

Jan Cernicky: What is the good of the ECOWAS?

The ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, was founded in 1975 as an association of 15 West African states, its objective being to step up the development of its members by close economic and political cooperation. The results have so far been sobering. According to certain studies, many resolutions are taken but few are implemented. Yet this is not the entire truth, for there is progress as well: A free trade area has been established, intra-regional passenger transport has been facilitated, infrastructural measures have been realised, a mechanism for conflict resolution has been initiated, the question of the community's income has been solved, and a functional court of justice has become reality.

The ECOWAS' field of activity is not, as so often depicted, the economic and political integration of its members but project work. This has been demonstrated in an investigation of the association's activities at three levels – the intergovernmental, the multinational, and the nation-state level.

The orientation of the ECOWAS as a whole, its budget, its structure, and its appointments are decided at the intergovernmental level. The conference of the heads of state and government takes place once a year, while the council of ministers meets twice a year. Furthermore, there is the Mediation and Security Council (MSC) which determines the countries' common military and security policy. The ECOWAS is legally underpinned by the founding treaty of 1975 which was replaced in 1993. Although the decision-making power officially lies in the hands of the ministers and the heads of state and government alone, they are not the only ones who plot the course of the community. As summit meetings take place too seldom and are too brief, many resolutions are prepared by the council of ministers. In the field of economic and political integration, most of the work is done at the lowest, i.e. the expert, level. Another factor which curtails the decision-making power of the heads of state and government is the strong position of the commission, which issues recommendations, initiates programmes and, even in 'political cooperation' fields such as trade or migration policy, works with well-informed experts who take part in developing common positions. In point of fact, one may say that the ECOWAS is controlled by experts and the commission. One side effect of this situation are potential 'spill-over effects': At times, the heads of state and government sign decisions of whose consequences they are hardly aware. The ECOWAS does not have any promotion instruments for sub-national regions; however, it is about to establish permanent liaison offices in the member states, whose task will be to maintain contact with the lower levels of administration.

The decisions of the ECOWAS are published in its official journal. An analysis of the resolutions published there shows that in the last few years, 52 percent of the decisions taken related to internal affairs such as appointments, budget issues, and process regulation. At the beginning of the nineties, the number of resolutions concerning other international organisations was growing, while the proportion of sector-related resolutions remained stable. The percentage of resolutions on trade liberalisation decreased, and the number of those on financial cooperation stagnated. Those two facts especially clash with the statement that trade liberalisation is the ECOWAS' primary objective.

The practice of ratifying conventions and protocols raises some problems. Non-ratification does not block decisions entirely, but it does delay their implementation. The majority of the protocols and conventions (39 percent) relate to trade policy and the free mobility of persons, goods, and services. 21 percent address budget issues, and seven percent military cooperation. Matters of monetary and legal cooperation as well as other issues remained markedly below five percent.

Not all ECOWAS countries have ratified every protocol and convention; some of them have signed only a few documents. Since the quorum of seven states required for each to become effective was reached, integration is not hampered. However, this shows how low the interest of some states is in the integration process as such, nor can the ECOWAS acquire a common legal regime if individual states do not integrate certain resolutions in their national legislation.

Among the multinational ECOWAS institutions, the secretariat is the only one which is worth a closer look: The other institutions – the parliament and the court of justice – have not yet overcome the status nascendi. Following the model of its counterpart in the EU, the secretariat was raised to the status of a commission early in 2006, its two key tasks being to prepare and support resolutions on political and economic integration adopted by the ministers or heads of state and government, and to develop sectoral policy programmes.

The commission's activities mainly focus on political work. In this field, the commission makes considerably more decisions than its remit allows. Consequently, there is hardly any information available about the division of responsibilities between the commission and the member countries. The main reason for the commission's great decision-making power is that it is the only institution with the human resources and organisational capacities required for drafting meaningful and realisable programmes and policies for the entire community. The work of the ECOWAS commission appears to have been rather inefficient so far, but now that the community has been restructured, it is expected to perform according to its abilities: It is much better equipped than, for example, Nigeria's ministry of integration. It benefits from a streamlined bureaucracy which is much less inflatable than national ministries. And it is superior to the national ministries in terms of personnel, not least because advertised vacancies in the bodies of the ECOWAS are open to citizens of all member states, so that it can pick and choose among the most qualified applicants from all countries.

Secondly, the commission focuses on planning, implementing, and financing programmes which are developed in consultation with the member states and prepared on the basis of studies. Depending on the nature of each project, the commission may endeavour to find private investors or organise a donor conference. If the planned undertaking can be operated economically, private investors are called in. If, however, it concerns a public good, a donor conference will be held.

There is a marked difference between the EU and the ECOWAS in terms of project work, as the latter hardly ever has enough funds to carry out projects single-handed or co-finance them. This being so, the ECOWAS acts as service provider, helping its member countries to plan and finance large projects.

The national political level seems to be the weakest link in the decision-making and implementation chain of the ECOWAS, which is due to the ponderous and inefficient administration of almost all West African states. For one thing, the technical equipment is a disaster, so that communication by telephone and email is limited. For another, rigid hierarchies constitute an obstacle as every decision requires the approval of a head of department, if not a minister.

To coordinate policies and programmes at the national level, the ECOWAS has meanwhile introduced special units which function as relays between the commission and the ministries concerned. However, when it comes to personnel and material these units are badly equipped, and their allocation to specific ministries is rather arbitrary. In Senegal, for example, the ECOWAS unit is situated in the Ministry for NEPAD, African Economic Integration and Good Governance. Having been included in the Ministry of Integration, which has by now been dissolved after receiving the lowest budget of all the country's departments for many years, Nigeria's unit is now

part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The authority which harbours the unit in Burkina Faso is the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Development, which demonstrates the importance the country ascribes to the ECOWAS. However, the units do certainly not function as coordination offices for ECOWAS affairs. And as long as the member countries do not create adequate feedback mechanisms for these affairs, the implementation of a common ECOWAS policy will remain utopian.

The ECOWAS does not define or even influence any national political decisions of its member states. That the leaders of these states ascribe little importance to the community is obvious. They regard the ECOWAS neither as a political player nor as a development partner. After its creation, it might now be a substantial step to strengthen the commission politically so as to change this situation, especially in view of the enormous differences between the individual members of the ECOWAS and their lack of mutual trust.