



# ECOWAS at 50

## Current Threats and Recurrent Trends

Lucy Okonkwo

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# Executive Summary

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the recent developments within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as it commemorates its 50th anniversary amidst significant political and economic challenges, highlighted by the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which have formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The departure of these member states raises critical questions about ECOWAS's effectiveness in promoting trade cooperation, economic growth, and political stability.

ECOWAS has experienced notable achievements over the past five decades, with a combined GDP reaching approximately \$828.6 billion by 2023 and intra-ECOWAS trade increasing significantly under its trade liberalization initiatives. However, the recent withdrawal of the AES countries, driven by accusations of foreign interference and perceived threats to their sovereignty, adds complexities to the bloc's future.

The report outlines the current threats faced by ECOWAS, including the socio-economic, political, and security implications of the AES exit. Member states must navigate the challenges posed by military coups and their aftermath, further threatening the integrity of regional cooperation. The analysis emphasizes the importance of economic integration and trade as foundational elements of ECOWAS's mission.

The bloc has made strides in dismantling trade barriers and fostering intra-regional commerce, with intra-ECOWAS trade growing by 92% from 2016 to 2023. Despite the smaller economic weight of the departing AES countries within the bloc, their exit could hinder ongoing efforts aimed at advancing regional economic integration and stability.

In conclusion, as ECOWAS grapples with implications stemming from the AES departure, its commitment to uniting member states and fostering economic growth will be crucial in determining the future trajectory of both the bloc and the wider West African region. The report suggests a need for renewed focus on cooperation and engagement to address the challenges ahead and strengthen regional solidarity.

# Introduction

ECOWAS marked its 50th anniversary on May 28th with a mix of emotions. The regional commune looks back on its successes and achievements, and feels too the weight of losing three of its members - Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger - who have formed a new group called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

This loss puts a slight damper on the celebrations. It questions how effective ECOWAS has been in promoting trade cooperation, economic growth, and political stability among its members. There's also a concern that the bloc might be drifting away from its original pan-African goals, succumbing to the influence of non-African interests. This has stirred up debates about ECOWAS's future and its commitment to uniting and growing the continent.

Over the past fifty years, ECOWAS has made good progress in economic and political terms, but these successes haven't come easily. The road to regional integration and transformation has been full of challenges.

By 2023, the combined GDP of the region had reached approximately \$828.6 billion, indicating steady economic growth. Intra-ECOWAS trade saw a significant boost, reaching \$25 billion in 2024 under the ECOWAS trade liberalization scheme, which underscores the increase in cooperation among ECOWAS member states.

Given how crucial ECOWAS has been for economic and political progress in the sub-region, not just for its members but for Africa as a whole, the AES exit raises a lot of concerns. Will AES be better off without ECOWAS? Or will ECOWAS be better after the AES exit?

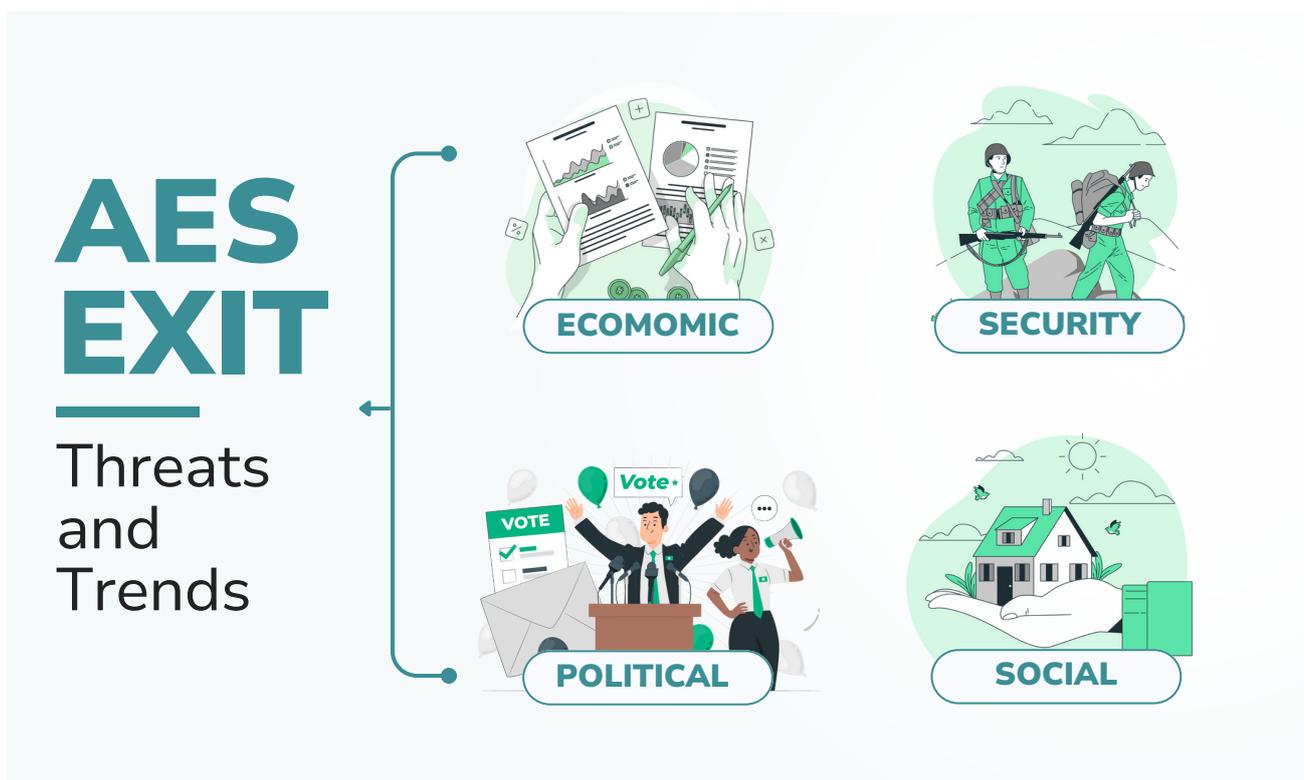
## Current Threats and Trends

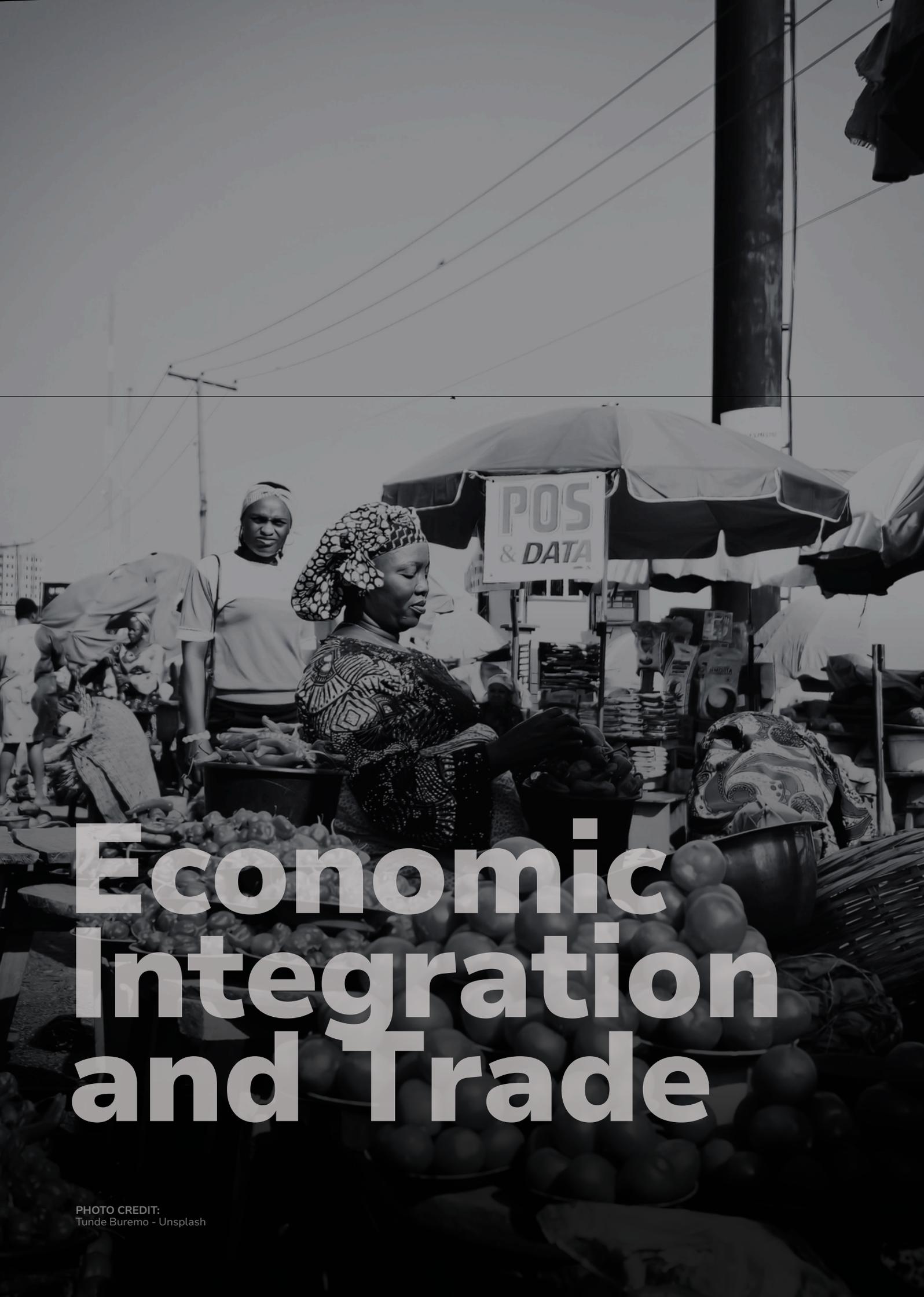
On January 28, 2024, the AES countries formally submitted their notice of withdrawal from ECOWAS, citing the bloc's infringement on their sovereignty and accusing it of being unduly influenced by foreign powers that, in their view, compromise the integrity of regional decision-making.

In a joint communique, they stated ECOWAS has "strayed from the ideals of pan-Africanism" due to "foreign interference in its decision-making processes, betraying its founding principles, and has become a threat to member states and peoples."

The departure of the AES was catalysed by ECOWAS's response to a wave of military coups in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), which ushered in new military-led governments. The bloc's imposition of sanctions and demands for rapid democratic transitions were perceived by the junta as punitive and intrusive, deepening tensions and ultimately prompting their collective withdrawal.

While the AES countries withdrew from ECOWAS to assert their sovereignty and reduce foreign interference, the decision carries significant economic, security, political, and social consequences for both the regional bloc and the newly formed AES alliance.





# Economic Integration and Trade

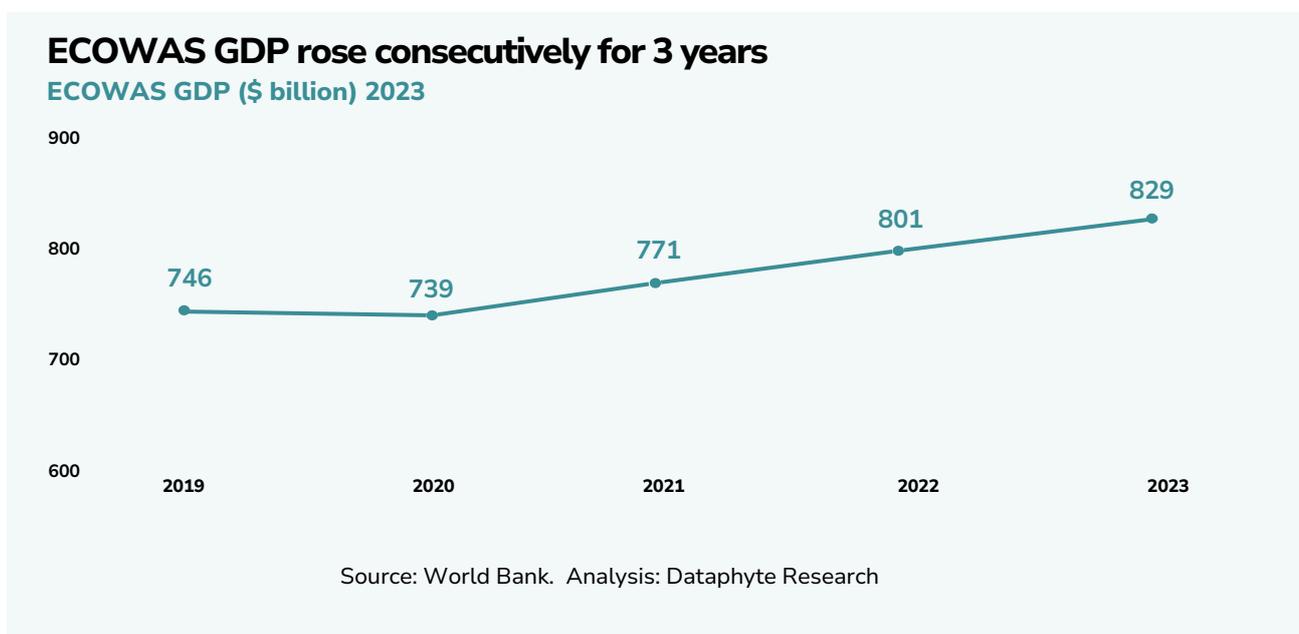
PHOTO CREDIT:  
Tunde Buremo - Unsplash

# Chapter 1

## Economic Integration and Trade: What is at Stake?

ECOWAS anchors a regional economy valued at over \$800 billion, making it one of the most significant economic blocs on the African continent. Central to its mission is the free movement of goods, people, and capital — a cornerstone of its integration agenda. Progress has been steady, albeit gradual, as intra-ECOWAS trade grew by \$14 billion between 2016 and 2023.

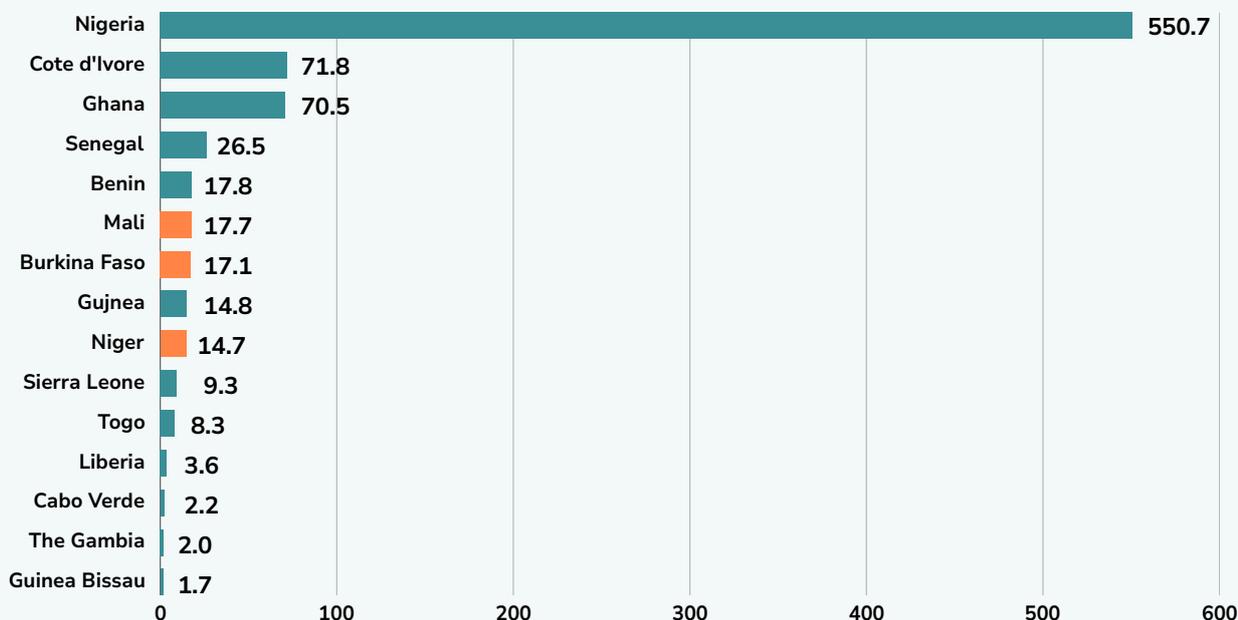
Over the past five years, the ECOWAS recorded a steady growth in the combined GDP of member states, except in 2020, due to the COVID-19 crisis, which affected the global economy. Its economy has increased by 11%, growing at an average of 4% yearly.



The bloc's economy is powered by Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Senegal, which together generate a substantial share of the region's GDP. These countries not only dominate in terms of economic output but also serve as hubs for trade, investment, and innovation, playing a pivotal role in shaping the bloc's overall growth trajectory and regional influence.

**ECOWAS' GDP was valued at \$829 billion the year before AES' exit. The 3 AES states accounted for 6% of this.**

ECOWAS GDP (\$ billion) 2023



Source: World Bank Analysis: Dataphyte Research

As of 2023, the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the AES states, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, accounted for 6% of the total economic output of the ECOWAS region, highlighting their limited economic weight within the bloc.

The exit of the three AES countries, although all together small in GDP value, may undermine regional economic and trade integration within the ECOWAS region.

## 1.2. AES Exit and Intra-ECOWAS Trade

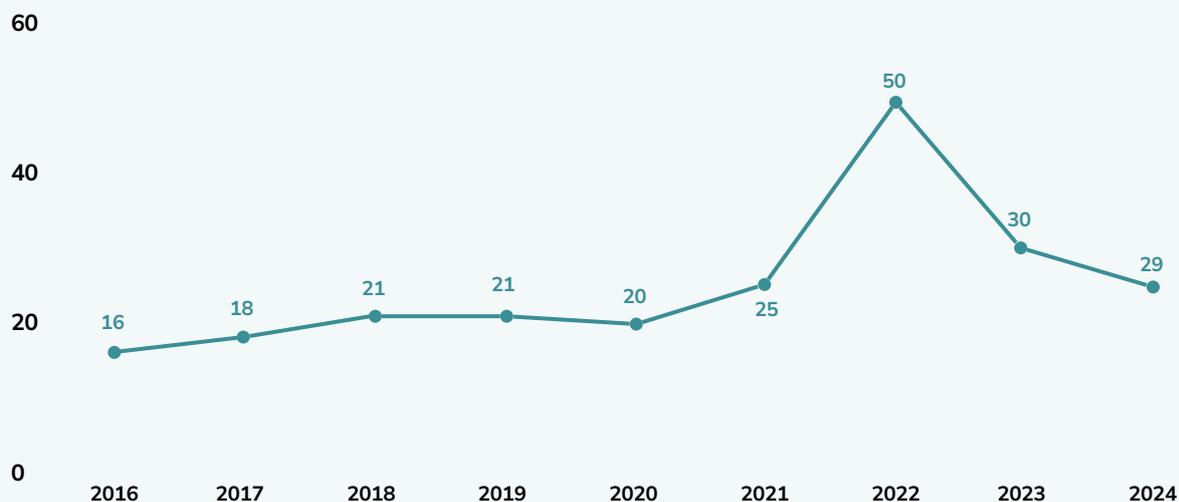
ECOWAS's push for economic integration centred on strengthening the economies of member states through deeper trade cooperation. At the heart of this effort is a collective commitment to dismantle trade barriers, both tariff and non-tariff, that hinder the free flow of people, goods, and services across borders. By fostering a seamless regional market, the bloc aims to enhance intra-regional commerce, stimulate industrial growth, and create more resilient national economies.

From 2016 to 2023, intra-ECOWAS trade grew steadily, increasing from \$16 billion to \$30 billion, a notable 92% rise that underscores the bloc's ongoing efforts to strengthen regional integration and foster cross-border economic cooperation. This growth trajectory reflects the impact of policy reforms, improved trade infrastructure, and coordinated initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to the movement of goods and services across member states. Yet, this momentum has proven vulnerable to regional instability.

By 2024, intra-ECOWAS trade stood at \$29 billion, while higher than 2016 levels, marking a dramatic 50% drop from the \$50 billion peak recorded in 2022. This sharp decline signals the volatility of trade progress in the face of political and structural disruptions, particularly the withdrawal of about a quarter (23 percent) of the bloc's trade prospects

## Total intra-ECOWAS trade peaked in 2022, and has been on the decline after the exit of the AES states

Total intra-ECOWAS trade (in \$billions) from 2016 to 2024



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade. Analysis: Dataphyte Research

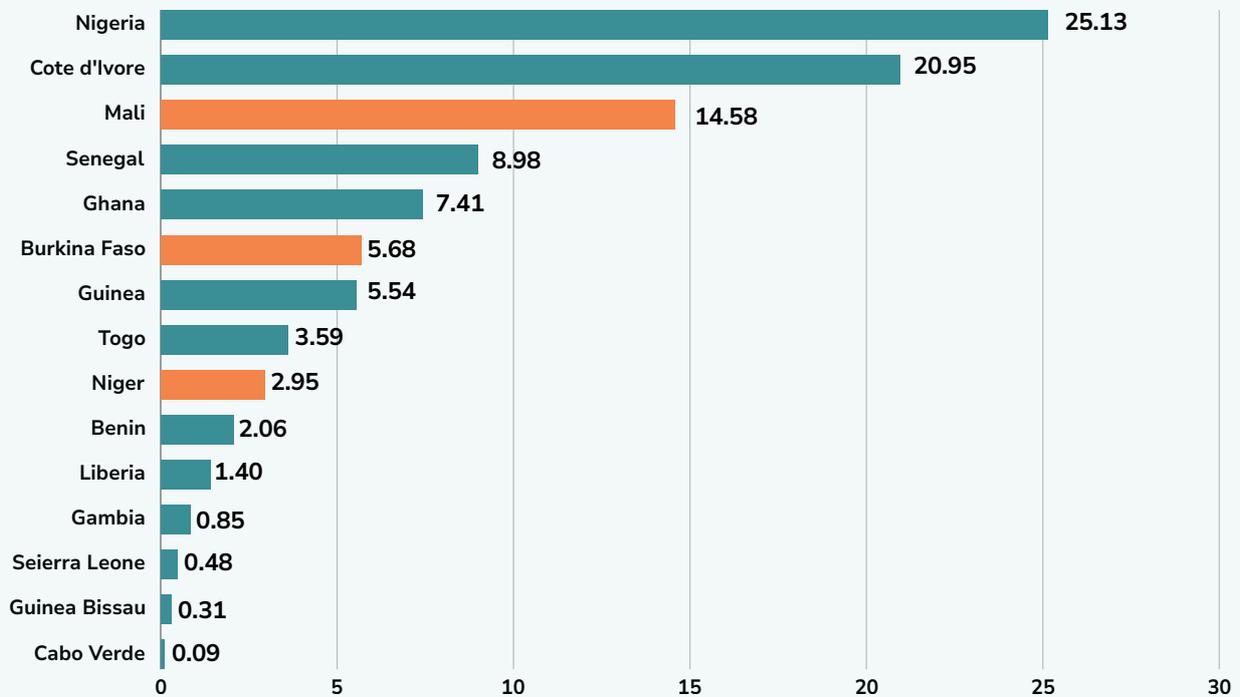
This sustained decline from 2022 to 2024 highlights the pivotal role these three countries played in the intra-ECOWAS trade network. Their departure not only disrupted established supply chains and trade corridors but also delivered a clear signal about the fragility of regional economic cohesion in the face of geopolitical shifts.

The AES countries played a substantial role in shaping intra-ECOWAS trade dynamics between 2016 and 2023, collectively accounting for 23% of the bloc's total internal trade during this period. Among the three, Mali emerged as the most prominent contributor, responsible for 14.66% of the total intra-ECOWAS trade, a figure that underscores its strategic economic importance despite its landlocked geography.

Together, these countries formed a vital trade corridor linking coastal and inland West Africa. Their contributions not only reflect active participation in regional commerce but also the deep interdependence among ECOWAS member states, a dynamic now at risk following their withdrawal from the bloc.

## The AES countries contributed 23% of the total intra-ECOWAS trade in the last 8 years

Total Intra-ECOWAS trade (%) from 2016 to 2023



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Analysis: Dataphyte Research

The withdrawal of the AES countries marks a defining moment in the history of ECOWAS, revealing the fragility of its economic integration agenda.

Though these countries collectively account for only 6% of the bloc's total GDP and 23% of intra-ECOWAS trade between 2016 and 2023, their departure has laid bare the critical economic interdependencies within the region and the indispensable role these countries played in sustaining the flow of goods across West Africa.

## 1.2. AES Exit and ECOWAS Intra-African Trade

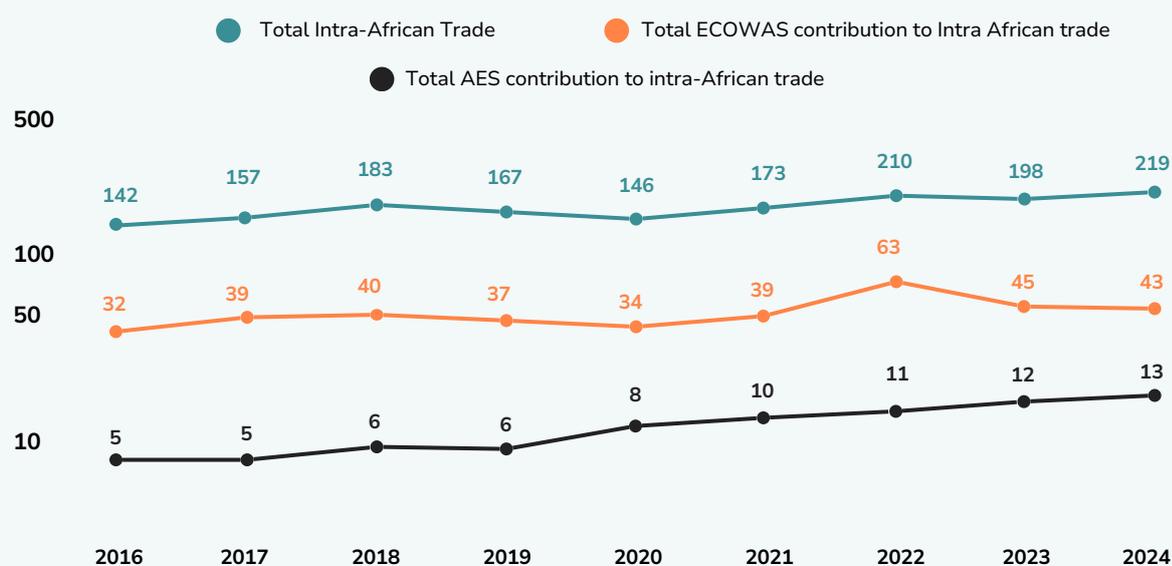
Intra-African trade grew over the past decade, surging by 54%, from \$142 billion in 2016 to \$219 billion in 2024, driven by regional integration efforts and policy harmonization across the continent. Within this upward trend, ECOWAS has steadily expanded its role.

ECOWAS' share of intra-African trade grew steadily over the last decade, rising from \$32 billion in 2016 and peaking at \$63 billion in 2022. This momentum slowed in 2023, with the bloc's contribution falling to \$45 billion, signaling emerging challenges to regional trade integration and the bloc's economy.

It further declined from \$45 billion in 2023 to \$43 billion in 2024 after the withdrawal of the AES countries from the bloc.

### ECOWAS trade contribution to intra-African trade peaked at \$63 billion in 2022 and has been on the decline since 2023 after the AES countries exited.

Total intra-ECOWAS trade (in \$billions) from 2016 to 2024



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Analysis: Dataphyte Research

These exits disrupted regional supply chains, fragmented market access, and reduced overall trade volume within the ECOWAS framework, highlighting the fragile balance between political cohesion and economic performance in the region.

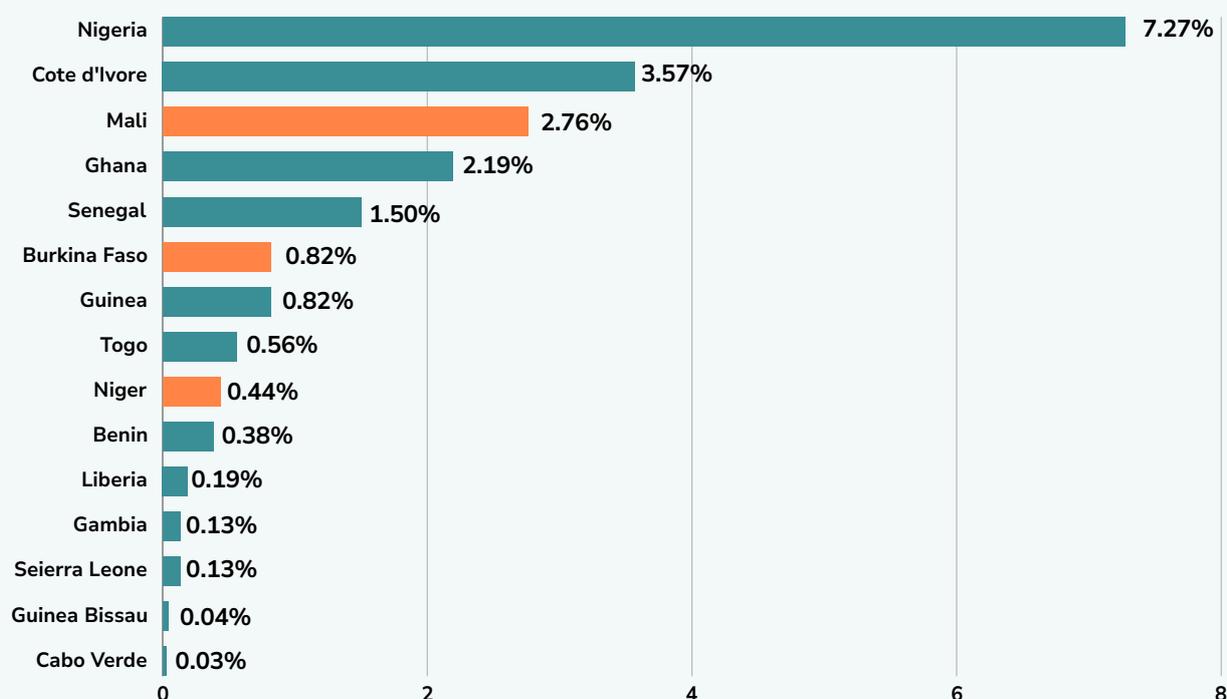
Before their withdrawal from ECOWAS, Mali ranked among the top three contributors to the bloc's intra-African trade, accounting for over 2.76% of ECOWAS's trade within the continent over the past eight years. Burkina Faso contributed 0.82%, while Niger added 0.44% during the same period.

Collectively, these three Sahel states contributed 4.8% to the region's trade ecosystem, and their exit marks a shift in the economic dynamics of ECOWAS.

Nigeria dominates regional trade, accounting for more than a third (7.27%) of ECOWAS's total trade volume from 2016 to 2023.

## ECOWAS regional bloc contributed a total of 21% to Intra-African trade in the last 8 years

The contribution of ECOWAS countries to intra African trade from 2016-2023



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Analysis: Dataphyte Research

While ECOWAS has made notable strides in economic integration, its resilience will be defined by how effectively it can navigate political fractures and realign its path toward a cohesive, stable, and inclusive regional economy.



# Security Trends

PHOTO CREDIT:  
Alexander Mckinley - Unsplash

## Chapter 2

### Security Trends: Is Conflict Ebbing with AES Exit?

Over the past two decades, ECOWAS has witnessed a dramatic surge in violent conflicts and fatalities as a result of the conflicts, showing a deepening crisis in governance and public security across the region.

The number of recorded conflict incidents skyrocketed from 351 in 2005 to 11,973 in 2024, a staggering increase that reflects growing instability and the proliferation of armed groups, extremist violence, and political unrest.

Alongside this rise in conflict, the human toll has escalated sharply, with total deaths from conflicts soaring from 523 in 2005 to over 23,500 in 2024. This 20-year trend paints a sobering picture of a region grappling with systemic challenges, including weak state institutions, contested legitimacy, and cross-border security threats, that increasingly undermine both national stability and regional integration efforts.

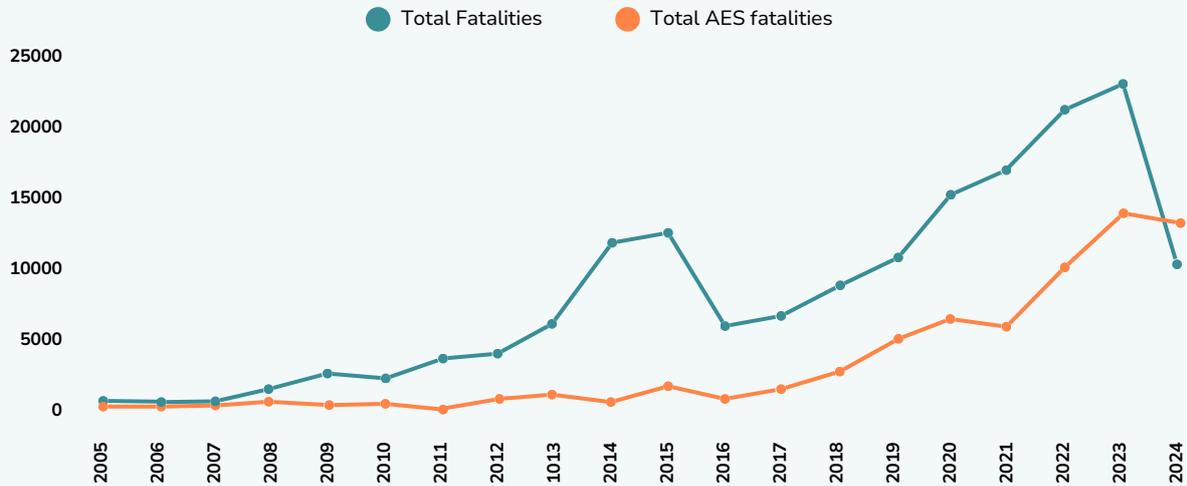
#### 2.1. Fatalities

The human cost, as deaths linked to violence within the ECOWAS region, escalated dramatically in the last 20 years. It rose from just 523 slain in 2005 to over 23,500 by 2024. This sharp increase reflects the growing intensity of instability and insecurity within the ECOWAS bloc.

After the AES members' exit from ECOWAS in 2023, the number of people killed in the 3 Sahel states alone a year later, in 2024, surpassed that in the remaining ECOWAS countries.

## After the exit of AES in 2024, the number of fatalities declined within the regional bloc

Total number of fatalities in ECOWAS and AES countries from 2005 to 2024



Source: ACLED Analysis: Dataphyte Research

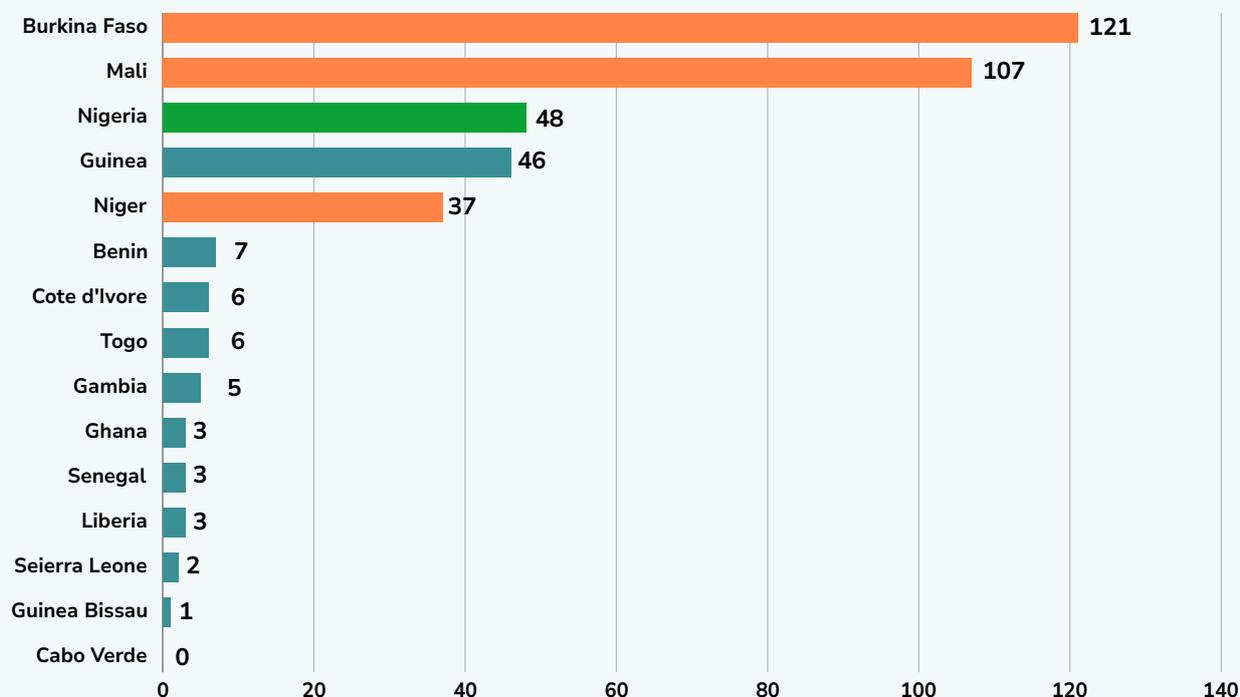
The AES countries, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, are clearly at the epicenter of the regional security crisis as seen in the figures on fatalities per 100,000. Their populations face a disproportionately high risk of death from conflict.

These fatalities per 100,000 represent the proportion of deaths due to conflict relative to the population in each ECOWAS country between 2005 and 2024. The numbers show how intense and deadly conflict has been on a per-person basis, which is often a more meaningful measure than raw fatality counts, especially when comparing countries of vastly different population sizes.

Burkina Faso and Mali stand out as the most deadly conflict zones per capita within ECOWAS. For every 100,000 people, over 100 lives have been lost to conflict in the last two decades. Niger, while below that threshold, also registers a high per capita fatality rate, when measured to its population.

## The proportion of death per 100,000 person due to conflict is more intense and deadly in the AES countries, especially Burkina Faso and Mali

Total Fatalities per 100,000 person in ECOWAS member states from 2005 to 2024



Source: ACLED Analysis: Dataphyte Research

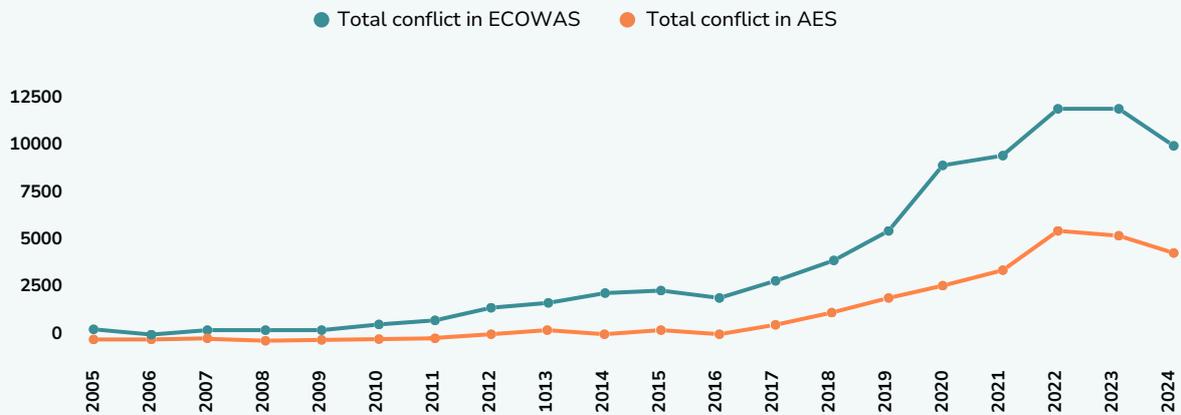
## 2.2. Conflicts

The trajectory of conflict within the ECOWAS region witnessed a sharp escalation up to 2022, driven largely by the intensifying violence in the Sahel states. However, beginning in late 2022, the overall number of conflict incidents across the bloc began to decline—a trend closely tied to a relative reduction in hostilities within Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

This shift suggests that regional stability remains heavily contingent on the security dynamics of the Sahel, reinforcing the centrality of these countries to ECOWAS's broader peace and security architecture.

## As the total conflict in AES began to decline in 2022, so did the conflict in ECOWAS region began to decline

Total conflicts in ECOWAS and AES countries from 2005 to 2024

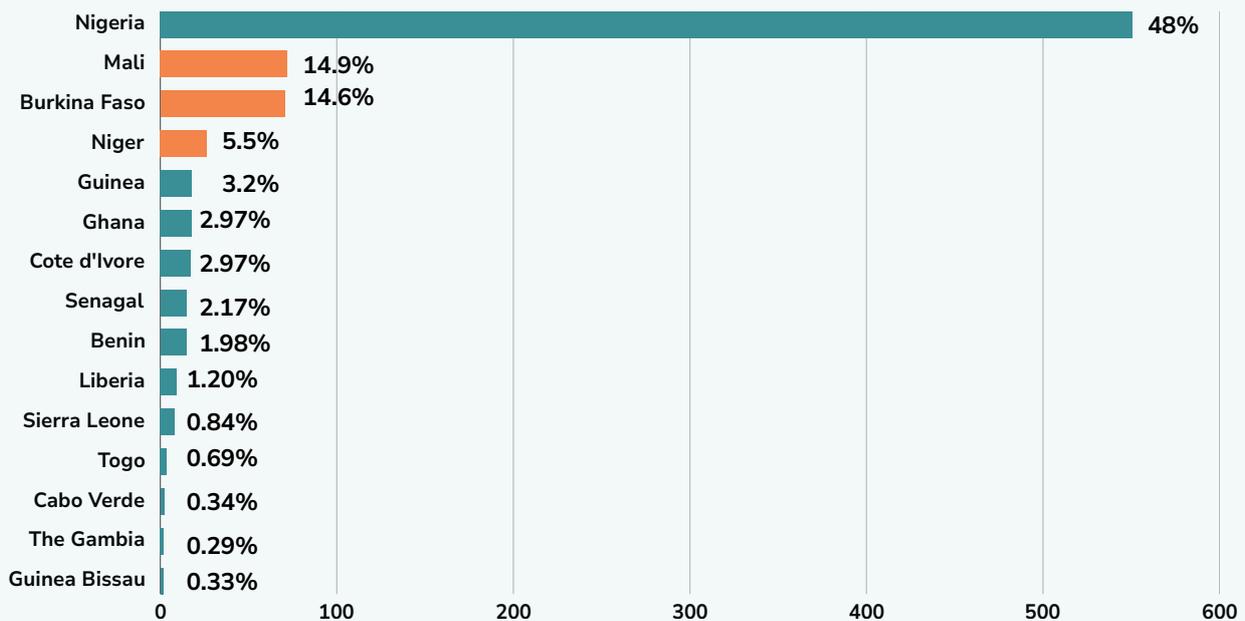


Source: ACLED. Analysis: Dataphyte Research

A closer look at the distribution reveals that the Sahel States, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger collectively accounted for over one-third (35%) of all counted conflicts during this period: Mali: 14.9%, Burkina Faso: 14.6% and Niger: 5.5%

## The three AES countries are among the countries with the highest number of conflicts in the last 20 years

% of total conflicts from each ECOWAS member from 2005 to 2024



Source: ACLED. Analysis: Dataphyte Research

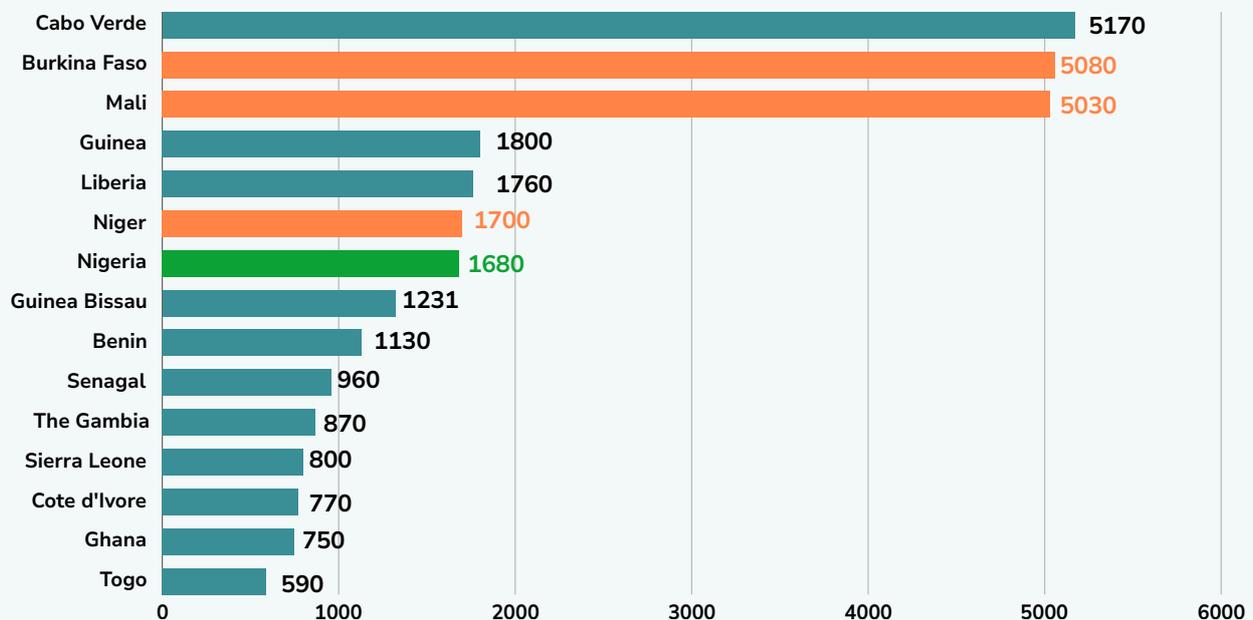
Nigeria accounts for 47.8%, the highest percentage, of the region's count of conflicts. This can be attributed to Nigeria also having the highest population among countries in the subregion, 52% of ECOWAS' total population.

When measured on a per capita basis, Nigeria's conflict intensity is significantly lower than the three smaller AES countries - Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Over the past 20 years, Nigeria recorded approximately 1,680 conflict incidents per 100,000 people, reflecting the diluting effect of its large population.

In contrast, Burkina Faso and Mali experienced far higher conflict densities, with 5,080 and 5,030 incidents per 100,000 people, respectively, over three times Nigeria's rate. Niger also surpassed Nigeria slightly, with 1,700 conflicts per 100,000 people during the same period.

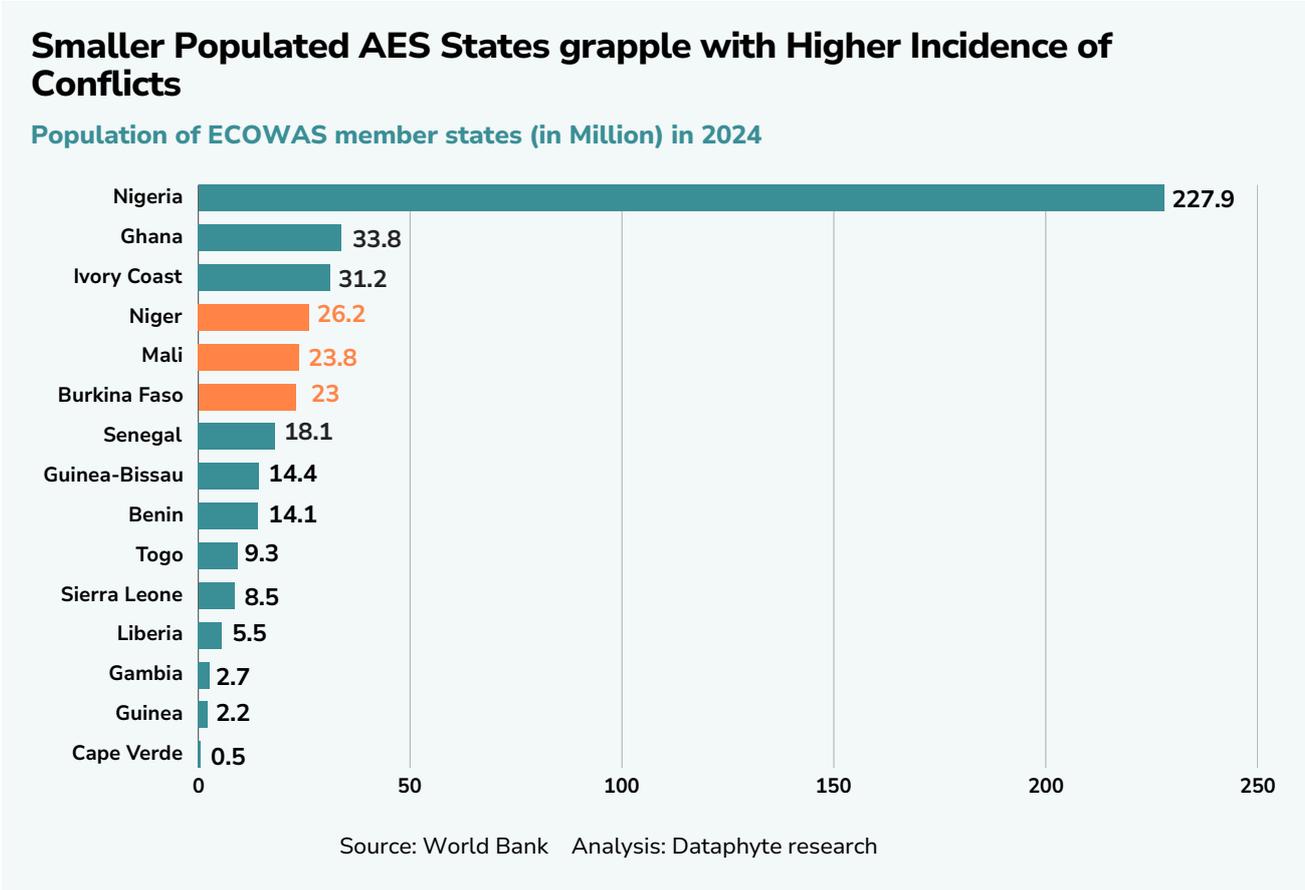
### The AES states, especially Burkina Faso and Mali, have been exposed to more conflicts in the last 20 years considering their population size

Number of Conflict per 100,000 persons from 2005 to 2024



Source: ACLED. Analysis: Dataphyte Research

These figures highlight the disproportionately heavy burden of conflict in the Sahel, where smaller populations are exposed to much higher levels of violence and insecurity, underscoring their status as the most volatile zones within the ECOWAS region.



The persistence of political unrest across ECOWAS member states, particularly in the Sahel, reflects deep-rooted structural challenges that continue to threaten regional stability. Contested elections, fragile democratic institutions, and widening socio-economic disparities have eroded public trust and undermined state legitimacy, creating fertile ground for unrest and rebellion.

Compounding these issues are the alarming rise of violent extremist ideologies and transnational terrorist networks, which are capitalising on governance vacuums and local grievances to expand their influence. The Sahel/AES states, already weakened by years of stunted socioeconomic development and weak state presence, especially in their peripheral regions, remain especially vulnerable.

Unless these root causes are addressed through sustained political reform, inclusive governance, and coordinated regional responses, the destabilising spiral of insecurity will persist. The aftermath of a developmental neglect of the AES not only threatens social cohesion and security within affected states but also undermines bordering ECOWAS' broader goals of economic integration, peace, and regional solidarity. The stakes for the region have never been higher.



# Political Instability

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## Chapter 3

### Political Instability

Over the past two decades, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has faced a growing political stability crisis, shaped by military coups, electoral disputes, weakened democratic institutions, and escalating violence, particularly in the Sahelian belt.

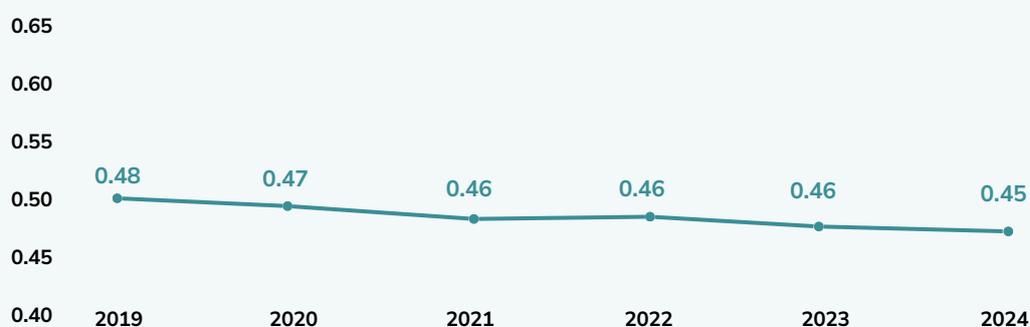
The World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law index reveals that, over the past six years, the majority of ECOWAS member states have consistently fallen below the global average benchmark of 0.50.

The index measures the extent to which countries adhere to the rule of law, using the following metrics: limited government powers, absence of corruption, order and security, fundamental rights, open government, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, criminal justice, and informal justice.

The bloc's average declined from 0.48 in 2019 to 0.45 in 2024, highlighting enduring weaknesses in governance, legal accountability, and institutional integrity across the bloc.

#### **There has been a consistent weakening in governance, especially in the adherence to the rule of law in the ECOWAS bloc**

Total Average on the WJP Rule of Law for ECOWAS from 2019 to 2024



Source: World Justice Project | Analysis: Dataphyte Research

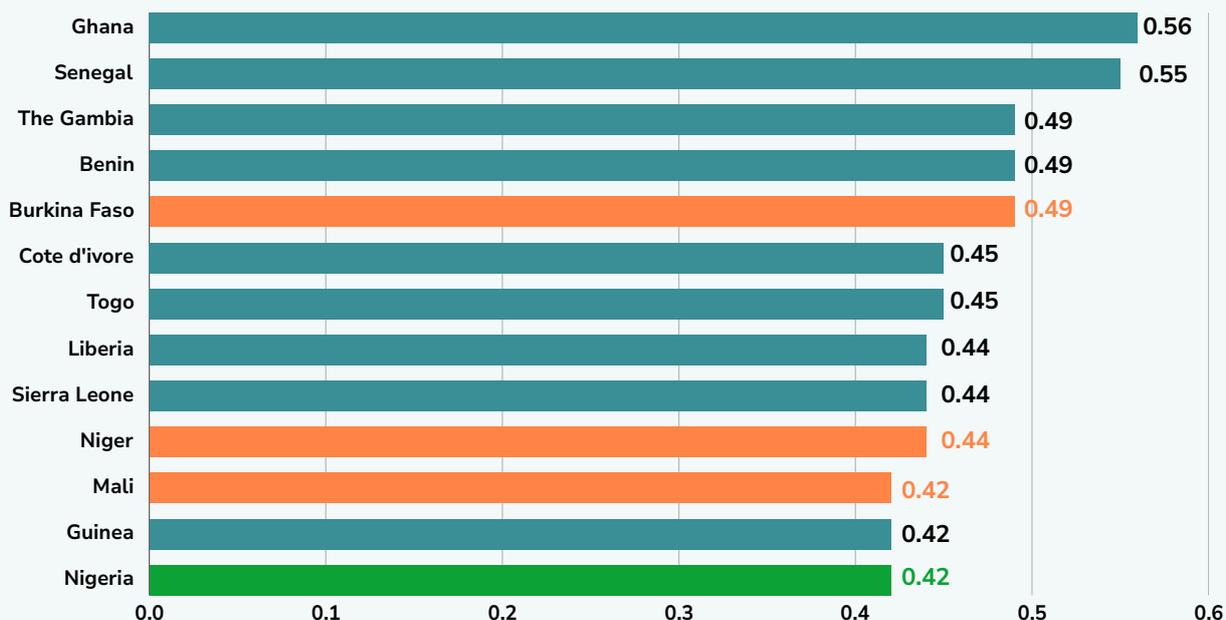
Nigeria recorded the lowest average adherence to the rule of law among ECOWAS member states over the past six years, with a score of 0.42.

Among the recently exited Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Mali and Niger also ranked among the weakest performers, scoring 0.42 and 0.44 respectively. These low scores reflect deep-rooted institutional weaknesses, including fragile judicial systems, pervasive corruption, limited checks on executive authority, and restricted civil liberties.

In contrast, Burkina Faso emerged as the strongest performer among the AES countries, with a score of 0.49. While this places it closer to the global average threshold of 0.50, it still falls short of indicating a strong or resilient rule-of-law environment. The collective performance of the AES states highlights persistent governance challenges that have contributed to their political instability and eventual departure from ECOWAS.

### Mali and Niger are among the lowest ranks in the adherence to the rule of law, but Burkina Faso is among the top performers in adherence to the rule of law within ECOWAS

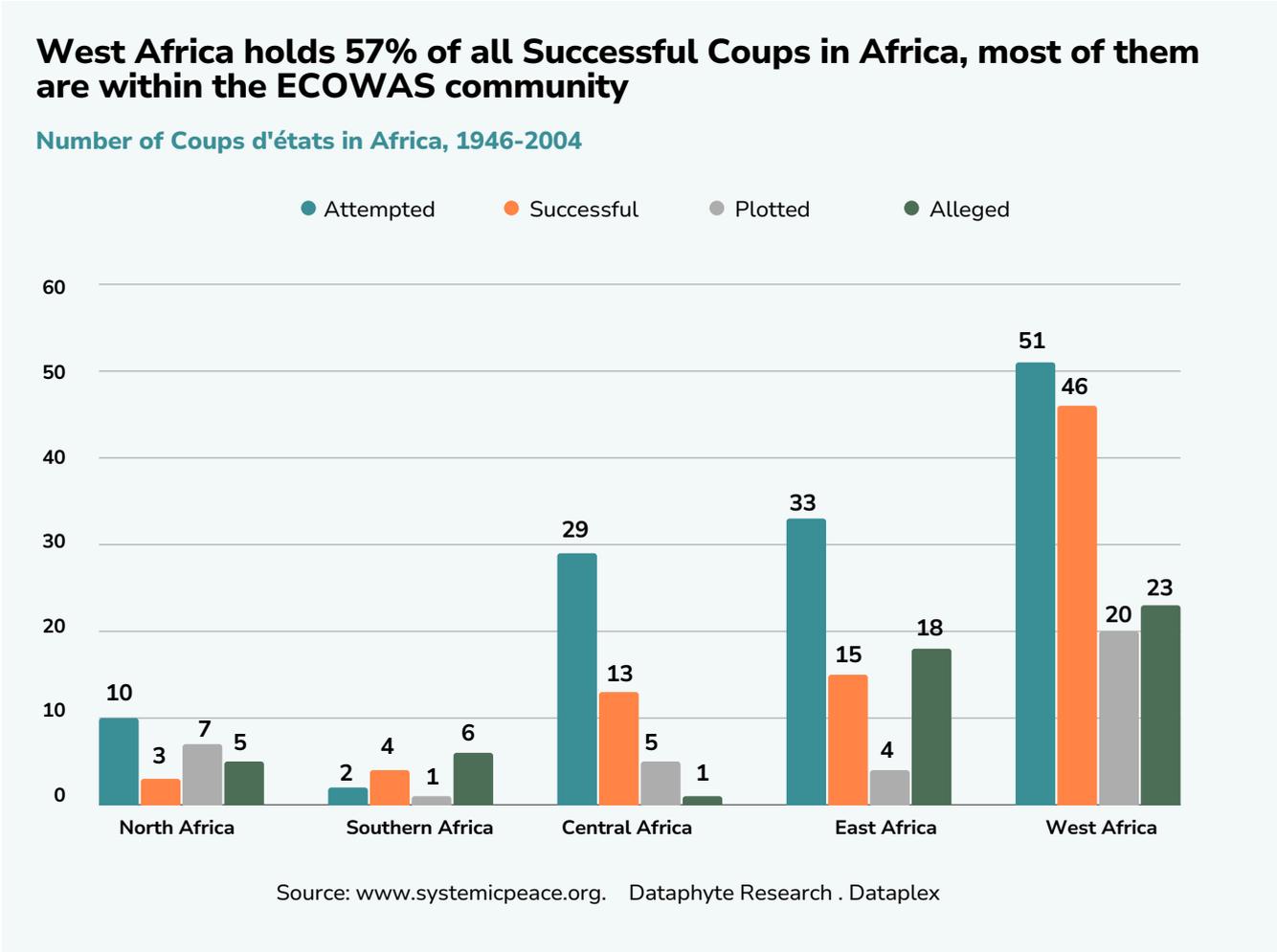
Rule of Law Index Scores for ECOWAS from 2019 -2024 (0 = Worst | 1 = Best)



Source: World Justice Projects Analysis: Dataphyte Research

The low Rule of Law scores across ECOWAS member states closely correlate with the region's growing political instability and recent waves of unconstitutional power transitions.

Over the past decades, most African countries that have experienced successful military coups have been located within the ECOWAS bloc, highlighting a deepening governance crisis and the bloc's struggle to uphold democratic norms and institutional resilience.



Currently, seven countries in Africa are governed entirely by military regimes, Chad, Sudan, Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali with four of them, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, being members of ECOWAS.

The convergence of poor rule-of-law performance and military takeovers reveals a troubling pattern: governments that fail to uphold legal accountability and democratic norms are more vulnerable to authoritarian reversals.

**There are 7 African countries under military rule, with 4 within the ECOWAS bloc**



Map: Analysis: Dataphyte Research. Source: AfricaNews. Created with Datawrapper

The strain on governance is not restricted to coups, but there has been an increasing number of contested elections, which have eroded trust in the electoral process and politically stimulated conflicts, which has put a strain on political stability within the bloc.

According to ACLED data, incidents of political violence across the bloc surged dramatically between 2005 and 2024, increasing by 8,214 cases over the two decades. While only 196 incidents were recorded in 2005, this figure soared to 8,410 by 2024. A significant portion of this violence is attributed to widespread public frustration over electoral fraud, entrenched government corruption, and the erosion of democratic institutions, showing the bloc's deepening political crisis.

This trend not only undermines the bloc's democratic credentials but also raises serious concerns about the future of political stability, human rights, and regional cooperation within ECOWAS.



# Socio- Economic Threats

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Shedrack Salami - Unsplash

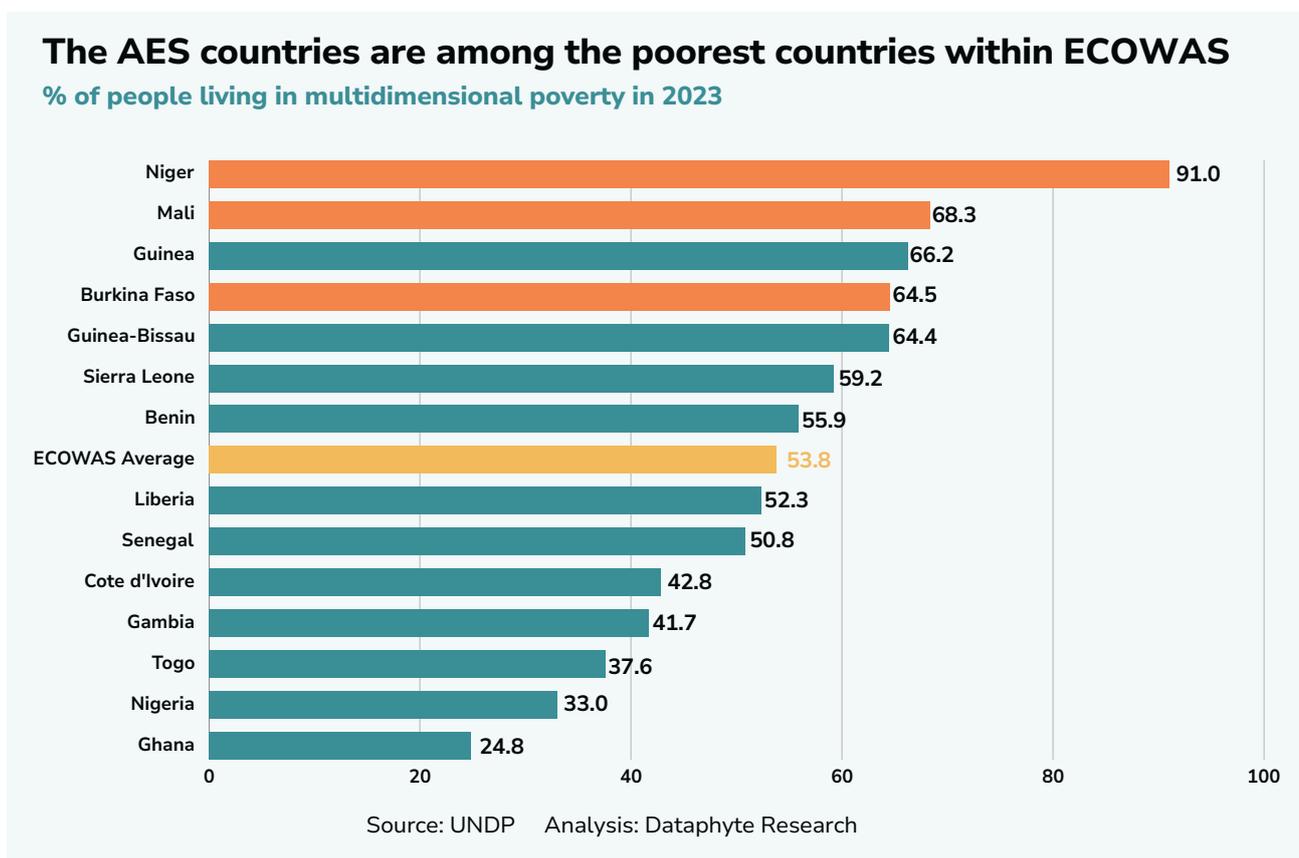
## Chapter 4

### Socio-Economic Threats

The proportion of people living in multidimensional poverty across ECOWAS reached an average of 53.8% in 2023, significantly higher than the Sub-Saharan African average of 48.4%. This stark disparity underscores the region's deeper challenges in health, education, and living standards.

The majority of ECOWAS member states have a significant share of their populations living in multidimensional poverty, with the situation particularly severe in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These countries, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, rank among the poorest on the African continent, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic vulnerabilities.

As of 2023, an estimated 91% of Nigerians live below the multidimensional poverty line, while over 60% of the populations in Burkina Faso and Mali face similar conditions. This economic fragility creates fertile ground for instability, with disenfranchised youth increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups or being drawn into informal, and often violent, economies.



The 2025 Human Development Report revealed that although poverty remains widespread, all ECOWAS countries have made measurable progress in human development. However, despite these improvements, the region's overall performance continues to fall within the "low human development" category on the Human Development Index (HDI) scale.

The HDI, which measures the level of human development across countries. It focuses on social investments that drive sustainable progress. It goes beyond just economic growth to evaluate three key dimensions of well-being:

1. Health – Measured by life expectancy at birth.
2. Education – Measured by:
  - Mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 and older.
  - Expected years of schooling for children entering school.
3. Standard of living – Measured by Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP).

The bloc's average Human Development Index (HDI) stood at 0.52, reflecting generally low levels of human development across ECOWAS.

Notably, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger fell below this already modest regional benchmark, showing deep-rooted development challenges in these countries. Their lower scores highlight persistent deficits in education, healthcare, and living standards, factors that contribute to broader instability and hinder progress toward sustainable development in the region.

## Of the 46 countries measured for human development in Sub-Saharan Africa, the AES countries are among the lowest ranked

Human Development index 2025

Country	HDI Value	Sub-saharan Rank	Global Ranking
Cape verde	0.67	8	135
Ghana	0.63	12	143
Cote d'ivoire	0.58	19	157
Togo	0.57	22	161
Nigeria	0.56	24	164
Senegal	0.53	27	169
Gambia	0.52	28	170
Benin	0.52	31	173
Guinea Bissau	0.51	32	174
Liberia	0.51	33	177
Guinea	0.5	35	179
Sierra leone	0.47	39	185
<b>Burkina faso</b>	<b>0.46</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>Mali</b>	<b>0.42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Niger</b>	<b>0.42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.52</b>		

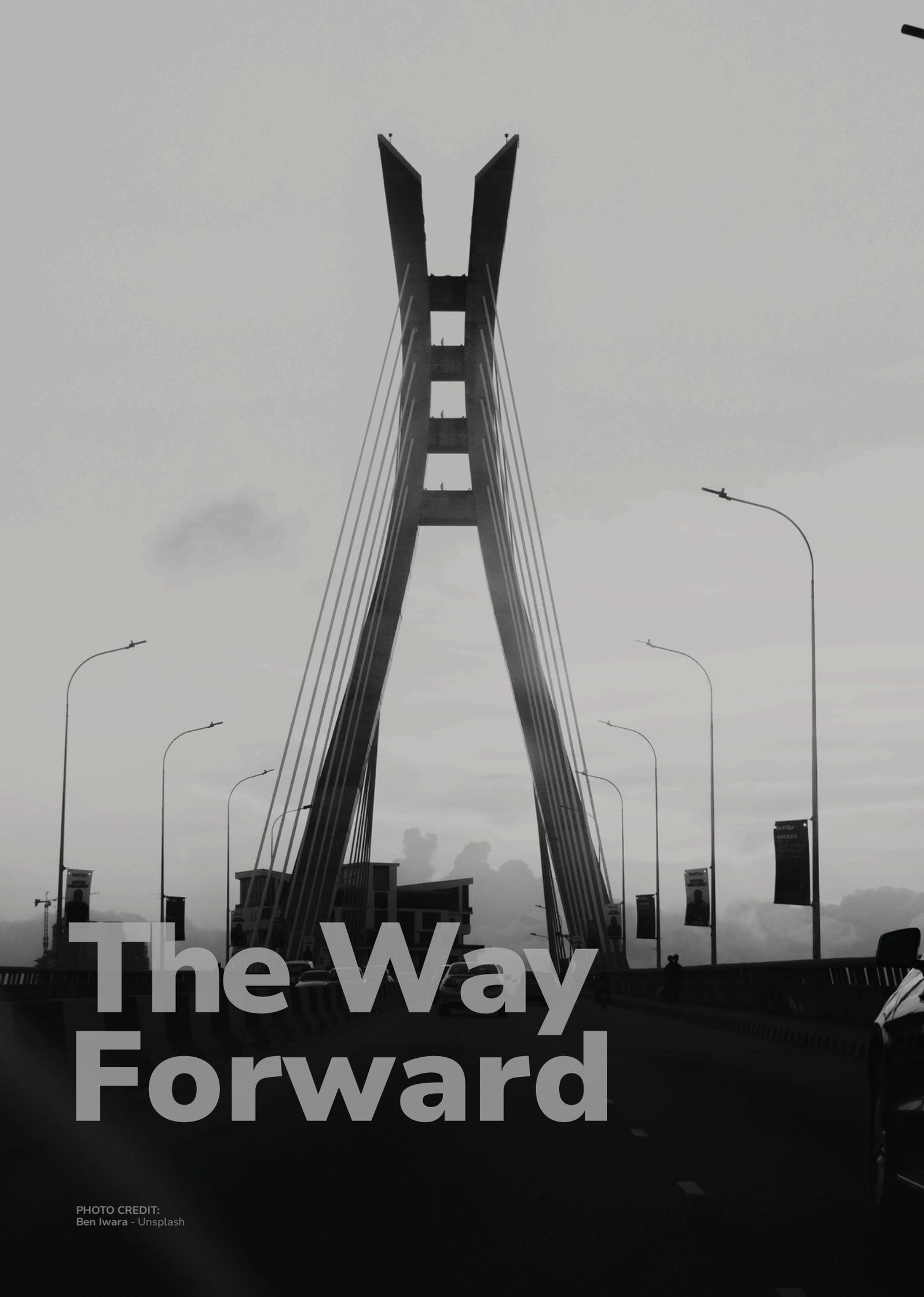
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Source: UNDP Analysis: Dataphyte Research

The HDI Scale:

- HDI scores range from **0 to 1**, where:
  - **0–0.549** = Low human development
  - **0.550–0.699** = Medium human development
  - **0.700–0.799** = High human development
  - **0.800–1.000** = Very high human development

The socio-economic challenges facing ECOWAS are deeply interwoven; poverty, conflict, poor governance, and weak institutions are reinforcing one another in a destructive cycle. The withdrawal of the AES countries from ECOWAS marks not just a political rupture but a socio-economic tipping point.



# The Way Forward

PHOTO CREDIT:  
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## The Way Forward

As ECOWAS commemorates its 50th anniversary, the departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, forming the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), represents more than a symbolic loss; it exposes critical structural fractures at the heart of West Africa's integration project. What should have been a moment of regional triumph has instead become a sobering inflection point, raising urgent questions about the bloc's internal coherence, external legitimacy, and long-term strategic vision.

ECOWAS stands at a crossroads. On the one side is a record of notable economic progress and institutional ambition, underpinned by frameworks such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) and contributions to intra-African trade growth under AfCFTA. On the other hand there is an increasingly fragile political and security situation, shaped by democratic backsliding, economic disparities, and governance deficits, conditions that have alienated peripheral member states and contributed to their exit.

The departure of the AES, despite its limited gross domestic product contribution to ECOWAS, has magnified the extent of interdependence of member states. Collectively accounting for nearly a quarter of intra-ECOWAS trade from 2016–2023 and over a third of the bloc's conflict burden, their withdrawal threatens to unravel the delicate economic, security, and social ties that underpin regional stability. Furthermore, their accusations of foreign influence and ECOWAS's failure to uphold pan-African ideals strike at the bloc's legitimacy, exposing a growing dissonance between institutional rhetoric and on-the-ground realities.

What emerges is not merely a case of institutional divergence but a widening gap between ECOWAS's foundational goals and its present-day operational effectiveness. The transition from "ECOWAS of States" to a meaningful "ECOWAS of Peoples" remains incomplete. And now, with the emergence of "ECOWas" in the form of AES, a

counter-narrative is taking shape, one that could fragment regional integration efforts, dilute shared security mechanisms, and undercut continental ambitions for unity under the African Union.

To chart a path forward, ECOWAS must confront hard truths and embrace structural reform. This includes rebalancing the distribution of economic and political power within the bloc, restoring confidence in its neutrality and sovereignty, and doubling down on inclusive development strategies. Rebuilding trust with estranged member states will require not punitive measures, but genuine engagement, transparent dialogue, and recognition of their grievances, without compromising democratic principles or regional solidarity.

Ultimately, the future of ECOWAS hinges on its ability to evolve from a reactive coalition to a proactive, people-centered community rooted in mutual respect, shared prosperity, and African agency. The current rupture, while destabilising, offers a pivotal opportunity to redefine the bloc's purpose for the next 50 years, transforming crisis into a catalyst for renewal.

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# Dataphyte

Dataphyte is a social impact organisation providing data access, insight and hyperlocal research for businesses, governments and development organisations to achieve their socio-economic goals.

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