN PDF 978-952-281-362-6

ISSN PDF

2737-0844

URN-adress <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-281-362-6>

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FOREWORD

Finland's Africa Strategy was adopted on 18 March 2021. With the Strategy, the Government of Finland wants to underline the growing importance of the African continent and the African countries in global politics, economy and trade. The main objective of the Strategy is to increase and diversify Finland's interaction with the African countries and organisations through mutually beneficial political, commercial and economic cooperation.

Traditionally, Finnish society's focus in Sub-Saharan Africa has been in the south and in the east of the continent: Finnish missionaries in the late 19th century, humanitarian support to liberation movements and anti-apartheid work, development cooperation with countries like Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, and Namibia, and scientific & innovation cooperation in more recent years.

There has been an increased attention on West Africa also in Finland. The region offers many opportunities for interaction between various actors and offers great potential for cooperation within the private sector, too. Therefore, it is of great importance that in 2022 Finland opened an **Embassy in Dakar, Senegal** – the first one in French-speaking West Africa.

As part of the implementation of the Africa Strategy – and in order to prepare the ground for the new Dakar Embassy – the Ministry for Foreign Affairs decided to commission a *development policy related study on **Peace, security and democracy support in West Africa***. The purpose of the study was to analyse the situation in the region, priorities and positions of certain countries and organisations and give concrete recommendations for Finland's future actions and initiatives.

We want to thank the research team from TAPRI, Dr. Anitta Kynsilehto, Prince Duah Agyei and Dr. Karim Maïche for their hard work as well as Kelly Brito and Johanna Kivimäki at UniPID for keeping all the strings together.

At the Ministry for Foreign Affairs on 30 March 2023.

Sofie From-Emmesberger

Director-General, Department for Africa and the Middle-East

1 Introduction

This study investigates the contemporary context in West Africa from the perspective of peace, security, and democracy. These three dimensions are interconnected and interdependent: for peace to denote not only the absence of war but a societal condition in which everyone can enjoy the same access to rights and lead a healthy and meaningful life, security and a real possibility to participate in societal and political life are necessary. Furthermore, for positive peace to be accomplished, tackling inequalities is the key.

One of the biggest challenges in contemporary West Africa is insecurity, which needs to be addressed from the perspective of human security. This perspective emphasizes “the protection of individuals from risks to their physical or psychological safety, dignity, and well-being” (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007). In this report, we describe insecurity as comprising multiple challenges that confront the region, including but not limited to violence in all its forms, the illicit arms trade across the region, coupled with and feeding transnational terrorist activity. Insecurity is also dispersed unevenly: the situation is particularly difficult for people living in remote areas far from capital cities, where the state is often relatively absent and locals have been equipped with arms to protect themselves.

Structural violence is a phenomenon that hampers the possibilities for sustainable peace, even in contexts where armed conflict is absent. Structural violence refers to issues such as the lack of income-generating opportunities, obstacles to receiving quality education, the lack of food and nutritional security, or discrimination based on, for example, gender, ethnic origin, age, or disability. Gender equality, quality education, and non-discrimination are also among the cross-cutting objectives in Finland’s development policy. Hence, the possibility of sustainable peace requires tackling pervasive inequalities in the region. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 in the UN Agenda 2030 identifies this as a central dimension and outlines specific themes that must be addressed so that sustainable development and peace can be achieved. In line with the above, eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, and achieving sustainable development are major goals in Finland’s development policy.

West Africa, particularly Sahel, is a region where the impact of climate change is already very severe. In Sahel, the temperature is expected to rise 1.5 degrees faster than the global average. Successive droughts took place in the 1970s and 1980s, and these have intensified over the years. Added to droughts, heavy rainfall has become increasingly

common, which contributes to flooding as the dry ground cannot absorb the rainwater. These impacts are drastically reducing people's access to livelihoods and sanitation. Therefore, it is important to invest in climate-resilient and low-emission development as outlined in the cross-cutting objectives of Finland's development policy.

Photo 1: Dried riverbed in Mali. Picture Nora Klami, UM, 2010



The population in West Africa is extremely young: according to the most recent statistics (UN 2019), over 60% of the population is under 25 years of age. Moreover, population growth is the fastest on the African continent, with Niger in the top position. Regionally, the population is expected to double by 2040. This means the region is and continues to be populated largely by young people, which requires paying specific attention to young people's concerns in terms of access to education, work, and political participation at different levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic and access to vaccines are not only important for the inhabitants of the region but to every human being around the world. Today, West African countries lack vaccines and, unless the availability of vaccines is increased in sub-Saharan Africa at large, it is impossible to imagine that Europe or other neighboring areas would be safe from future waves of COVID-19.

We start this report with an overview of the region. After outlining the overall context, we discuss peace, security, and democracy, paying specific attention to how they manifest in connection with Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal. Moreover, we take Niger as an example of interconnected issues of enhanced migration control by the European Union that has created unintended consequences on people's livelihoods and local governance structures, and may influence regional security considerably beyond Nigerien borders. Throughout the report, we highlight the challenges on the path towards a more peaceful and secure region, where inhabitants can trust democratic modes of governance and participate with their full potential in societal and political life.

1.1 Methodological approach

Methodologically, our commissioned study draws on a desk-based study of relevant literature and nine interviews with differently positioned experts with broad experience of different countries in the region. Some of our interviewees were based in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana) at the time of the interviews, while other interviewees responded to our questions from other parts of the world. All have accumulated considerable work experience in different countries in West Africa, and some are nationals of the region. We talked to senior academics, senior civil servants, and development professionals in order to gain as complementary and comprehensive perspectives as possible within the time limits and from a distance, given that we were not able to conduct field research for this study. We express our gratitude to those people who agreed to talk to us and share their views.

The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and they were conducted remotely via Zoom or Teams. We asked our interviewees for their views regarding security, development, trade, and future prospects for the region overall. As the aim of this commissioned study is to identify the possibilities for Finland to work bilaterally with the aforementioned West African countries on specific issues, we also asked the interviewees for themes they saw as the most pertinent for common actions. Alongside bilateral relations, shared frameworks are within the context of bodies of other Nordic countries, the European Union and the United Nations. The interviewees talked to us openly and we agreed to keep their participation anonymous.

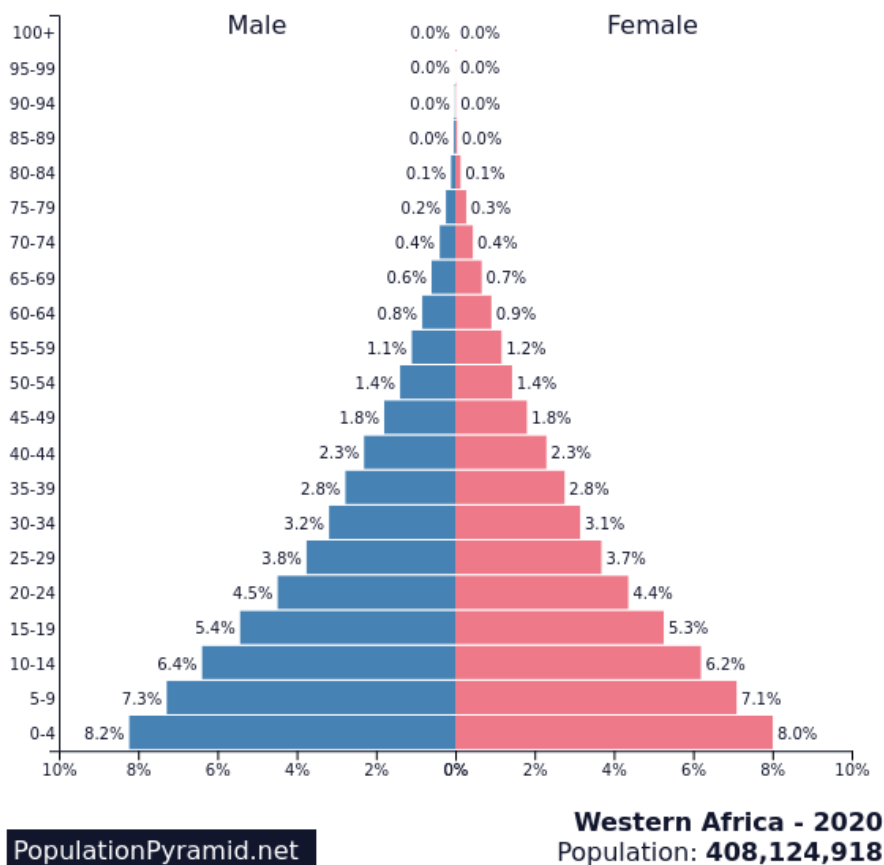
We structured the interviews on the basis of expectations from the Finnish Foreign Ministry officials in the context of *Finland's Africa Strategy*. According to those persons among our interviewees who were familiar with this document, Finland's Africa Strategy is ambitious and subtle, but they also questioned its practicality. They asked about the extent to which it is possible to put its principles into practical actions. Due to the multifaceted nature of the strategy, we focused on its political and economic dimensions,

as advised by Finnish Foreign Ministry officials. Similarly, we reflected the framework within which its main principles could be achieved, that is, whether Finland should orchestrate its actions within the frameworks of the United Nations or the European Union, together with other Nordic countries, with the African Union, or on a bilateral basis. We leave it to the Finnish Foreign Ministry to decide on these reflections. They have the best understanding of what is the best framework for their actions in each question and context.

2 West Africa: Analysis of the region

According to the latest UN estimates, West Africa is home to approximately 430 million people. Geographically speaking, West Africa includes the 16 African countries in the western part of the African continent. Politically, it represents only the 15 countries within the jurisdiction of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) — Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Of these countries, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone speak English, while the rest speak French, with the Portuguese speaking Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde remaining the exception.

Figure 1: Screenshot taken from populationpyramid.net, under the search criteria "West Africa".



Economic growth (approx. 3.6% in 2022) in West Africa has been exponential during the last couple of decades. In 2018, for example, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Guinea were among the 10 most promising economies in Africa. Of these, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Ghana were among the 10 fastest growing economies in the world. According to the African Development Bank, there was, however, a severe drop in 2016 region-wide, largely due to the fall in oil prices and political uncertainties in Nigeria, the largest economy in the region, and alongside South Africa, in the whole continent. The full economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be seen.

The distribution of these gains, however, remains highly unequal (see e.g. Obeng & Hallum 2019). Inequality is sometimes presented as the "ratio of the incomes of the top quintile to the bottom quintile or via the Gini index to better reflect the wealth distribution within a country" (West Africa Brief 2019). As an example, the richest Nigerian's wealth generates 150,000 more than the average annual consumption expenditure of the poorest 10 percent in the country. In neighboring Ghana, it would take more than 1,000 years for the average poor woman to make the monthly earnings of one rich man (Obeng & Hallum 2019).

Such income inequalities have been identified as one of the reasons for the worsening violence in the Sahel region (Peyton 2020). Aside from incomes, inequalities concern disparities in the access to and use of basic social services (West Africa Brief 2019), as outlined also in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. The result has been a huge gap emerging between urban and rural areas. These major disparities between urban and rural areas concern most countries in the region and this causes people to leave their villages for cities, or even further and leave the country, possibly across the Saharan desert and to Europe. These inequalities are visible in all areas of life: access to clean and drinkable water, health, employment, social amenities like roads, and education. Several researchers who were interviewed for the study argued that paying significant attention to socio-economic concerns, especially food security, health, sanitation, education, and employment, will be a significant step in dealing with the challenges in the region, including security.

2.1 Security in the region

Described by some observers as "a region in turmoil" (Boafo Arthur 2008: 8), "the riskiest region in Africa" (Edi, 2006: 7), and "the coup d'état belt of the African continent" (Olukoshi 2001: 1), the sub-region manifests a mix of political instabilities, misrule, civil wars, communal violence, and general insecurity.

Since Togo's military coup in 1963, coups have become the norm. Between 1957 and 2004, the region had as many as "forty-four successful military-led coups, forty-three often-bloody failed coups, at least eighty-two coup plots, seven civil wars, and many other forms of political conflict" (McGowan 2005: 5). Nigeria topped the list with six successful coups between 1966 and 1993, followed by Ghana with five successful coups and several failed coups between 1966 and 1983. The story is no different in the remaining countries, with Senegal standing out as the only aberration. However, events during recent years suggest that the decades of coups that followed the era immediately after independence have not ended. Between 2020 and 2022, there has been a new wave of coups, with five successful and two failed coups in the sub-region, reminiscent of the period of constant coups in the 1960s. These coups included: the August 19, 2020, coup in Mali, which saw the removal of President Ibrahim Keita; the May 24, 2021, military takeover in Mali, which ousted President Bah Ndaw; the March 31, 2021, failed coup in Niger; the September 5, 2021, successful coup in Guinea, which toppled the regime of President Alpha Condé; the January 24, 2022, successful coup in Burkina Faso, which caused the exit of President Roch Kaboré; the failed coup attempt on February 1, 2022, in Guinea-Bissau; and most recently the military insurrection of September 30, 2022 in Burkina Faso that toppled the administration of interim President Paul-Henri Sandaogo over alleged mishandling of Islamist insurgents.

Beyond coups, the region has also witnessed several civil wars. In Nigeria, the assemblage of three distinct nations (Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo) by Britain led to "one of Africa's great human tragedies, the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70" (Mazrui 2008: 37). Liberia, the oldest African republic, largely exempted from the colonial quandaries experienced by its neighbors, created its own colonial regime, a settler imperialist and an apartheid regime that imploded into two civil wars from 1989 to 2003 with a brief respite between 1997 and 1999 (see e.g. Afolabi 2018). In Sierra Leone, the civil war which started in 1991 only ended in 2002, leaving in its wake over 75,000 deaths and 2.6 million displaced people (see Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020; M'cleod & Ganson 2018). Currently, although the wars have abated, Islamist jihadism has gained ground in West Africa, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger being the most affected by these forms of violence. Joined more recently by Islamic State West Africa Province, Boko Haram's insurgency, which began in 2009 for example, continues and has resulted in the killing of over 350,000 people and with over one million displaced.

Perhaps based on the region's ethnic heterogeneity and the artificial drawing of state borders during the colonial era, the region suffers from internal violence, most of which ethnic and communal. Even in Senegal, which has remained an exception to state-wide political instabilities, there is a long-term, ongoing confrontation between a separatist movement and the Senegalese army in the Casamance region. West Africa and Sahel regions suffer from multiple security threats and insecurities, both internally and

externally. While the international media covers mainly the hostile attacks committed by the international jihadist groups, the news reports rarely address the consequences related to French-led military operation Barkhane, socio-economic inequalities within the states, or the impacts of climate change in the region. These gaps, with various connotations, can be found mainly through international reports and other research literature.

Photo 2: Legacies of colonialism and slave trade in Senegal. Picture: Karim Maïche.



Therefore, it is necessary to approach the security dimensions from different perspectives: comprehensive security and human security, including access to livelihoods. In addition, the security dimensions also integrate cross-border phenomena, such as humanitarian and displacement crises, cross-border criminality (human, arms, and drug trafficking) as well as money flows related to neocolonial economic structures and corruption.

Overall, the security nexus in West Africa can be approached on four levels: local, national, regional, and international. During the last decade and especially after the spillover of the civil war in Libya, considerable resources have been invested in West Africa (Eizenga 2019: 6). International UN and EU operations have aimed to strengthen the capacities of the governments in order to provide stability, security, and the tools to manage migration,

economic development, and societal solidity. Especially the EU member-states, led by France, have invested economic and military deposits to maintain stability in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal.

The civil war in Mali erupted due to spillover from the civil war and NATO military intervention in Libya. After the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, the diffusion of weaponry from Libya to Tuareg fighters amplified the demands for their independence from the state of Mali. Already at the beginning of the 1990s, Tuaregs and Arab nomads had created the *People's Movement for the Liberation of Azawad* (MPA) in order to liberate a part of northern Mali. Violence erupted in 1991, 1995, and 2007, while in 2012 the *National Movement of Liberation of Azawad* (MNLA) formed an alliance with radical Islamist groups *Ansar Dine* and *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM). They occupied northern Mali easily and demanded self-determination.

These events led to a military coup in Mali in March 2012 when Captain Amadou Sanogo announced the dissolution of the constitution of Mali. The coup was strongly condemned by the UN Security Council, the African Union, and ECOWAS. Despite these condemnations, no concrete actions followed. In this context, the MNLA drifted into conflict with Islamist groups, former allies, *Ansar Dine*, and *The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJWA). The MNLA was too weak in the face of war-hardened and better organized Islamist groups and lost cities one after another (Bencherif et al. 2020, 6).

In addition, some ethnic minorities, such as Sonhay and Fulani, rebelled against MNLA Touaregs opposing the dissolution of Mali. Gradually, MNLA started peace negotiations with the government of Mali, dropped its previous aim of creating self-determination (Azawad) and realigned with the government in order to concentrate the fight against the Islamist groups. In January 2013, France launched a military intervention (Opération Serval), which did not bring an end to the war in Sahel. On the contrary, the foreign intervention transformed conflict into traditional guerrilla warfare at the expense of local suffering.

Five international operations were organized to tackle the growing spiral of violence. Firstly, the UN MINUSMA peacekeeping operation (13,000 persons), the EUTM crisis management operation (700 persons), the French Barkhane operation (5000 persons), the French-led Takuba forces (600 persons), and G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) (5000 persons). Compared to international operations in Afghanistan, these numbers are extremely modest, especially in comparison with the much larger geographical Sahelian area covering three million sq km.

As a consequence, the situation in these circumstances has deteriorated as violence has spread into new locations, while new jihadist groups and their alliances are joining the

guerrilla war against international military forces led by France. Jihadist groups such as *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) and Al-Qaeda's *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) have successfully benefitted from local grievances in instigating growing fear and suffering among the inhabitants of the region (Cline 2021).

Simultaneously, socio-economic grievances such as widespread poverty, corruption, and ethnic tensions in West Africa offer fertile ground for armed groups and their local allies to mobilize increasingly inhabitants of the area (Raafat 2021). For example, violence between traditional hunters Dogon and pastoralists Fulani escalated in 2019 in the Seeno-Gondo plains in central Mali. The government forces of Mali sponsored and trained Dogon militia against Fulani, close to insurgent Islamist groups (Benjaminsen and Ba 2021). While these atrocities between various armed groups are directly related to contemporary armed conflict, these forms of violence trigger simultaneously traditional tensions among various local actors.

Due to these atrocities, many people need to leave their homes in search of security and livelihoods. Often this mobility is directed from poorer countries to richer countries in the region, towards countries such as Côte d'Ivoire or further northwards. According to a senior scholar we interviewed, borders can be crossed with money. As he framed it, the security situation in northern Burkina Faso, for example, is already so weak that local inhabitants have taken up arms in order to establish self-defense units. Simultaneously, armed groups execute civilians, including the elderly and children. This development describes how everyday lives are ever more militarized in local remote areas. Therefore, a major challenge for state representatives is to build trust and confidence in the state authorities.

The fight against irregular migration brought the relatively neglected Sahel region to the forefront of actions by the European Union. This interest began already in the 1990s but has intensified since 2011, and especially since 2015. This has led to reorganizing the priorities of previously development-focused activities to implementing border control measures and increasing policing activities.

While the EU's approach to migration management and border control in Niger may have reduced the number of migrants passing through the country, it has also produced unintended consequences that have had an impact on the local population. One such issue is access to livelihoods (Brachet 2018). As one of our interviewees pointed out, people whose income had previously relied on transporting tourists across the desert had, in the absence of tourists, moved to transporting aspiring migrants without perceiving this a criminal activity in the way it has been defined as such by the EU. It was the smuggling of goods and not people that was perceived as smuggling. Moreover, the implemented measures may also disturb local compromises, such as those between the

Tuaregs in Agadez and the government, that had enabled Niger to stay relatively stable, unlike its neighboring countries Burkina Faso and Mali (Bøås 2021).

As our interviewees pointed out, foreign civil actors among urban populations are concerned that the spiral of violence will soon spread from the countryside and remote areas to the larger cities as well. One of our interviewees, a senior civil servant based in Ouagadougou, depicted for us how fear and the conflict move hand in hand from remote areas towards the capital of Burkina Faso. Another interviewee, a program leader from a faith-based organization in Senegal lamented on how the idea of terrorism still evokes a sense of fear in a country deemed peaceful by international standards. These developments symbolize how entire state structures are in peril amid spiraling violence. This raises questions of how democratic structures can be built, development work can be conducted or trade can take place in such unsafe areas where state structures have collapsed. So far, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo have avoided being hit by terrorist attacks. A senior scholar we interviewed stated that one reason why Senegal has remained relatively safe may be due to its important presence of strong Sufi brotherhoods (Tariqa), such as Tijaniyyah and Mourides.

Finland has participated in the UN-led operation MINUSMA and the EU-led EUTM operation from the beginning of 2013. Instead of taking part in the direct military combat, Finland has concentrated on training the Malian army. The second military coup in a year in Mali that took place in May 2021 led to strained relations between France and the new military leadership of Mali. Deteriorated relations led to the drawdown of the military Operation Barkhane. According to several sources, the new military leadership has agreed to replace French troops with the Russian private shadow army Wagner (Reuters 2021). On 16 August, the last French troops left Mali by the demand of the Malian army-led government, which further stressed the speculation that the presence of France in West Africa is significantly weakening. Mali left G5 Sahel in May 2022.

There are at least three major regional organizations in West Africa and the Sahel: G5 Sahel and ECOWAS (discussed in more detail later in this report) as well as the African Union. The AU is the main continental organization for and on behalf of African countries, with a current membership of 55 African countries. These organizations are often assumed to play a significant role in enabling international cooperation between Sahelian and foreign countries and institutions. These three regional organizations act through different mandates: G5 Sahel operates in the field of security, ECOWAS focuses on regional economic integration, and the African Union's main focus is on pan-African socio-economic development.

However, the weakness of these regional actors seems to be their top-down organization, which prevents broader civil society from integrating into joint action with them or

gaining support for private small and medium-sized enterprises. According to some of our interviewees, these organizations are mostly funded by external funds and their impact often seems to be no more than “empty letters”. In addition, some of our interviewees even indicated that these organizations are used by power elites as tools to gain prosperity.

Therefore, it would be relevant to reflect on who and what those governments represent and what the EU and other international actors are supporting. Rapid population growth indicates that the proportion of young people in these countries is large, but their possibilities to participate in decision-making processes are modest if not non-existent. The young people in the area, especially in Senegal, seem to be increasingly critical towards continuous neocolonial power structures. The unpopularity of France became visible in mass protests erupting in the streets of Dakar, where French companies were looted and burned (Al-Jazeera 2021). Anti-French demonstrations have also erupted in Chad and Niger, while Mali and Burkina Faso have ended their military accords with France. These latest developments will have far-reaching consequences within the political and security dynamics in the region. Meanwhile, France still plays a central role in West Africa in multiple fields and it cannot be ignored in the future.

Under these circumstances, one should maybe challenge the whole paradigm of the EU presence: Does the EU concentrate too much on military actions at the expense of social development? As one senior civil servant we interviewed pointed out, the aims of cooperation and foreign policy in West Africa and the Sahel have transformed from a development paradigm to a security paradigm during the last decade. There is too little focus on social, economic, institutional, and democratic development at the expense of security concerns. The heavy emphasis on military security leaves room for enhancing social deterioration, which then increases instabilities and security challenges that further feed the radicalization and marginalization of various social groups, whether based on ethnic, class, gender, or religious categories.

2.1.1 The role of ECOWAS in the resolution of conflicts in the region

Originally, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 purely as a platform for economic integration and development. From the 1990s onward, it began to take on a more governance-oriented agenda in response to its troubled past (see Aggad & Miyandazi 2017; Ramanzini, & Luciano 2020), and partly due to the realization that the socio-political stability of the region is crucial to its economic integration agenda. It began to assume a role in peacebuilding in the region, with the creation of the Economic Community of West African States Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) composed of English-speaking members of ECOWAS in 1990. The revised directorate of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) of ECOWAS has since 1993 been

actively engaged in the operationalization of conventions relative to the “Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security of 1999 as well as the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, including the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF)”. It also supports governmental institutions and related entities, including electioneering bodies across the sub-region (ECOWAS, Political Affairs, see also Hartmann 2017).

Thus, from the 2000s onwards, the assertiveness of ECOWAS in enforcing its zero tolerance of unconstitutional governmental takeovers among member states has been addressed by the imposition of sanctions and suspensions and even military interventions. The setback in this renewed strength is that they only happen under conditions of serious insecurities and political upheavals (Ramanzini & Luciano 2020). Examples of these can be witnessed in the role of ECOWAS in Togo in 2005, Guinea in 2008, Niger in 2009, Guinea-Bissau in 2009, Mali in 2012, Burkina Faso in 2015, Gambia in 2016, and more recently Mali and Guinea in 2021. In Mali, however, the ECOWAS representative was expelled in October 2021 and declared *persona non grata*.

Rather than its usual reactivity, ECOWAS has been widely praised especially for its proactiveness in averting a possible civil war in Gambia by forcing out President Yaya Jammeh (Hartmann 2017). However, an interviewee for this study contended that it was more the desperate will of Gambians rather than the effect of the ECOWAS show of force that gave ECOWAS such a timely success. However, it must be emphasized that, regardless of the dynamics in Gambia, ECOWAS would have been embarrassed had it faced a more powerful country such as Nigeria. Thus, the effectiveness of ECOWAS interventions largely depends on contextual factors in the target country as well as on regional dynamics at any point in time.

Today, although the organization is very actively engaged in the region and trying to stress human capital aspects as well, perceptions of its actual role in fostering democracy remain mixed. It is not surprising that ECOWAS has initiated steps in amending the protocol (APAnews, October 14, 2021). ECOWAS must find ways to address the renewed interest in coups and its somewhat ambivalent relationship with leaders who have taken power through illegal means as they do not only threaten an ominous future but also remain a huge stain on its gains.

Most of our interviewees highlighted the potential of ECOWAS to act in conflict resolution in the region. However, most also noted the fragile position of ECOWAS that has resulted in ambiguous stances towards different conflicts in the region. This decreases the organization’s ability to be perceived as a legitimate actor, hence also diminishing its ability to truly act in a given conflict. An additional aspect of the possibilities of rendering the organization more legitimate from the perspective of participating states and societies

is the question of financing the organization: its legitimacy can hardly increase when its funding comes from international donors, not primarily from participating countries. However, it is questionable whether the institution would function if the support from international donors decreased.

2.1.2 The role of G5 Sahel

Partly overlapping with the ECOWAS membership, five countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) formed the institutional framework of G5 Sahel in February 2014. Mali left the platform in May 2022 after the latest military coup. However, this framework was formed in order to strengthen their regional cooperation and development amid multiple challenges related to regional instability, violent extremist groups, and transnational organized crime. G5 Sahel, with its secretariat situated in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, was created in December 2014 with the following main objectives: to guarantee the conditions for development and security; to offer a strategic framework for interventions to improve people's living conditions; to align development with security, supported by democracy; and to promote inclusive and durable development.

However, since the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, French foreign policy has pushed G5 Sahel towards military and security cooperation forming a counterterrorism task force of 10,000 soldiers. The EU has provided EUR 50 million towards financing G5 Sahel forces. G5 Sahel countries are considered the poorest countries in the world, except Mauritania, which is considered as a lower middle-income country. Therefore, support from international donors, such as the EU, is directed at decreasing poverty in order to tackle radicalization and to enhance stability within the region. In 2021, Chad recalled half of its troops from G5. In May 2022, the military junta of Mali announced its withdrawal from G5 due to discrepancies and economic sanctions imposed by its associates related to restoring civilian rule.

According to our interviewees, G5 has proved to be an inefficient actor, even a disappointment, especially regarding the context of Mali. One of its main challenges relates to the legitimacy of the state actors: G5 is often accused of being used as a tool to strengthen the position of those in power. In addition, G5 as a relatively new platform also overlaps with other security frameworks within the African security architecture, such as ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations. While it was created to fight against terrorism and extremist groups in the Sahel, the results have so far been modest. Inhabitants of the region perceive it as the apparatus managed by France and its allies in the north, though it failed to receive vast support and funding from its European partners.

2.2 Democratic participation

Globally, democracy and democratic gains are alarmingly on their knees, but recent trends indicate West Africa is disturbingly losing grip of all its consolidated gains (see Fomunyoh 2020). While this has been the case for a while now, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing panic (Campbell & Quinn 2021), and growing insurgencies in some parts of the region seem to have aggravated the situation (Gyimah-Boadi, Logan & Sanny 2021). The Freedom House 2019 report depicts five of the 15 West African countries — Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria — in the category of 12 countries that persistently experience democratic decline. Senegal and Benin even dropped from being free to partly free leaving Ghana and the Islands of Cabo Verde as the only free countries in West Africa (Repucci 2020).

The independence journey in West Africa began with Ghana in 1957 and ended in 1960s with exception of Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau which attained theirs in 1975 (Olukoshi, Open Society Initiative for West Africa, & Codesria 2008). As one of our interviewees formulated it, democracy is not a tradition exclusive to Europeans. Therefore, attempts at appropriating it are and will be misleading, especially when the idea and concept have been practiced at some point among various societies, albeit in different forms. However, democracy (liberal democracy) as a concept was an inheritance bequeathed to the newly independent states of the colonized world by their former colonial masters. While the quick departure from Western styled democracy by the newly created African States was seen in the old left and right lenses, Cowan (1960: 173) observed that the Africans themselves recognized that their new states could not be governed by institutions cooked from European capitals and consequently sought to advance their own form of governance. The result was a wave of authoritarianism, one-party states, and coups. At best, the Europeans were simply replaced by strongmen who governed to suit their own selfish desires. As one political economist observed in our interviews, democracy in West Africa has been designed externally on the basis of so-called Western thinking without incorporating traditional value systems into it. This has been one of the main reasons for the continuous violence and insecurities in the region.

According to the 2020 Democracy Index by The Economist, there was no truly democratic country in the whole of West Africa. Even the highest ranked countries — Cabo Verde and Ghana — were flawed democratic regimes. Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Benin, Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria were all hybrid regimes, while the remaining countries were designated authoritarian. The worst of these countries were Togo and Mali, which dropped 15 and 11 places, respectively, from their previous rankings (The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2020). A year on, the story remained almost unchanged (The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2021).

On this basis, it can be argued that after three decades of active democratic engagements, West Africa remains deeply unsettled. The intensity of coups that followed the first in January 1963 in Togo has waned, but so-called constitutional coups have prevailed, and they are being employed increasingly by incumbents to stay longer in power. Apart from Mali, and most recently Guinea where the president has been overthrown, there appears to be at least a semblance of democracy in almost all the countries, despite seldom resulting in a change in power. Regular free and fair elections, although important in the democratic process, are just the early steps in the democratic process overall. Building stable and safe spaces for dissenting views and ideas, remaining accountable, and offering an inclusive governance that can bring progress to the people is the hard part (Doss 2020). These steps remain elusive in West Africa today.

Africa is said to be the richest and yet the poorest continent on earth, and West Africa is no exception. Its richness is in the fact that every single country of the region has considerable amounts of natural resources. Even more, the continent's human capital is massive, and its number is growing. In 2015, for example, 226 million people were between the ages of 15–24, and this number is set to double by 2055. Yet politically and socio-economically, the continent remains hostile to these young people, with avenues for political engagement closing up.

2.2.1 Electoral violence

Many countries in the region have witnessed cycles of electoral violence, Côte d'Ivoire being one such example. In 2010-11, at the end of the civil war, over 3,000 people were killed in violence, and severe violence erupted also around the presidential elections in October 2020 (Bakare 2021). Electoral violence is connected to the perceived lack of legitimacy of the candidates and mistrust in the electoral system, and in many cases disrespect for the constitution. One illustration of this is the difference between the 2015 presidential elections and similar elections in 2020: the former concerned the second term of the sitting president and passed peacefully, while the latter represented a breach of the constitutional limitation of candidacies to two consecutive terms. In September 2021, a similar breach took place in Guinea, and the military took over the country after the sitting president had refused to respect the limitation of two terms.

ECOWAS acted in both cases. In Côte d'Ivoire, it used a preventive conflict strategy by offering electoral support and sending electoral observation missions to the country. In addition to this, a joint mission by ECOWAS, the AU and the UN visited the country in preventive diplomacy efforts to mitigate the issue of voter registers and the composition of electoral committee. However, the regional organization failed to facilitate dialogue between the government and opposition parties, which would have been a necessary

next step in the process (Bakare 2021). As for Guinea, ECOWAS sent a delegation to the country and suspended its membership of the organization.

Electoral violence challenges democratic principles. It illustrates the fragility of democratic structures and the lack of confidence in political institutions. Often it brings up questions related to neocolonialism and the troubled past. As a senior civil servant who we interviewed stressed, the feeling of ownership of democratic institutions is lacking because economic structures, such as the monetary CFA, continue to connect some states closely to the former colonial relationship. In addition, the European Union delivers continuous budget aid to many states and holds regular meetings with various governments that are not perceived as legitimate by the broader population. All these issues reflect wider sentiments of distrust of democratic transformation and its institutional transparency, corruption, nepotism, and clientelism.

2.3 Participatory peace processes

Indigenous conflict management and resolution mechanisms can be defined as community-based, traditional, or local conflict mitigation, and indigenous mediation. Rooted in the local turn in Peace Research more broadly, indigenous conflict resolution and peacebuilding include diverse grassroots approaches to the ways in which sustainable peace can be achieved.

In Peace and Conflict Research, critical interrogations of what constitutes ‘the local’ in peacebuilding have surfaced over the past decade. Advocating for an understanding of “the local as de-territorialized, networked and constituted by people and activity rather than place” (Mac Ginty 2015: 841) instead of uncritical deployment of ‘the local’ as referring to some traditional, rural, yet-to-be-taught-how-to-be-governed entity, would mean taking seriously diverse claims that constitute local perspectives to peacebuilding. In practice, this means addressing a comprehensive variety of intersectional perspectives: listening and taking seriously the concerns of people of different genders, generations, socio-economic classes, and religious affiliations.

Photo 3: Fishermen repair their boat on the beach in Senegal. Picture: Karim Maïche.



As conflicts in West Africa are predominantly complex and involve multiple actors—whether local, national, regional, or global—the solutions and tools for peacebuilding similarly require multilevel approaches. The region consists of hundreds of different ethnic groups that live across official national borders and therefore create manifold webs of cleavages and loyalties beyond the nation state. Especially in the past, coups or attempted coups were often directly connected to support acquired by fellow tribesmen within the military machine pertaining to ethnic loyalties. However, direct ethnic conflicts have been less frequent (Okai et al. 2014).

ECOWAS has played a noticeable role in peace and security efforts in the region during the past three decades. Some of these activities have resulted in success, others ended as failures. Its largest challenge is connected to the origins and political impacts related to the origins of its mandate as such and how the mandate is pursued (Atuobi 2010-2011). For example, conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d’Ivoire in the 1990s and early 2000s were prolonged due to weak mandates ECOWAS obtained for peace mediation. In 2006, ECOWAS’s established Peace Fund (EPF) became operational. Its aim was to stress the mechanisms of conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and conflict management.

West Africa has suffered from terrorism, economic upheavals, collapsing public infrastructures, the proliferation of small arms, light weapons, regional and local militias, socio-economic poverty, the drugs trade, and climate change. Through EPF, ECOWAS has contributed to peacebuilding efforts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, and Mali (ECOWAS Peace Funds 2020). However, it has received criticism related to its inability to sustain good governance and conduct efficient peacebuilding. For West Africa to get back on track, where elements of positive development such as peace and democratic structures are built and sustained, it will require international input where the region is able to benefit from the process of transformation of global multiplex world order (Acharya 2018).

Moreover, the global COVID-19 pandemic affected all levels of activity, and its impact is likely to continue. International peace operations, including those in Mali, were severely disrupted due to the pandemic, although they seemed to adapt well to the changing cycle of personnel rotation and remote work. Mobility restrictions and lockdowns, and the digital leap these necessitated required adapting working practices and decision-making regulations to new remote conditions. The lack of internet connectivity also pushed for developing mobile connections to enable national staff to participate in full. However, the lack of direct, in-person interaction between people severely hampered the possibilities of identifying the immediate needs for civilian protection and taking necessary actions (de Coning 2020). Moreover, the global pandemic accelerated the need to develop digitalized mediation techniques, including virtual dialogues, where Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) has been particularly active.

2.3.1 The participation of women

UN Resolution 1325 stresses the multiple ways in which women need to be full participants in peace processes as their lives are directly affected by war and conflict. According to UN Women Mali, however, women were practically excluded from the peace negotiations in 2015 and the implementation of the outcomes. This is partly related to their weak position in governance structures both nationally and locally.

In the past, women played significant societal and spiritual roles in West Africa. However, their traditional roles have been misunderstood due to colonial and patriarchal interpretations. According to our interviewees, women's political and social participation should be increased, and there has been an increase in the number of legal initiatives regarding these aims especially in Senegal and Mali. While agriculture remains an important economic driver in West Africa, women's access to mobile phones and digital technology could increase women's leverage in trading and lending money, for example.

Photo 4: Women with their children in Senegal. Picture: Karim Maiche.



Education plays a significant role in enhancing women's socio-economic position. However, while girls often complete elementary schooling, there are many obstacles preventing them from continuing to higher education. These obstacles are related to expectations regarding family formation and assigned gender roles more broadly. According to our interviewees, training and raising awareness continue to be necessary in order to move towards gender equality. Therefore, what is needed is enabling accessibility rather than formulating new gender policies, as one senior civil servant stated. There are already plenty of women's organizations in the field. Their assets and functioning need to be supported.

2.3.2 Youth participation

The importance of enhancing young people's participation in peace processes is highlighted in UN Resolution 2250. As noted earlier, the population of West Africa is very young overall and, due to the high birth rate, will remain young in the decades to come. Therefore, creating channels for the effective participation of young people in defining issues that are shaping not only their present but also their future is of fundamental importance.

In 2019, UNICEF argued that West and Central African education systems were under threat from violence and insecurity. The organization cautioned the world to pay attention to education by not making it a *forgotten crisis*. Unfortunately, young people continue to find it difficult to access education. Access to education can enhance youth participation, although it does not alone guarantee their actual participation or necessarily render even access to participation possible. As emphasized by a senior civil servant we interviewed, young people's access to education and employment must be ameliorated. To achieve this, it is necessary to stop framing young people through good-evil or active-passive dichotomies. Young people need possibilities for educating themselves, to find work, and to establish families in order to attain a fully independent social status already early on in their adult lives. In addition, the radicalization of young people amid increasing violence should not be securitized but, instead, the role of social work and civil society should be stressed and supported in order to conduct dialogue with young people themselves.

According to a senior scholar we interviewed, regardless of the inherent problems with general education in the region, some young people are extremely capable and aware politically, economically, and socially, even "over-informed" as he stated. Social media, such as TikTok and Facebook, has an important role in their lives. According to this scholar, the "colonial pact" is not working with young people any longer, and the hatred towards former colonial powers such as France and neo-colonial structures erupts in sporadic violence in demonstrations. Therefore, empowering young people and youth organizations is the only path to building a solid societal environment in the future.

3 Conclusions

West Africa is a diverse region with multiple potentialities but also manifold challenges. In this commissioned study, we have demonstrated a clear interrelatedness between peace, security, and democracy. Our analysis underscores the fact that, regardless of the myriad of challenges affecting the region—from violence of all types and their concomitant insecurities to the erosion of democratic institutions and gains—there are still pathways for redress to which people are committed to following, as well as avenues for support, cooperation, and mutual engagements.

Therefore, when Finland, alongside other Nordic countries and the EU, reflects upon future political actions and activities in the region, it is important to note and take into consideration the interests relevant to countries in the neighboring regions, namely North Africa and Central Africa. They are also present and have multiple effective connections to endorse their policies in the region, whether military, economic, cultural, or social.

In order to struggle and contest armed militias and address the root causes for their emergence, aspects of human security, combatting poverty, and addressing population growth and desertification should play a greater role within EU, Nordic and Finnish political aims. Instead of adding military personnel, a wider strategy of deploying civilian crisis management personnel could achieve more efficiently the political goals indicated in Finland's Africa Strategy (2021). It is also important to remember that the French intervention in Mali in 2013 was planned only to bring order after jihadists took over Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, and to support the UN peace operation (Pérouse de Montclos 2020). However, year after year, these goals became increasingly distant and finally led to the withdrawal of French military troops in 2022.

According to various studies, climate change will have a devastating impact on West Africa and Sahel countries (Kwasi et al. 2019). Compared to the global average, warming in West Africa is taking place at an extremely fast pace despite the region being among the lowest carbon emission contributors in the world. This means the sub-region cannot afford to wait. Without a serious commitment to climate change adaptation, approximately 32 million West Africans may become forcibly displaced due to climate-induced factors. With the region's overdependence on agriculture, interruptions in rain patterns are anticipated to cause massive food shortages and food insecurity. Even more dreadful is the projection that rising sea levels are likely to make some cities uninhabitable. In Saint Louis in

Senegal, this is already a reality as hundreds of people have been forced to abandon their dwellings. This trend is projected to exacerbate already volatile situations as migrants compete with host communities over already scarce resources (see Pronczuk 2020; Söderbergh 2019). Adapting to and mitigating the effect of climate change requires a lot of financial and technological support.

The IPCC has stated that the region has already witnessed the most substantial and sustained decline in rainfall recorded in the world in addition to prolonged heat waves and rising temperatures. Simultaneous processes of degrading environment and military conflict that continue to displace inhabitants in the area will only worsen the environmental crisis and its social impacts in the shorter and longer term. How can economic growth and the targets needed to address climate change effectively be combined?

Instead of fighting climate change, West Africa is now fighting terrorism. There are no military solutions to solve socio-economic challenges. Internal socio-economic development will dictate the security dimensions. Understanding security means that it is reflected widely in different sectors and areas of life. With increasing scarcity and lack of resources, the spiral of violence will continue to accelerate. The fight against climate change is also linked to development and education: the awareness and possibility of impacting an individual's own local environment. Through knowledge and technology, some of the impacts of climate change can be countered. However, it is also important to acknowledge that many impacts of climate change are not connected to the local way of life but are rather consequences related to larger economic production and consumption at the global level.

Instead of shedding light on the various possibilities of Finland creating business opportunities and gaining political leverage in the area, concentrating on basics would enable the achievement of more effective and longstanding results. There are four major sectors: food security, health, educational system, and employment. When these four areas are addressed at least tolerably, the possibilities of achieving peace, security, and democracy open up. While Finland has the capacity to create commercial opportunities related to certain green high technologies, building simple electricity in a village would facilitate much more in terms of Finland's Africa Strategy. West Africa suffers from shortages of electricity, water, and food. As one senior civil servant asked, "What can be done with high-tech machinery if there is no electricity to charge the batteries or to use laptops?". As we were told, what is necessary is fairly simple, it's not "rocket science".

All in all, this diverse region presents multiple possibilities for cooperation and mutual learning. Forms of cooperation already exist between different countries in the region and Finnish actors, including civil society organizations and higher education institutions, and these should be supported by channeling new initiatives.

4 Recommendations for Finland's actions

The purpose for this commissioned study was to assess the current state of peace, security, and democracy in West Africa – drawing on a desk-based study of literature, media sources, and expert interviews – and to suggest avenues for Finnish engagement in the region in accordance with Finland's Africa Strategy (FAS). Our analysis demonstrates that there exists enough evidence for democratic backsliding, continuous insecurity, and the erosion of peace. We must stress that our reflections on insecurities do not include only conspicuous violent encounters, including terrorist and jihadist activities. They also encompass less obviously violent encounters on the sidelines of everyday lives, whose ordinariness renders them even invisible although not entirely so (Agyei & Möller 2019, 2). In the case of democracy, there appears to be something of a disconnect *between western liberal democratic ideas (deals) and West African democratic practices* – primarily made manifest in elections (whether free and fair or otherwise) – and where access to political participation remains an endangered engagement among some population strata such as women, young people, and those with less access to education. To avoid being branded neo-colonialist, the Finnish approach needs to ensure that ordinary people perceive it as truly based on human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and gender equality. The future prospects of the growing young population of Africa, such as their access to education, whose lives and interests these interventions seek to change, need to be at the center of such engagements. Such an approach cannot and must not be done in isolation. Indeed, they need to be consistent with the ideas expressed in the FAS.

According to the FAS (p.7), "security can only be on a sustainable basis if it arises from human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality." The FAS further links employment opportunities, or the lack of them, directly to social stability, emphasizing the importance of actions reducing poverty and inequality. It also stresses the disputes involving climate, environmental, and natural resource issues behind conflicts. The position outlined above demonstrates the existing recognition of the entwinement of these broad thematic areas, as our analysis in this study suggests. Therefore, in our concluding recommendations, we think with the FAS and, accordingly, discuss various aspects of these themes in ways that make the best impact. As such, a perfect point of departure will be to reflect on the extent to which these recommendations contribute to peace, security, and democracy in the sub-region.

Drawing on principles outlined in the FAS, we highlight manifold forms of cooperation in order to tackle challenges related to young people, women, peace mediation, peace-building, peacekeeping, conflict management, climate change, health and sanitation. Within each of these thematic areas, it is of crucial importance to cooperate with civil society organizations in close cooperation with actors in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. Potential actors for envisaging cooperation are, for example, **UN Youth of Finland** (2250 Youth, Peace and Security) and **Allianssi** (Future Agents NOW) regarding enhancing the role of young people. In order to address women's rights and gender equality, a practical collaboration partner could be **UN Women Suomi** (1325 Women, Peace and Security). **Siemenpuu Foundation** concentrates on environmental work through local communities and it has been present, for example, in Mali. Related to health and sanitation, **Käymäläseura Huussi ry** (also present in Ghana) executes international projects to offer ecological sanitation and dry toilets, while **Abilis Foundation** supports grassroots organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and small businesses led by persons with disabilities in developing countries. In addition, valuable partners that could be useful in the various fields already mentioned are **Crisis Management Center Finland (CMC)**, **CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Foundation** and **KIOS Foundation**. Moreover, Finnish-African cultural Center **Villa Karo** in Benin could have networks and experience in wider West Africa as well. We believe that cooperating with these actors would offer the relevant know-how to achieve the objectives, execution, and resources of the FAS.

In doing so, the first question to ask is what our partners need from us rather than starting from the question of what we could do. Identifying these needs necessitates frequent field visits and field studies to understand sub-regional specificities in order to gear activities most productively. These needs must also be evaluated and aligned considering the capacity of Finland and its general strategy for Africa inherent in Finland's Africa Strategy. Such a move will ensure that Finnish engagements are seen as a valued addition to the needs of the region with mutually beneficial outcomes.

Finland's Africa Strategy as such is a welcome first step towards recognizing the importance of the African continent. Given the diversity of the continent, the next steps would be developing more nuanced regional and sub-regional strategies to address their specificities.

There is space for Finland to facilitate access of civil society organizations to join higher level negotiations and contribute to these debates. This concerns especially women's and youth organizations, in line with UN Resolutions 1325 and 2250. One suggestion we were given are those organizations that are located in conflict zones, such as Kidal in Mali, to reach capital cities, in this case Bamako, and be able to raise their concerns with the international actors based in the capital.

Finland should profile itself as a visible and honest actor and prepare for a long-term presence in the region. This is important to deepen the understanding within long durée in order to gain credibility as an actor. Simultaneously, Finland should reach out in the area and not focus only on Senegal. Finland has to estimate reliable partners and in Senegal, for example, it is important to involve also religious leaders from the Sufi brotherhoods Tariqa.

Finnish companies have many skills. They could contribute to projects focusing on development and the environment. Finland could have a major impact through helping in the transformation of current technologies into greener and more sustainable technologies, or to the so-called sustainable value change. This would help West African countries get past many bureaucratic difficulties and obstacles related to EU legislation, which would help them access European markets.

As regards civil protection, Finland has accumulated considerable experience regarding cooperation between different official authorities and organized civil society in emergency procedures, such as forest fires. This could translate into advice on how to coordinate help for people suffering from fire in the desert. For example, Mali lacked police forces and their operational capacity would have been strengthened if they had been able to coordinate their activities with other major authorities, such as ministries and gendarmes.

In the sector of farming, harvest, crops and forestry, and the field of sanitation, Finnish actors have a lot to offer as well. Moreover, micro-biology, bioinformatics, and reformation of especially the gold mining industry open up vast possibilities for cooperation in Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, the impact must be carefully evaluated so that good intentions do not lead to negative results.

There are several potential sectors for economic cooperation, such as health (e.g. COVID-19 vaccinations) and education. Finland can facilitate teachers and organize educational events for local teachers. It is, however, important to ensure that basic infrastructure, such as access to electricity and waste management facilities, is in place for developing and implementing these activities. Therefore, Finland should focus on providing solutions rather than only materials.

Education in the sub-region can certainly benefit from Finnish expertise. Such educational exports must be encouraged. At the tertiary level, for example, Finland can and should engage in faculty exchange and curriculum development. Finland can bring expertise in structuring teaching programs and curriculums in ways that reflect the needs of the job market. This will ensure that graduates gain the required expertise necessary in the job market and, by extension, increase their employability. This will reduce unemployment among young people in the region.

Better oversight of institutions would be necessary, but this needs to be done also through developing and building the capacities of the countries' own oversight entities, not only by international organizations. Capacity-building in this field would be needed and could be an aspect in which Finland can contribute.

Finland can also encourage and incentivize companies into setting up subsidiaries in West Africa. This will ensure a steady supply of raw materials for those companies while, at the same time, also create avenues for employment – by providing both white- and blue-collar jobs – in the country. This could have a considerable effect on the employment rate.

Finland should consider the framework for its activities in the region: whether the main reference group is the EU that is likely to be better known in the region or other Nordic countries that are not similarly connected with the colonial history of the region, and culturally closer than the EU. Or should Finland first follow the EU and then the UN?

Various forms of cultural cooperation in the form of film festivals, music, and arts exist already, and they could be further enhanced. Finnish artists or artists with a West African background could act as cultural bridges between Finland and societies in West Africa.

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**Publications of
the Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland**

2023:2

ISBN pdf: 978-952-281-362-6

ISSN pdf: 2737-0844