

International Conference on ECOWAS AT 50

“A Story of Resilience and Integration”

May 20-21, 2025

Ahead of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) commemoration of its 50th year since its establishment, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos on May 28, 1975, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) hosted the International Conference on ECOWAS AT 50 with the theme, “A Story of Resilience and Integration,” on May 20-21, 2025 at the Institute’s Conference Chamber. The only surviving founding father of ECOWAS and former Head of State of Nigeria (1966-1975), General Yakubu Gowon graciously attended the conference as the Father of the Day and gave a robust reminiscence on ECOWAS alongside Gen. Ike Nwachukwu and Professor Bolaji Akinyemi as the conference chairperson. The conference was highly graced by esteemed scholars, retired and serving ambassadors, delegates from educational institutions, resource persons, research fellows of the Institute and experts from History, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies and Political Science who presented well-researched papers across different sessions with the themes ranging from regional integration and economic development, to peacekeeping and security sector reforms, human security and emerging threats, the future of ECOWAS and many more. The conference also featured an inter-school debate by secondary school students.



In his welcome remarks, the Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Prof. Eghosa Osaghae, remarked that the conference was to serve as the academic arm of the celebration of ECOWAS' 50th anniversary and herald the main event scheduled

for May 28, 2025. He reminded participants that NIIA was the host because of the pivotal role the institute played in the signing of the ECOWAS Treaty 50 years ago. He added that ECOWAS has the protocol for free movement of persons and goods across West Africa and

has become one of the engine rooms for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework that the whole world reaps from. He also reported that Nigeria has the trading figures that suggested that Nigeria might become the strongest trading partner for Africa.

Marija Peran, Resident Representative, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, stated that in the annals of the region's collective history, the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 was not merely an act of diplomacy but an assertion of sovereignty, a proclamation of unity, and a bold step toward economic emancipation. From its inception, ECOWAS embodied the aspirations of a people determined to harness their shared destinies in pursuit of integration, peace, and sustainable development. According to her, the EU and ECOWAS share a foundational commitment to regional integration, economic cooperation, and political stability, each striving to harmonize policies among member-states while fostering collective prosperity. She stated the challenges confronting ECOWAS, including economic asymmetry, single currency, political instability and unconstitutional change of government which continue to test the democratic fabric of ECOWAS member-states. While enumerating the areas of support from the German government, she concluded by expressing hope and optimism for the next fifty years, recommending deeper economic integration, reinforced political cohesion, and an unwavering commitment to security and prosperity for every West African citizen.

His Excellency, Weert Boerner, Consul-General of the German Consulate in Lagos, congratulating ECOWAS on a landmark golden anniversary, noted the substantial progress in ECOWAS' regional integration. He expressed Germany's interest in addressing the root causes of terrorism and instability in the Sahel and the coastal states while mentioning the main areas of collaboration which include peace, stability, good governance, sustainable economic development, education and vocational training, job creation, energy, and public health.

The chairperson of the conference, Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi, (Nigeria's former Minister of External Affairs and former Director-General of NIIA), the Chairman of the NIIA Governing Council, paid a tribute to Gen. Gowon for his pivotal role in the establishment of ECOWAS while re-echoing Gen. Gowon's opinion and optimism about ECOWAS' future, arguing that the three countries that left ECOWAS to form AES would come back to the fold.

His Excellency, Babajide Sanwo-Olu, the Executive Governor of Lagos State, ably represented by the Secretary of the State Government, Barr. Bimbola Salu-Hundeyin, while basking in the pride of Lagos, emphasized ECOWAS' functions and challenges.

The objectives of the conference were to reflect on ECOWAS' 50-year journey and generate strategic insights and recommendations for its future. It was also aimed at examining ECOWAS as a regional organization in general and comparative perspectives, especially in light of the global tendency of regional organizations to transform from conventional economic organizations to political, social, security, military, governance and all-purpose organizations.

Series of paper presentations and interactive sessions followed while the two-day international conference ended in a communique which was signed by the Director-General, Prof. Eghosa Osaghae.



Following this event, some heads of states and government of ECOWAS member states converged in Lagos on Wednesday, 28 May 2025, to mark the ceremonial celebration of its 50th anniversary in Lagos, Nigeria. The landmark event, hosted by the prestigious NIIA, brought together regional leaders to reflect on half a century of progress and to chart the course for future collaboration.

The day began with a brief ceremony at the NIIA conference chambers, featuring a symbolic re-enactment and signing of the Lagos Treaty, which led to the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975. This was followed by the signing of the 50th Anniversary Card. The Chairman of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, His Excellency, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, appended his signature to the Treaty, along with the current leaders and representatives of member states in attendance, including Liberia's Joseph Boakai, Togo's Jean-Lucien Savi de Tové, and Guinea-Bissau's Umaro Sissoco Embaló. The presence of General Yakubu Gowon, the last surviving architect of the original 1975 ECOWAS Treaty, added profound historical significance to the occasion.

A roundtable with the theme: **“ECOWAS, an African Model @50: Resilience and Future Prospects”** was later held at the NIIA conference chambers. Discussions focused on ECOWAS regional integration and cooperation, contemporary challenges, and the way forward.

The roundtable was moderated by the Director-General of the NIIA, Distinguished Professor Eghosa Osaghae, while the keynote address was delivered by the Chairman of Council, NIIA, the renowned Professor Bolaji Akinyemi.

Highlights of the discussions noted that since its establishment in 1975, ECOWAS has evolved into a cornerstone of West African diplomacy and economic cooperation. The regional bloc has successfully fostered increased trade relationships, facilitated cross-border investment, and created frameworks for economic development across member-nations. These achievements represent tangible progress toward the founding vision of a unified West African economic community.



However, while celebrating its successes, ECOWAS faces notable obstacles in its fifth decade. The recent departure of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the community represents a significant challenge to regional cohesion. These withdrawals highlight the complex political and security dynamics that continue to shape West African integration efforts.

Looking forward, as ECOWAS enters its next chapter, the organization faces the dual task of addressing immediate challenges while pursuing long-term integration goals. The path ahead requires navigating complex political landscapes, strengthening economic ties, and maintaining the delicate balance between national sovereignty and regional cooperation.

The golden jubilee celebration in Lagos demonstrated that, despite facing significant headwinds, ECOWAS remains committed to its foundational mission of creating a more integrated, prosperous, and peaceful West Africa. The Lagos ceremony served as more than a

commemorative event—it represented a collective recommitment to ECOWAS’s founding principles.

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