

## **Evolving Developments in ECOWAS and the Sahel: A Strategic Roundtable Report**

On January 22, 2025, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) hosted a strategic roundtable titled "Evolving Developments in ECOWAS and the Sahel" at its conference chamber. This significant event brought together a distinguished assembly of experts, including academics, policymakers, diplomats, and public policy analysts, to discuss pressing issues confronting the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Sahel region. The session, chaired by Professor Olufemi Otubanjo, a renowned Professor of International Relations featured both physical and virtual participation from a wide array of stakeholders, reinforcing the global significance of the dialogue.

The Director-General of NIIA, Professor Eghosa Osaghae, opened the session by addressing the mounting challenges facing ECOWAS and the Sahel region amidst a rapidly evolving global landscape. He emphasized the need for Africa to focus on solving its internal problems rather than seeking solutions from external influences. Referring to the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States, he observed that global developments, though significant, should not overshadow the importance of regional stability. He expressed concern over the rumoured intention of Togo to join the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the potential implications for ECOWAS, particularly in terms of trade and maritime dominance. Togo's Lome port, strategically positioned to service Sahelian states, presents economic challenges to other ECOWAS members like Ghana and Nigeria.

Throughout the discussions, several critical issues were examined, including the exit of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS and the formation of the AES. Professor Joshua Bolarinwa (Director of Research, NIIA) highlighted that while ECOWAS has achieved notable milestones, such as fostering economic integration, promoting democratic governance, and intervening in political crises, recent developments signal a shift towards disintegration. He identified the growing trend of unconstitutional changes of government as a significant threat to the region's stability. Furthermore, Togo's apparent opportunism, leveraging its proximity to AES countries for economic gain, was a focal point of his analysis.

Professor Anthony Kila (Professor of Strategy and Development, Commonwealth Institute of Advance and Professional Studies) underscored the urgent need to review and reset ECOWAS, pointing out a disconnect between the organization's founding ideals and its current realities. While ECOWAS was envisioned as a pioneer in regional integration, its performance has been hindered by leadership challenges and a lack of tangible progress. He stressed the importance of addressing systemic issues and fostering measurable achievements to regain the trust of member states and their citizens.

Ambassador Olayiwola Laseinde (Chairman, Association of Retired Career Ambassadors of Nigeria) provided a historical context to the crises, attributing them to long-standing issues

such as bad governance, corruption, poverty, unemployment, and climate change. He suggested that diplomatic engagement and moral suasion could help reintegrate the breakaway states into ECOWAS. Similarly, Professor Efem Ubi (Director of Studies, NIIA) emphasized the necessity for ECOWAS to adopt innovative strategies, both within and outside traditional frameworks, to address endogenous and exogenous factors contributing to the crisis. He warned that the exit of AES members could lead to further fragmentation, while also reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of West Africa and the Sahel.

The roundtable also featured a European perspective, with Professor Jan Zahorik (Associate Professor, University of West Bohemia) discussing the European Union's priorities in the Sahel, including security, rule of law, and human rights. He noted that fostering economic development and addressing poverty were crucial for stability in the region. Dr. Brown Odigie (Program Officer, ECOWAS Commission) highlighted ECOWAS's strengths, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme, common tariffs, and peacekeeping efforts, while calling for renewed geopolitical and strategic engagements to address political crises and external influences.

Dr. Tunde Afolabi (Regional Director, Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) focused on Togo's strategic position and its potential to disrupt regional dynamics. He noted that Togo's intention to join the AES does not necessarily signal an exit from ECOWAS but rather reflects its opportunistic alignment with economic benefits. Contributions from other participants, including retired ambassadors and academics, reiterated the importance of reconciliation, governance reform, and addressing the root causes of discontent within member states.

In concluding the roundtable, the Chairman, Professor Otubanjo, affirmed that while ECOWAS faces significant challenges, it has not failed. He advocated for reforms to strengthen the organization, including making ECOWAS Parliament membership elective and engaging AES members in dialogue to facilitate their return to civil governance. Despite the ongoing trials, the consensus was that ECOWAS remains a critical pillar for regional integration and stability, capable of overcoming its current challenges with strategic adjustments and renewed commitment.

As ECOWAS approaches its 50th anniversary, this roundtable served as a timely reflection on its achievements, shortcomings, and prospects for the future. It reinforced the need for collective action, innovative solutions, and sustained leadership to navigate the complexities of regional integration in an increasingly dynamic world.

Report Compiled by the **NIIA REPORT TEAM**