#TheGambiaHas Decided: A model for intervention, or a missed opportunity?

The role of the African Union and Economic Community of West African States in The Gambia crisis

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Executive summary

Recent years have seen increased instances of democratic backsliding across West Africa, particularly through military coups. This underscores the need to consider how regional actors like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in collaboration with the African Union (AU), can work proactively together to strengthen democratisation processes.

Against this backdrop, this report presents an in-depth case study on The Gambia. In particular, it evaluates the AU- and ECOWAS-led interventions that followed the country's elections in 2016.[1] In the course of its assessment, the study articulates insights for Africa-led interventions. These draw on an array of tools, including mediation, political missions and military pressure. Another key focus of the report is the changing nature of partnerships between the AU and regional economic communities (RECs) as part of their responses to political crises. This includes examining the extent to which the AU and ECOWAS coordinated efforts to address the constitutional crisis that followed the disputed outcome of the December 2016 polls.

The study culminates in a series of key findings. Among these is that the principle of subsidiarity remains ambiguously defined; that coordination between the AU and ECOWAS was uneven and at times duplicative; and that national ownership in The Gambia was insufficiently embedded in the reform

process. This suggests that while ECOWAS´ visible and robust intervention was decisive in restoring constitutional order, the AU´s more technical engagement lacked visibility and sustainability. Both actors struggled to align their support in a coherent and mutually reinforcing manner. Over time, this served to reduce how both organisations were able to act as continuous and legitimate actors in the country.

These findings offer guidance on how the AU and RECs could partner more effectively to address crises in Africa. Clarifying subsidiarity is a key step. While the term is widely used by the AU and RECs, the key questions of subsidiarity — such as the political dimensions it entails; and how the AU and ECOWAS could jointly address a lack of political will at the member state level — remain unresolved.

Other areas of guidance defined in the report include strengthening joint planning and communication; and ensuring that balanced attention is given not only to immediate security concerns, but also long-term governance reform. The study concludes that without deeper institutionalised coordination mechanisms and stronger political will from both continental and national actors, the sustainability of such interventions will remain limited.

Recommendations

For the African Union

- Re-engage in strategic dialogue on the evolving situation in The Gambia, focusing on joint political support to the state, civil society and key national stakeholders. This should include support to electoral reform processes, constitutional changes and a comprehensive review of progress made since 2016;
- Revisit the application of the PCRD Policy to ensure a comprehensive, people-centred approach that goes beyond SSR and delivers on pillars such as socio-economic recovery, reconciliation and community-level engagement — embedding this support from the outset;
- Ensure the AU PSC remains engaged and regularly briefed on developments in The Gambia. The AU PSC should also clarify the status of AUTSTG, including whether the mission has formally closed;
- Strengthen strategic communication with the Gambian public, ensuring clarity on why the AU is present, what it does and how it supports the country's transition;
- The AU PSC and the AU Commission should re-engage with the ECOWAS Commission and Gambian authorities to help address the current political impasse and identify options for moving the reform agenda forward.

For the ECOWAS Commission and Permanent Mission

- Strengthen coordination and joint planning between the ECOWAS Permanent Mission in The Gambia, the ECOWAS Commission and relevant Gambian institutions, including the Ministry of Trade and Regional Integration;

- Enhance collaboration, coordination and strategic communication between the ECOWAS Permanent Mission in The Gambia and other ECOWAS agencies operating in the country;
- Ensure mandates are continuously adapted to the context on the ground, and remain flexible to evolving political and security dynamics;
- Increase the capacity of the ECOWAS Permanent Mission in the country by deploying programme staff and technical advisors on security sector to allow the mission to actively shape, adjust and adapt to decisions based on the realities on the ground; rather than primarily observe and report.
- Explore developing programme-level support inside The Gambia rather than relying solely on directives from Abuja. This could help ensure that strategies are better aligned with the local context, needs and timelines.

AU and ECOWAS

- Institutionalise gender-sensitive capacity-building prior to deployment and within AU and ECOWAS interventions, moving beyond ad-hoc training toward mandatory curricula for military, police and civilians, aligned with the AU Gender Policy (2022) and ECOWAS Gender and Development Strategic Framework.
- Recognise and address the political dimensions of subsidiarity by developing frameworks for engagement when national political will is weak, fragmented or contested.
- Enhance coordination with international partners, including the EU, UN and bilateral actors, to avoid duplication of efforts and reduce strain on national institutions, while ensuring support remains calibrated to and manageable for national systems.
- Encourage states where national institutions are to clearly articulate the type and duration of support required. The AU and ECOWAS should then collaborate with national and bilateral partners to channel assistance through appropriate institutional mechanisms.
- Continue technical support during the implementation phases of SSR, human rights and the judiciary, supported by clearer theories of change and systematic monitoring and evaluation.
- Improve communication, transparency and community engagement regarding the purpose, scope, and timeline of support in the security sector through public briefings, local-language campaigns and civil society participation in the monitoring and evaluation of SSR efforts. Such measures would help reduce misinformation, particularly regarding the role of ECOMIG.
- Enhance harmonisation between the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and ECOWAS's ECOWARN, including regular two-way reporting to inform pre-emptive diplomacy and timely engagement. This should incorporate the work of The Gambia's National Early Warning and Response Systems Centre.

AU, ECOWAS and The Gambia

- Establish a tripartite coordination framework between the AU, ECOWAS and the government of The Gambia to address structural challenges. This framework should include clearly defined roles and responsibilities; joint planning and monitoring of SSR-related activities; and mechanisms for resolving political tensions that delay or obstruct reforms.

ECOMIG

- Strengthen public awareness of the ECOMIG´s mandate and role through strategic communication led by the ECOWAS Permanent Mission.
- While the strategic review of ECOMIG has recommended withdrawal following elections, there is a need to develop and communicate a clear exit strategy — including timelines, a phased drawdown and liquidation process.
- Such a strategy should be negotiated, progressive, sustainable and adaptable to evolving conditions in The Gambia.

The Gambian State

- Continue investing in the capacity, cohesion and professionalism of the national security forces, along with improving their internal relationships. This should involve confidence-building measures and targeted to support their role as primary security providers during and after transition periods.
- Recognise the stabilisation dilemma. While ECOMIG is recognised as an enforcement mission, the context and realities on the ground differ significantly. In many African contexts, prolonged reliance on peace enforcement and stabilisation missions can remove incentives for reform. The Gambia should encourage a progressive shift from ECOMIG's stabilisation function toward a Formed Police Unit model. This would support national security forces to assume a more substantial role in the country's broader security environment.
- Strengthen national ownership by ensuring that Gambian leadership directs the reform agenda from the outset. This should be clearly communicated at community (micro) and regional (meso) levels, supported by a clear national strategy to guide partner assistance.
- Improve continuity and institutional memory. The frequent turnover of senior officials and permanent secretaries in government has disrupted reform progress and weakened institutional capacity. Therefore, all levels of the state must enhance their institutional memory and capacity for long-term engagement, ensuring that the knowledge of processes and interactions is preserved despite personnel changes.

Acronyms

AFPRC	Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council
APRC	Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AUTSTG	African Union Technical Support Team to The Gambia
CEWS	Continental Early Warning System
CSO	civil society organisation
DCAF	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
ECOMIG	ECOWAS Military Mission in The Gambia
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FPU	Formed Police Unit
GAF	Gambian Armed Forces
GBA	The Gambia Bar Association
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
GNA	The Gambia National Army
GNG	The Gambia National Gendarmerie
GPF	Gambian Police Force
IAG	International Advisory Group
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission
MFCD	Movement Force de Casamance
MoU	memorandum of understanding
NATAG	Nigerian Army Training Assistance Group
NSS	National Security Strategy
NSP	National Security Policy
ONS	Office of National Security
PCRD	post-conflict reconstruction and development
PSC	Peace and Security Council
REC	regional economic community
RM	regional mechanism
RWAFF	Royal West African Frontier Force
SIS	State Intelligence Services
SSR	security sector reform
SSRG	security sector reform and governance
TNA	technical needs assessment
TRRC	Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission
TSG	Tactical Support Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Introduction

Regional economic communities (RECs) are recognised as the building blocks that shape and drive Africa's regional integration.[2] In 2001, African heads of state met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and agreed to establish the African Union (AU) as a successor to the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The AU was officially launched on 9 July 2002 in Durban, South Africa.[3] The relationship between the AU and the RECs/Regional Mechanisms (RMs) is mandated by the Abuja Treaty and the AU Constitutive Act. Among others, it is guided by the 2008 Protocol on Relations between the RECs and the AU, as well as the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation in Peace and Security.

These frameworks aim to clarify roles and foster cooperation in managing conflict across the continent. In recent years, the AU and RECs have sought to strengthen their partnership, particularly in response to political crises.[4] The RECs have increasingly assumed a first responder role, with the AU providing support through coordination and legitimacy. More recently, the AU Commission (AUC) and the RECs/RMs signed an MoU on the African Standby Force to provide a legal framework and clarify stakeholders' roles and responsibilities.[5]

Despite a growing body of literature on the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), much of it has focused on institutional frameworks. Less scholarly attention has been given to the practical aspects of AU-REC coordination, particularly during interventions. As a result, further exploration is needed to understand how these partnerships are built, managed and sustained in complex political contexts.[6] The intervention of the AU and ECOWAS in The Gambia provides an insightful lens for exploring these dynamics. Existing research has scrutinised ECOWAS's deployment of a military force,[7] as well as the legality of that decision;[8,9] the success of global-regional alignment;[10] ECOWAS use of 'coercive diplomacy',[11] and the success of REC interventions more broadly.[12] More recent studies have investigated the local perception of ECOWAS and AU interventions as a regional norm.[13] A relatively underexamined area is how the AU and ECOWAS coordinated their actions during and after the crisis.

As a result, further exploration is needed to understand how these partnerships are built, managed and sustained in complex political contexts.

Understanding this partnership provides insight into the workings of African-led interventions, especially in the context of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2719, and renewed discussions on subsidiarity and burden-sharing in peace operations.[14] The case of The Gambia offers a particularly interesting lens for examining AU-REC interventions for two reasons. First, despite the absence of a violent conflict, transitional justice efforts were applied yet often overlooked the country´s specific needs.[15] Second is that The Gambia´s small size makes interventions both highly visible and politically sensitive. Actions taken by international actors or the head of state, for instance, are noticed and felt at the community level with an immediacy that would not be the case in larger states like Nigeria. Finally, this heightened degree of visibility, combined with perceptions of The Gambia as a relatively lower-risk environment, both facilitated engagement and upped the stakes of how engagement was received.

Background to the crisis

Following the December 2016 presidential elections in The Gambia, and then President Yahya Jammeh's refusal to concede defeat, the AU, UN and ECOWAS jointly called on The Gambian government to respect the will of the people and ensure a peaceful transition. Despite diplomatic efforts led by ECOWAS, Jammeh refused to step down. On 19 January 2017, the regional body, with AU and UN support, deployed the ECOWAS Military Stabilization Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG). The following day, ECOWAS forces crossed the border on orders to march on Banjul. Jammeh finally conceded defeat at this point, with internal dynamics having also limited his options.

The ECOMIG mandate was to "facilitate the exit of Yahya Jammeh, restore the popular will of The Gambian people as expressed in the December 9 elections and create conditions for normalising the political and humanitarian situation in The Gambia". The force fell under the ECOWAS command structure, with a Senegalese commander at the helm. It consisted of 500 troops (with a mandate for up to 7,000) from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Togo, along with air and naval assets.[16]

Prior to the election, the AU and ECOWAS deployed a joint fact-finding and sensitisation mission from 4 to 5 May 2016 in The Gambia to engage political stakeholders. This was followed by public statements by the chair of the AU Assembly and the AUC. Leading up to the crisis, however, the ECOWAS Commission declined to send an observation mission to monitor the 1 December 2016 presidential poll for the second consecutive time. Instead, it chose to deploy four-member technical observation team. Consisting of political, early warning and human rights experts, the team was intended to strengthen the work of its Zonal Bureau in Banjul, while monitoring the electoral processes and the evolving political and human rights issues before the election.[17] These efforts were complemented by various activities undertaken by the AU and ECOWAS commissions based on established intervention practices, and drawing on the bodies' foundational, legal and normative frameworks. These activities show how the AU and ECOWAS, at the time, had tried to foster norm transformation through a series of protocols and diplomatic moves aimed at deepening democratic governance.[18] However, this was denied by the Gambian authorities, claiming that it the accreditation request arrived too late.[19] Nevertheless, ECOWAS closely monitored the progress of the electoral process and positioned itself as a key defender of democracy and the people´s will.

Nevertheless, The Gambia is widely noted as a case study of success for the AU and ECOWAS.

For the AU, the intervention eventually led to the deployment of a small technical assessment staffed by its Post-Conflict, Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) division. In June 2017, the AU PSC requested for a technical support mission called the African Union Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG) to be deployed in September 2018.[20] While ECOWAS deployed the 'muscle' that made up the intervention, the nature of the AU and ECOWAS partnership continued to evolve in their response to the crisis in The Gambia.

As a result, this report examines several key questions:

1. *How effective is the working partnership between the AU and the RECs? What other insights should be gleaned about how the two entities' engagement before, during and after a crisis?*
2. *Can the AU-ECOWAS mode of intervention in The Gambia be replicated in other contexts across West Africa? What do such prospects tell us about how these organisations choose to intervene in the future?*

The report builds on existing qualitative research and supplements this literature with desk interviews, online interviews and field research trips to The Gambia. A validation workshop was conducted to finalise the report findings. The analysis first considered the historical context of The Gambia and the 2016/2017 crisis. This was followed by a critical evaluation of the actions taken by the AU and ECOWAS in the immediate aftermath of the crisis (2017–2020), and up to the current period (from 2020). The analysis specifically focused on the extent of coordination, collaboration and partnership between various actors — and particularly the AU and ECOWAS — in responding to The Gambian crisis. It draws on academic literature, think tank assessments, as well as communiqués and statements from the AU and ECOWAS. Interviews with key academic, civil society, military and political actors in The Gambia were conducted electronically between November 2023 and May 2024, and in person as part of a field trip in April 2024.

The analysis specifically focused on the extent of coordination, collaboration and partnership between various actors — and particularly the AU and ECOWAS

The report finds that the intervention in The Gambia was a success in short-term crisis resolution, yet it exposed gaps in AU–ECOWAS coordination, a lack of clarity with regard to subsidiarity, and insufficient focus on sustainable, nationally owned reforms.

The engagement of the AU — and more broadly that of ECOWAS, through its decisive stance — helped to restore constitutional order. The backing of a credible military threat in the form of the ECOWAS Military Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) also supported former President Yahya Jammeh's ushering out of the country. Moreover, internal dynamics created an enabling environment that provided both ECOWAS and the AU with the legitimacy to engage in The Gambia, which allowed the organisations to deploy a unique, African-led stabilisation effort.[21] These internal dynamics within the country lowered the costs, raised legitimacy and reduced the risks. As a result, the two organisations were able to act decisively.

Three specific internal factors in The Gambia helped facilitate the intervention by the AU and ECOWAS. First was that despite ideological differences, the population and political parties unified around protecting the electoral results — including through the widespread use of social media. Unlike elsewhere in the region, ECOWAS thus had the legitimacy to act and present itself as responding to the will of the Gambian people. Second, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) had declared and confirmed the electoral results. Jammeh could go to court and attempt to challenge the results, but he could not reject them. The Bar Association had also delegitimised the Supreme Court, refusing any attempts to bring in any judges from neighbouring states. These legal manoeuvres simplified the situation. It also narrowed the space for Jammeh and deepened ECOWAS' legal justification to act in support of the newly president elect. The third factor was a set of structural aspects. The Gambia is relatively small in size, and the military was willing to support the people and uphold the results at the time — all working in favour of the intervention.[22]

Nonetheless, despite the success of their interventions, it became clear over time that there was weak coordination between the AU's technical interventions and ECOWAS' military-political approach. Given the lack of a systematic coordination mechanism, the partnership between the AU and ECOWAS (the AU-REC model of subsidiarity) was never fully harmonised. This resulted in fragmented support, rather than a coherent response. Another factor was that national ownership in the state's reconstruction process and post-crisis reforms was limited. Without strong Gambian stakeholder buy-in, changes risked being externally driven and less sustainable. Equally, ECOWAS support experienced challenges connected to the immediate crisis, long-term democratic consolidation and security sector reform that were not adequately embedded or followed through.

Nevertheless, The Gambia is an example of how African institutions such as ECOWAS and the AU can act without heavy external involvement, giving legitimacy to the principle of 'African solutions to African problems'. Regionally, it demonstrates how ECOWAS' willingness to uphold electoral outcomes can help countries maintain steps towards democracy.

Research methodology

The authors considered a range of options for the research methodology. Following discussion with other researchers familiar with the Gambian context and initial work, the team implemented a mixed-methods approach combining desk research; semi-structured interviews, including in-country fieldwork (a total of 24 interviews were conducted); and a validation workshop. The research process spanned from January 2024 to September 2025.[23]

Desk research and actor mapping

The authors compiled a comprehensive list of experts, civil society organisations (CSOs) and government officials. This mapping exercise helped identify key ministries, institutions

and individuals to engage with. The authors also conducted an extensive desk review of existing literature on The Gambia, spanning the last 60 years. This included online material, academic articles, books and policy reports on the country's political and institutional history. Insights from this desk review allowed the authors to refine the initial mapping and identify additional actors within and beyond the AU and ECOWAS frameworks, including the government, from the past as well as the present.

Online interviews

Building on this mapping process, the authors conducted in-depth online interviews on key themes identified during desk review. The interviews took place mainly using Teams and Zoom. In some cases, due to connectivity issues, the team used WhatsApp. On average interviews lasted 45 to 55 minutes. During this stage of the data collection process, respondents were fully informed of the aims of the study and given the opportunity to opt out. However, all agreed to participate and were forthcoming with their responses, allowing the team to discuss the AU-ECOWAS partnership in The Gambia in depth. Through online interviews, the team was able to use the snowballing approach to gain names of additional interviewees.

In-country fieldwork

The third method involved in-country and in-person interviews in April 2024. Working from the authors' list and with the support of a Gambian official, a broad spectrum of actors was engaged. They included former vice presidents, political advisors to the president of The Gambia, political opposition leaders, CSO representatives, women leaders, advocacy groups, AU experts, ECOWAS officials, military personnel from the Gambian Armed Forces (GAF), police officers and business leaders. The number of respondents reflects those willing to provide their time and be interviewed. The intensity of the fieldwork — beginning early morning and running late into the evening — enabled the team to conduct 15 interviews over the course of five days. Not only were these interviews insightful, but they ultimately provided perspectives on the AU and ECOWAS interventions that had not been previously captured or appreciated by the research community, nor had they emerged during the desk review or online interviews. As a result, the team left the Gambia in April 2024 with a renewed and different understanding of the 2016–2017 crisis.[24] Once the interviews and fieldwork were completed, the team entered a period of coding, analysis and drafting. Multiple layers of analysis were included to ensure that the draft was accurate and reflected Gambians' views.

Validation workshop

The fourth pillar of the method was caried out roughly 18 months later, when the team visited The Gambia again to conduct a validation workshop. All previous respondents were invited for dialogue, constructive discussions and critical engagement on the draft report. Over a day and a half, the authors facilitated structured and detailed discussions of each section of the draft report with 18 participants, and invited each one of them to provide feedback.[25] The final session of the validation workshop focused on discussing and reviewing the draft recommendation line by line. This iterative process enriched the analysis and culminated in one of the most comprehensive lessons learned reports on The Gambia 2016–2017 crisis to date, while also reflecting Gambian voices and perspectives.

Analytical approach

The report adopts a deductive approach. While guided by predetermined themes derived from the literature and evaluation questions, these were adjusted following direct engagement in The Gambia. Deductive reasoning allowed the team to structure the data around core analytical categories, while remaining open to new insights from the fieldwork. This approach was particularly useful in examining the interplay between structures and agency in the AU-ECOWAS engagement — recognising how institutional practices and individual actors continuously shape one another. The analysis combines theoretically informed analysis with empirical evidence from the fieldwork. Finally, all interviews were anonymised to encourage open and honest participation and ensure respondents' security and privacy.

The report has five sections. It starts with a review of the conceptual framework underpinning the AU-REC relationship, focusing on subsidiarity and coordination. Section two provides a historical background on The Gambia's political context. The following section outlines the internal dynamics and external responses to the 2016 electoral crisis. Section four evaluates the roles of the AU and ECOWAS in supporting The Gambia's transition and their coordination challenges. The final section reflects on lessons learned and key findings for future AU-REC engagement in peace and security interventions.

The AU-RECs relationship

Relations between the AU and RECs are guided by various treaties, protocols, memoranda of understanding and policies. The Abuja Treaty, which established the African Economic Community, and the AU's Constitutive Act both acknowledge the desire for coordination and harmonisation between the two sets of organisations to strengthen economic, political and security cooperation in Africa.[26] The Protocol on the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU established the initial structure of the APSA and is more specific on the security relations between the AU and RECs and regional mechanisms (RMs).[27] The Protocol envisions coordination, harmonisation and partnership between the AU's PSC and the RECs/RMs on actions aimed at promoting peace, security, stability and conflict prevention. The APSA aims to establish institutional mechanisms, in coordination and collaboration between the AU and RECs/RMs, to facilitate conflict prevention, management and resolution along with PCRD. Further outlining AU-RECs/RMs security relations is the 2008 MoU on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security Between the African Union, the RECs and the coordinating mechanisms of the regional standby brigades of East Africa and Northern Africa;[28] as well as the assessments and roadmaps that were outlined to assist in operationalising the APSA.[29]

The above treaties, policies and guidance notes specify that the AU and RECs/RMs are to collaborate and coordinate their peace and security activities through what has been described as subsidiarity. The PSC Protocol, for example, asserts that the AU's partnership with RECs/RMs will be "determined by the comparative advantage of each and the prevailing circumstance".[30] The 2008 MoU reiterates AU-RECs/RMs coordination, harmonisation and the joint implementation of approaches to promoting peace, security and stability. It also identifies subsidiarity as a guiding principle of AU-RECs/RMs relations.[31]

However, although subsidiarity is directly and indirectly referenced as underpinning AU-RECs/RMs relations, the treaties and policy documents from the AU do not specifically define subsidiarity — nor do they clearly articulate how this principle would be implemented.[32] This lack of clarity represents some of the challenges highlighted in APSA assessments and priority areas identified in the APSA roadmaps on AU-RECs relations.

In 2010, the AU's Peace and Security Department commissioned an assessment study of the operationalisation of the APSA. The study found that for many RECs/RMs, the APSA at the time was neither comprehensive nor coherent in addressing security challenges on the continent.[33] The study did note some progress in coordination between the AU and RECs/RMs, particularly with regards to operationalising the African Standby Force and the Continental Early Warning System when compared to other APSA components (Panel of the Wise, Continental Early Warning Mechanism and the Peace Fund). However, it also observed that linkages between the PSC and similar organs within RECs were non-existent. On subsidiarity, the study noted that its practical application in the relationship between the AU and the RECs/RMs remains unclear — particularly regarding the role of the AU: whether as implementer or coordinator.[34]

A 2018 study on the implementation of the APSA from 2002 to 2018, this time commissioned by the AU PSC, similarly observed that weak AU-RECs/RMs coordination and collaboration hinders the effective application of the APSA.[35] The study also noted gaps in the understanding and implementation of the subsidiarity principle, which is central to AU-RECs security relations. It mentioned instances of competitiveness between the AU and RECs/RMs, which also undermine this principle. Channels of RECs input in PSC decision-making were described as limited, while meetings and liaison between the AU PSC and the RECs and their security organs were noted to be infrequent. Notably, this study offered what may be the APSA's understanding of subsidiarity, namely: "PSC efforts are only expected to complement those of the RECs/RMs, which enjoy comparative advantages by virtue of being near to and better informed about the real dynamics in the theatres of conflicts/crises".[36]

The findings of these assessments informed the two roadmaps that the AU developed to articulate the APSA and the role of RECs/RMs in African security with greater clarity. The 2011–2013 and 2016–2020 roadmaps aimed to clarify and strengthen collaboration and coordination between the AU and RECs/RMs.[37] The 2016–2020 roadmap, in particular, acknowledges previous challenges in the application of the subsidiarity principle in AU-RECs/RMs security relations. It specifically identifies prioritising AU-RECs/RMs dialogue to define subsidiarity and develop relevant guidelines.

Policy analysis of AU-RECs/RMs security relations have also been critical of the subsidiarity principle. A 2023 report acknowledges that other mechanisms for cooperation between AU and RECs/RMs do exist, and that subsidiarity obscures their existence.[38] The report also notes that while the RECs/RMs may have intimate knowledge of security threats in their regions, the AU still has a role to play, observing: "Subsidiarity should […] be approached not as a principle that prevents the engagement of the AU but one that operates along with the principles of the primacy of the AU and comparative advantages."

Another report on the AU PSC observes ambiguity in that the AU's legal framework "recognizes the primacy of both continental

and regional levels in peace and security" but does not clearly define subsidiarity.[39] It notes that the RECs have come to use subsidiarity to claim their primacy in responding to security challenges, but that this assertion often masks deeper problems. For example, many RECs lack coherent or unified approaches to conflict resolution. Internal divisions among member states — such as differing political positions or threat perceptions — undermine the RECs' ability to act collectively and effectively. One example is the direct involvement of Uganda and Sudan in the civil war in South Sudan. This affected IGAD's mediation efforts, as the member states supported different sides in the war. The report describes that a "lack of clarity around subsidiarity has induced inconsistency in the implementation of APSA" and suggests that subsidiarity should instead promote cooperation between the AU and RECs to ensure effective responses to Africa's security challenges.[40]

Similarly, another study also acknowledges the ambiguity of subsidiarity and the lack of a definition in the AU's legal documents. The authors further suggest that the term is political, noting that "the subsidiarity discourse can be seen as a strategy of the regional levels to protect themselves against a continental peace and security architecture, often seen as intrusive". Ambiguity around the term has meant that subsidiarity has been implemented in different ways through the use of the APSA, adversely affecting conflict resolution efforts. Supplementary work on AU-RECs coordination similarly critiques a lack of clarity in the AU-RECs MoU: [42]

> While the principle of subsidiarity favours the level of the regional economic communities in stipulating that the higher level — in this case the AU — should only become involved when the lower level cannot effectively resolve a particular issue. The modalities of interaction between the signatory parties foresee a 'primary role' for the AU in resolving conflict.

While progress has been made in developing and implementing the APSA framework to address security threats and resolve conflicts, greater clarity is needed on how AU-RECs/RMs relations function across its various pillars. Effective implementation requires a clear delineation of roles between the AU and RECs/RMs in conflict resolution, including a shared understanding of subsidiarity and setting up equivalent regional peace and security institutions that can work with the PSC. Such clarity and alignment of regional security mechanisms would enhance coordination and harmonisation between the AU and RECs, as envisioned in the APSA framework.[43]

Notwithstanding the clearer AU-RECs/RMs relations to enhance its effectiveness, the APSA mechanism for conflict resolution has continued to evolve and remains central in responding to diverse security challenges, including military coups, civil wars and other political crises. In fact, the responses of the AU PSC to the 2013–2018 civil war in South Sudan and recent coups in Gabon and Niger illustrate APSA in action, as the PSC has consistently urged coordination and collaboration between the AU and RECs such as ECCAS, ECOWAS and IGAD in political disputes and supporting transitions to civilian and democratic rule.[44] APSA has also guided in post-conflict interventions, as seen in The Gambia following the 2016 elections. As expressed in its first communiqué following the start of the crisis, the AU PSC commended the "joint efforts led by ECOWAS, with the support of the AU […] to facilitate the speedy and

peaceful transfer of power, in line with regional and continental instrument to which The Gambia is party".[45]

The 2016–2017 crisis in The Gambia illustrates two key aspects of implementing the APSA framework. First aspect was the lead role of ECOWAS, endorsed by the AU.[46] By endorsing ECOWAS's efforts, the PSC demonstrated an interpretation of subsidiarity in which the AU complements RECs/RMs that possess deeper regional understanding of conflicts and crises.[47] Throughout the crisis, from December 2016 to January 2017, the AU engaged and coordinated closely with ECOWAS towards the shared objective of supporting The Gambia to restore and consolidate its democracy.[48]

The second aspect was the AU's direct involvement following Jammeh's resignation, complementing ECOWAS's efforts through the AU-led Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG), which applied the AU's 2006 PCRD Policy and framework to advance constitutional and security sector reforms.[49] As noted, the understanding and implementation of subsidiarity — a key APSA principle — remains fluid. A common definition is still lacking, and when deployed, interpretations have varied among regional actors and the AU. In practice, the AU — through its responses to conflicts and crises —has acknowledged that regional actors play a lead role, endorsed and supported by the continental body.

The ECOWAS and AU responses to the 2016–2017 political crisis in The Gambia, and the ongoing reform efforts, illustrate the complexities of subsidiarity in practice. Beyond the technical dimensions, subsidiarity is inherently political. During the validation workshop in The Gambia, one expert observed that shaping the principle of subsidiarity and its application requires consideration of higher-level political dynamics and decisions, as these directly affect outcomes on the ground.[50] Such decision-making processes must be both contextualised and more effectively institutionalised. Moreover, determining whether the AU or a REC takes the lead depends not only on their comparative advantage or bureaucratic coordination, but also the political will of the host state towards the intervention.

One expert observed that shaping the principle of subsidiarity and its application requires consideration of higher-level political dynamics and decisions, as these directly affect outcomes on the ground.

Subsidiarity is not only a matter of institutional design but of how political conditions within member states shape the scope

for regional and continental engagement. In The Gambia, favourable domestic conditions — including unity among political parties and civil society, clear electoral results and regional consensus — meant that political will was not a barrier, enabling rapid and decisive intervention. In other contexts, however, a lack of political will can obstruct subsidiarity in practice, regardless of the technical arrangements in place. This raises the question of how the AU and ECOWAS, as political entities, navigate situations where host states resist external assistance. Another recurring issue concerns capacity and resources. This needs to be addressed at all three levels, namely the AU, REC and member state. Even when decisions and proposals originate from the AU or ECOWAS, their success ultimately depends on the Gambian state's capacity to assume ownership of the process. As several respondents noted, national structures in The Gambia were weakly established and poorly implemented,[51] creating space for external actors to intervene and resulting in a 'traffic jam' that hindered effective and sustained coordination between the AU, ECOWEAS and The Gambian state.

As a result, the case of The Gambia presents three propositions. First is that although there is a lack of clarity regarding the substantive and practical meaning of subsidiarity, this has not undermined the basic understanding that RECs/RMs take the lead in responding to conflicts and crisis. Second, this lack of clarity can weaken the quality and impact of coordination between the AU and RECs/RMs, as their respective roles and areas of complementarity remain insufficiently defined. Third, the absence of a shared understanding of subsidiarity also obscures the role of the affected state in receiving assistance from the AU and RECs.

While it is natural for governments to request support and articulate their expectations based on their assessed needs, unclear subsidiarity arrangements complicate how these expectations should be balanced and implemented between the AU and RECs. Current practice does not specify whether the host government should coordinate and lead the various forms of assistance, or whether this role should fall to the AU, the REC, or joint AU-REC efforts. This raises a central question from the state's perspective: to what extent should national ownership shape the division of labour between the AU and the RECs, and how far can government assert leadership without undermining established subsidiarity frameworks?

Historical background

The Senegambia pact

Before the 1994 coup, The Gambia was widely recognised for its domestic tranquillity, respect for human rights and political pluralism.[52] The country had about 140 personnel in its Field Force, which later became The Gambian Armed Forces (GAF). The force originated in 1958 as part of the Gambian Regiment within the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), preceding independence. By the early 1980s, the Field Force's had expanded to around 500 personnel.[53]

Given The Gambia's small size and generally peaceful relations with neighbouring Senegal, there was little concern over the absence of a substantial military. Reflecting this trust, the two states signed a defence pact in 1965 to provide mutual assistance in the event of an external threat. The agreement remained dormant throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, in 1981, President Dawda Jawara faced a violent coup attempt led by Kukoi Samba Sanyang, a

civilian and unsuccessful candidate in the 1977 parliamentary elections. Sanyang was known for espousing radical leftist views.[54, 55] The Field Force was unable to respond rapidly to the violent putsch, prompting Jawara to request Senegal's assistance under the mutual defence agreement. Senegal responded swiftly, sending in hundreds of soldiers by foot, air and sea to quell the coup and restore order.[56] Following the failed coup attempt, The Gambia and Senegal signed the Kaur Declaration, establishing the Senegambia Confederation. The Confederation aimed to integrate the two countries' security forces, create an economic and monetary union, and coordinate foreign policy. Its security provisions also required The Gambian state to establish its own military.[57]

The formation of the GAF

From its inception, the GAF comprised the Gambia National Army (GNA) and the Gambia National Gendarmerie (GNG). The GNA was formed by merging loyal members of the Field Force with new recruits, formally established through the Gambia Armed Forces Act of 1985.[58] GNA personnel were trained by the British Army.[59] The GNG, by contrast, was based on French military doctrine and delivered by Senegalese instructors.[60] This blend of British and French military doctrine and training would muddle roles and fostered tension between the army and gendarmerie.[61]

In 1981, another coup attempt occurred, and The Gambia transitioned from maintaining little more than a police force to having armed forces composed of an army, a gendarmerie and the police. The Senegambia Confederal Agreement also created the Confederal Army, distinct from the regular armed forces of both countries. The Confederal Army comprised two-thirds Senegalese soldiers and one-third Gambian troops, able to deploy anywhere within the confederation. Gambian soldiers serving in the Confederal Army received the same pay as their Senegalese counterparts, which was significantly higher than standard Gambian military salaries. This led to resentment over income disparities and privileges.[62] Allegations of favouritism and nepotism in recruitment further fuelled tensions.[63]

From its inception, favouritism within the GAF weakened the hierarchical structures that ordinarily underpin military discipline and undermined doctrinal training. Privileges were often granted based on personal connections rather than merit. Meanwhile, key security responsibilities, such as guarding the airport, the port and The Gambian president, were assigned to Senegalese troops. (The same issue persists today.) Some Gambians viewed this as an affront to their national pride.[64] Political opposition parties also criticised the confederation as economically disadvantageous to Gambian citizens and detrimental to national sovereignty.[65] Domestic discontent continued to escalate over these concerns. In August 1989, Senegal removed the 300 troops it had stationed in The Gambia without prior notice, following a dispute over the rotation of the confederal presidency.[66, 67] This forced Jawara to turn inward and rely on the GAF for both internal and external protection.

In August 1990, The Gambia deployed 105 troops to Liberia under the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).[68] This marked the Gambian military's first involvement in a peacekeeping mission. The troops returned on 13 April 1991. Two months later, some of the soldiers protested at State House in Banjul, primarily over claims that they had not received their deployment allowances.[69] This incident constituted the first mutiny in The Gambia. President Jawara met the soldiers promptly to

address their complaints,[70] and promised to pay the allowances owed.[71] Colonel Momodou Ndow Njie, the GNA's commanding officer, retired directly after this mutiny — signalling the seriousness with which the government regarded the incident.[72]

However, Jawara's agreement with the soldiers lost credibility following the government's announcement that Nigerian Army Training Assistance Group (NATAG) would train and equip the army. Senior Nigerian officer Colonel Abubakar Dada — later promoted to Brigadier General — later assumed command of the GNA. The move that proved controversial and widely viewed as misguided. Amid these developments, The Gambia experienced its second mutiny by another contingent of peacekeepers returning from Liberia. Their grievances mirrored those of the first group, exposing ongoing mistrust between the military and the government. Accusations of corruption gained traction among military ranks — particularly with junior officers. Discontent intensified over NATAG's presence, with Nigerian officers occupying senior roles and reportedly reducing the GAF to 'nonentities'.[73] Additionally, the government's 1992 decision to disband the gendarmerie and merge its members into the Police Force's Tactical Support Group was deeply unpopular. The police force received less funding and equipment than the army and was considered less prestigious.[74] Many within the GAF blamed Nigerian advisers who had recommended the move to The Gambian government.[75]

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The 1994 coup

The July 1994 coup unfolded amid deep frustration within the GAF toward President Jawara's government. Orchestrated by Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh and a section of The Gambia's armed forces, the coup ended what was then the longest uninterrupted multiparty democracy in Africa.[76] After exchanging fire with the Tactical Support Group (TSG) and overpowering the police, the coup leaders moved to Banjul and ousted Jawara and his government.[77]

Jammeh subsequently[78] established the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) and ruled as a military dictator for two years, suspending the constitution, banning political parties and imposing a curfew. Governance was carried out through military decrees — with at least 70 issued in the first two years following the coup.[79] To address discontent within the armed forces, Jammeh introduced measures such as the Gambia Army

Revolving Loan Scheme to provide low-interest loans to soldiers. Other initiatives included educational opportunities and the allocation of land for residential purposes.[80]

A new constitution was drafted by 1996, and Jammeh was elected president in December that year.[81] During his 22-year rule, he devoted significant attention and resources to the armed forces, supported by a range of new security donors seeking to professionalise the military. Assistance and training came from several bilateral partners, including the United States, Turkey and Libya.[82] This enabled the expansion of the security services, including the army, navy and the National Guard. According to one estimate, the GAF grew to nearly nine times its 1994 size.[83]

According to Dwyer, Jammeh "facilitated a culture of structural unpredictability which was operationalised by forming overlapping security organisations, appointing individuals allowing inconsistencies in the application of rules and punishments and fostering a constant state of uncertainty about job security".[84] For example, the Gambia Armed Forces Bill of 2008, established a National Guard that oversaw several specialised units. Driven by fears of being overthrown, Jammeh creating parallel structures and informal units, and blurred chains of command to deter disloyalty or plots within the ranks. This led to a highly fragmented force, marked by suspicion and in competition among its elements.[85]

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Jammeh's 22-year rule saw the GAF expanded significantly, largely to ensure regime protection. Yet little is known about how these structures infiltrated the wider society. Jammeh survived multiple coup attempts — notably in 1994, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2006 and 2014. Advancement within the GAF was based mainly on loyalty to the leader rather than professional competencies, merit or military achievements. Under Jammeh, democratic institutions existed, but were routinely manipulated to sustain his rule.

As several respondents noted, the appointment of the unsuitable individuals ahead of the 2016 crisis contributed to the political impasse. Accordingly, the GAF was not only challenged in needing to be professionalised, but also faced persistent political interference, patterns of exclusion and marginalisation within the armed forces and their leadership. This had implications for the management of transitions throughout various periods of The

Gambia's state-formation process, and the use of the appropriate tools to support the state.

Fostering continuous engagement and creating sustainable outcomes

The response to the crisis

Jammeh's unexpected defeat in the December 2016 elections can be traced to provisions in the 2015 Elections (Amendment) Act, which reflected his continued use of legal means to entrench his rule and suppress the opposition.[86] The 2015 election law significantly increased the fees required to register a political party and for individual candidates to run in the elections — widely seen as a move to constrain opposition.[87] At the same time, the law helped galvanise public demands for electoral reforms — including those led by United Democratic Party's Ebrima Solo Sandeng in April 2016.[88] Sandeng's death in police custody sparked further protests and arrests, leading to international condemnation of Jammeh's government.[89] Jammeh's state-sponsored repression added momentum to calls for a united political front to challenge his rule, culminating in the creation of a coalition of opposition parties (dubbed Coalition 2016) and the selection of UDP's Adama Barrow as its presidential candidate on 14 October 2016.[90]

Following the 1 December 2016 elections, The Gambia was plunged into a constitutional crisis when Jammeh rescinded his concession and challenged Barrow's electoral victory, despite the results being verified by domestic and international observers.[91] As political uncertainty deepened, Coalition 2016 condemned Jammeh for violating democratic norms and urged the public to "remain calm, lucid, vigilant and not retreat".[92] Gambian civil society and non-governmental organisations were quick to denounce Jammeh's actions and pressed him to accept the election outcome.[93]

The Gambia Bar Association (GBA) issued a particularly forceful statement, questioning the legitimacy of Jammeh's challenge, noting that the Supreme Court had not been properly constituted with required judges since May 2015.[94] Youth movements played a decisive role, both endorsing Barrow's electoral victory and mobilising pressure on Jammeh to step down.[95] Campaigns such as "*#GambiaHasDecided*" galvanised public sentiment at home and in the diaspora.[96] It spread across social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, and appeared on T-shirts and billboards across Banjul. The message — that Gambians had decided "for peace, democracy, rule of law unity and justice" was clear and unambiguous.[97]

These domestic actions were complemented by regional and international efforts urging Jammeh to transfer power to Barrow. Immediately after Jammeh's rejected the election results on 9 December, the UN Security Council — urged by Senegal, one of its non-permanent members — issued a statement commending Gambians for conducting a peaceful and transparent election, condemning Jammeh's rejection and urging him to respect the will of the people and comply with ECOWAS and AU norms and instruments on democracy and good governance.[98] The AU PSC, along with the AU and ECOWAS Commissions and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, also released statements calling on Jammeh to accept the outcome of the elections, ensure the safety of Barrow as president-elect, and facilitate a peaceful transfer of power.[99]

The next section examines the roles of the AU and ECOWAS; assesses coordination between

the two entities and other actors on the ground; and considers both the positive outcomes and challenges of their engagement. Finally, it also evaluates the impact and sustainability of AU and ECOWAS support.

The roles and support of the AU and ECOWAS

The African Union Technical Support Team to the Gambia

The AU exercised its support through two main approaches. Firstly, soon after the elections, the AU — alongside ECOWAS and the UN — engaged in mediation efforts[100] to resolve the political impasse triggered by Jammeh's rejection of the election results. During this process, the AU and UN allowed ECOWAS to lead the negotiation efforts, with ECOWAS Chairperson Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf heading the delegation. ECOWAS also led public communications on the developments and decisions. Meanwhile, the AU and UN played a more discrete role — endorsing ECOWAS´ decisions, including its deployment of a military force to ensure Jammeh's departure and a peaceful transition.[101]

Second, in 2018, the AU deployed the AU Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG) to assist national authorities with stabilisation efforts, guided by the 2006 AU PCRD Policy.[102] The mission complemented ECOWAS efforts by applying three of the then PCRD policy pillars, namely support to the fields of security, human rights and transitional justice, and the rule of law. The AUTSTG mandate was to provide technical assistance on five areas: establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; security sector reform (SSR); socio-economic growth; repeal of repressive laws from the former regime; and foreign policy changes of the state.[103]

The AUTSTG was authorised to deploy 11 staff,[104] however only 10 were ultimately deployed. Six military officers (seconded by Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Ghana, Uganda and Sierra Leone) were embedded at the Ministries of Interior and Defence, the GAF and the Office of National Security (ONS) to support the SSR processes. Four civilian experts were seconded by Uganda and Ghana to support rule of law, and assisted the reform process to replace the 1997 constitution. Three of these were rights law experts, tasked with providing guidance in establishing the National Human Rights Commission and working with the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC).[105, 106]

Support also included reviewing options for downsizing or "rightsizing" the army, ammunition management, and assisting the development of national security and defence strategies (the NSP, NSS and SSR strategies).[107] The AUTSTG contributed to drafting policy documents by incorporating AU norms into national policies or strategies. Although a dedicated transitional justice expert was not ultimately deployed, the civilian experts present assisted in developing the National Transitional Justice Policy, commenting on early drafts and ensuring alignment with AU norms.

While the AUTSTG offered a promising framework, the AU support to The Gambia faced two challenges. First, with multiple actors providing different forms of assistance, The Gambia needed an institution such as the AU to assume an oversight and coordination role to help the government plan for and use support packages effectively and sustainably. In other words, the AU did not fully exercise its leadership potential to ensure that partner priorities and support were aligned, sequenced and implemented coherently.

Second, AU support was not sufficiently visible across government institutions or even at the community level. Several respondents noted limited awareness of the AU presence and its activities.[108] As one senior official remarked: "I was not even aware of the existence of the AUTSTG."[109] One explanation may be that the AUTSTG team of experts was too small in terms of numbers and reach to match the mission scope, forcing it to be selective rather than comprehensive in implementing its mandate. The predominance of military experts meant that efforts were concentrated on SSR, leaving limited attention to other key areas, such as social-economic recovery: a gap that validation workshop participants highlighted as remaining unaddressed by the AU.[110] This suggests the AU's presence was not sufficiently felt in other critical areas covered by the 2006 PCRD policy.

While this may point to a possible shortfall in the number and scope of staff, it could also point to shortcomings in the original technical needs analysis (TNA). Since the AU deployed resources based on the TNA's recommendations, important questions arise. Was the assessment accurate? Did the assessment adapt as circumstances evolved on the ground? Might outcomes have been different had the TNA articulated a different set of recommendations? While the AU's response appeared to be clear, ambitious and promising — with some praising the mission as a "true pragmatic initiative"[111] — others assessed its presence and impact as limited. ECOWAS was seen to be bearing the bulk of the work, which can also be interpreted as a practical example of how subsidiarity in action. However, officials from the ONS, the judiciary and transitional justice sectors highlighted that AU support was, in fact, critical in developing the policies and guiding documents (such as the Transitional Justice Policy) that remain in use.

The challenge, which respondents highlighted at the validation workshop, was that the AU lacked an overall strategic communication plan to demonstrate its objectives, activities and impact.

By contrast, ECOWAS played a much more visible — and arguably more impactful — role in The Gambia following the 2016 elections. Its initial approach centred on mediation efforts and signalled willingness to use force to compel Jammeh to step down. Once Jammeh refused to leave office, ECOWAS' role rapidly evolved into a military and stabilisation intervention. In January 2017, ECOWAS authorised and deployed its Military Stabilisation Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG)— codenamed "Operation Restoring Democracy" — to support the transition and to maintain political stability. Alongside this military deployment, ECOWAS also engaged in political and programmatic support, including mediation and SSR support. Although these aspects all fell under the ECOWAS umbrella, they were not always coherently aligned in their engagement with the state in The Gambia.

The military stabilisation mission

The ECOMIG mission was composed of 7,000 troops (later reduced to 4,000[112] and, at the time of writing, at approximately 1,000 troop capacity[113]) from Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana — primarily tasked with ensuring the safety of the president-elect, political authorities and The Gambian population.

The mission was tasked with supporting capacity-building activities to professionalise the GAF and strengthen the broader security sector. This included training and assisting the GAF and police in both external defence and internal security functions.[114] In addition to its military and operational trainings, ECOWAS

organised workshops to disseminate its policy frameworks around SSR and Governance (SSRG) through the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations (EPSAO) project, targeting cross-sectoral officials from government, security institutions and civil society.[115]

However, some respondents noted persistent confusion over core SSR concepts, including terms such as "rightsizing" and "downsizing", which were often interpreted narrowly as dismissing personnel.[116] As a result, the broader goals of SSR — including transforming the security apparatus into a professional, accountable, and rights-respecting institution — were also misunderstood. Key elements such as developing a new National Security Policy (NSP), strengthening institutional capacity, establishing clear civilian oversight, addressing post-authoritarian legacies and promoting inclusivity were also neglected. This delayed and limited progress and reforms.

Participants highlighted the lack of a shared, country-wide understanding of SSR and the absence of a clear and inclusive process.[117] These gaps reflect the early challenges of 2017, when reforms began without sufficient conceptual grounding or coordinated national planning. A more comprehensive approach to national security — incorporating SSR, judicial and economic reforms, human rights, and development — could have helped to address structural challenges through a whole-of-government effort, involving society as a whole and prioritising people-centred approaches.[118] The lack of understanding and knowledge of concepts such as SSR was not limited to local actors in country, but shared by those providing technical expertise and support. This led to inconsistencies in implementation.[119]

ECOMIG forces were also mandated to conduct joint patrols with the GAF, provide close protection to the president, as well as secure strategic sites such as Yundum airport and border areas with Senegal.[120] The joint patrols were intended to reinforce GAF neutrality in the post-Jammeh period, build trust between forces and enhance interoperability.[121] However, according to one respondent, ECOMIG patrols also faced constraints. The joint patrols remained under-resourced and sometimes failed to reach an optimal operational level. In some cases, border deployments — especially with Senegalese forces — triggered tensions. This highlighted how regional security operations can blur the line between collective intervention and national interests.

Politically, ECOWAS supported the establishment and operationalisation of the TRRC, including the creation of the Joint Technical Committee to draft the required legislation and define the budget for what would become a hybrid and internationalised court to prosecute crimes committed during Jammeh's rule.[122] However, a senior official noted challenges related to the limited support provided by the ECOWAS Commission to its Permanent Mission in The Gambia. Some respondents indicated that the Mission lacked a security sector advisor and other technical staff to support national authorities, and that it did not have strategic programmatic staff. This constrained its ability to engage effectively with the Gambian government, and limited communication and collaboration — as much of the work was directed from the Commission headquarters in Abuja.

Interviews with Gambian officials indicated that ECOWAS enjoys a higher profile and stronger reputation than the AU, as ECOMIG efforts

were felt and seen. However, the mission's prolonged presence has become increasingly controversial.[123] While many respondents agreed that ECOMIG's role and support was essential at the outset, many now question the justification for its continued deployment, perceiving it as driven more by political considerations to protect the leadership of the country.[124]

Coordination between the AU and ECOWAS

The Gambian case offers a clear example of coordinated action between the AU, ECOWAS and the UN. Their swift and aligned response to the post-elections' political crisis demonstrated effective application of subsidiarity, complementarity and comparative advantage, enabling ECOWAS to play the primary mediation role in resolving the political impasse. Although the AU and ECOWAS aligned in condemning Jammeh´s actions, ECOWAS took the lead role in convincing Jammeh to leave — later reenforced by the ECOMIG mission. The AU complemented these efforts with technical assistance based on its PCRD Policy.

In May 2017, the AU, ECOWAS, the EU and UN conducted joint assessment mission to tack stock of the situation and identify priority areas for supporting the new government.[125] The assessment highlighted urgent needs to depoliticise and to right-size the security sector, demilitarise the police, advance reconciliation and support economic recovery. While the mission stated its intention to coordinate the efforts of the four actors in these priority actions, the extent of their collaboration remains unclear. For example, the AU conducted a separate needs assessment in parallel, which informed the deployment of the AUTSTG. Later that year, a 27-member technical working group with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted another assessment focused on the security sector, overlapping with the AU's efforts.[126]

The assessment was divided into two categories: situational and institutional. The latter noted an absence of overarching policies and standard operating procedures in how institutions were managed and administered; an absence of a policy framework to address interoperability within the security sector; and the weakness or absence of fully functioning oversight from the Ministries of Defence and Interior, the National Assembly and civil society. The findings emphasised the need to update and develop legal and institutional frameworks that strengthen coordination and interoperability among security actors.[127]

Following these developments, the SSR Steering Committee within the Gambian ONS established the International Advisory Group (IAG), which housed experts from ECOWAS, AUTSTG, UNDP, the EU, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) and France.[128] The platform facilitated a degree of cooperation and joint technical engagement with the AU and ECOWAS — as the two entities working most closely with the ONS[129] — leveraging their respective strengths to support the SSR process. This collaboration contributed to a more unified approach to transitional justice and SSR. It culminated in the development of policy documents and strategies such as the NSP and the National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2019, and joint efforts to establish and operationalise the TRRC[130] However, while the AU and ECOWAs worked in tandem with the ONS, the IAG's structure suggests that the Gambian Steering Committee led and coordinated the group's work, with AU and ECOWAS advisors providing support when requested.[131] As a result, the process was thus

mostly shaped by the ONS. This suggests that the relationship or rapprochement of the AU and ECOWAS had been driven largely by government initiative, rather than an institutionalised AU-REC collaboration as outlined in the various policy documents described in this report.

The output of the IAG also highlights the difficulty of integrating multiple international, regional and national actors in a single advisory mechanism. The relative inaction of the body raises important questions about why the AU and ECOWAS did not provide a holistic and integrated response. Our analysis aligns with Ambassador Momodou Badjie's observations that an overabundance of advisors with differing backgrounds and schools of thought resulted in avoidable friction and confusion.[132] One key gap in the assessments — and therefore in the NSP and NSS — was the absence of a clear framework for institutional reform and collaboration between the AU, ECOWAS and The Gambia. The AU and ECOWAS could have assisted the Steering Committee in developing such a provision to clarify roles and strengthen collaboration.

One key gap in the assessments — and therefore in the NSP and NSS — was the absence of a clear framework for institutional reform and collaboration between the AU, ECOWAS and The Gambia.

According to a senior diplomat, coordination between the AU and ECOWAS was strong during the initial phase of the crisis response (2016 onwards). However, coordination declined over time, with both entities operating in silos. Eventually, both coordination and interaction between the two entities became minimal.[133] Although respondents noted that there was "maximum collaboration" at the outset of the impasse,[134] cooperation between the AU and ECOWAS declined during the transitional years (2019 onwards). The two entities ended up addressing similar issues and often engaging with the same interlocutors, yet did not manage to foster improved communication and coordination. Respondents noted competing priorities and overlapping mandates, underscoring the lack of more a structured coordination mechanism.[135] A joint situation room, for example, could have reduced duplication, lowered costs and ensured more consistent joint action.[136]

For example, the missions' mandates addressed similar priority areas. The AUTSTG focused on long-term governance and institutional reforms, while ECOMIG prioritised immediate security and stabilisation. Both the AU and ECOWAS mandates aimed to support SSR and transitional justice. The AUTSTG worked with the Gambian government on long-term institutional

changes — such as policy development, legal framework adjustments and capacity-building. Meanwhile, ECOMIG concentrated on stabilisation, training and restructuring within the GAF and police. These differing but closely related areas of focus sometimes resulted in parallel efforts. The AU's broader SSR vision was not always fully integrated with ECOMIG´s operational activities. The local government's slow implementation of AUTSTG-recommended reforms caused frustrations within both missions. While the AU pushed for comprehensive reforms, ECOMIG had to deal with on-the-ground security issues. Occasionally this resulted in inconsistent strategies being applied.

Respondents also pointed a clear "disconnect between the charters and protocols of the AU and ECOWAS".[137] For example, the AU has a Transitional Justice Policy, whereas ECOWAS does not —despite having supported transitional justice initiatives in the past.[138]

During the validation workshop, experts highlighted coordination challenges between the AU, ECOWAS and the Gambian state. They noted that the ONS lacked the authority to direct or mandate external partners — including the AU, ECOWAS, UN and the EU — regarding implementation strategies and approaches.[139] Some attributed this to the absence of a strong national coordinating structure capable of aligning AU and EOWAS efforts with those of the state.[140] Others argued that while structures existed, they were weak, under-resourced and lacked the capacity required to coordinate this triangular relationship between the AU, ECOWAS and the state.[141]

The dynamic reveals coordination challenges not only among supporting entities, but also within the Gambian government. Some respondents argued that the government lacked the capacity — or at times, the responsiveness — to adapt to the support provided. This was attributed to a misunderstanding of its relationship with ECOWAS, and a failure to invest adequately in ECOWAS projects.[142] While the government requested assistance, it did not always fully understand what type of level of support it needed, limiting its ability to utilise the assistance when delivered. There was no shared strategic vision or detailed roadmap outlining needs, legal frameworks, actors, responsibilities and areas of support.[143]

As one respondent noted, the AU and ECOWAS — which were embedded in government structures — could arguably have been more assertive in presenting support options based on their needs assessments.[144] Conversely, others emphasised that it is ultimately the government's responsibility to take the initiative in identifying their needs and seeking targeted support.[145] While the government repeatedly emphasised the importance of advancing SSR, this often translated into rhetoric more than decisive action. For example, the 2017 technical working group joint encountered multiple challenges, including a lack of office space and remuneration, weak cooperation from national institutions, and irregular participation by government representatives, signalling limited capacity or political will.[146] In hindsight, the MoU should have been more explicit on roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

Traffic jam in The Gambia

Weak coordination from the state of The Gambia, combined with a proliferation of actors and partnerships with differing motivations — some aligned with national interests, others to personal or external agendas — contributed to what respondents described as a "traffic jam". Within ECOMIG alone, contingents from Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria brought varied

political and strategic priorities. Senegal's involvement was shaped by geographic and historical ties. Its presence in the southern border region of The Gambia (Foni), where it guards natural resources in timber trade, could reflect an interest in Gambian resources.[147] Senegal also has a security incentive for having troops in The Gambia given the conflict in the south with the Movement Force de Casamance (MFDC), believed to have been supported by Jammeh. Ghana and Nigeria, by contrast, had fewer material interests in the small country.[148] However, both benefitted from strengthening their diplomatic and military ties within ECOWAS. While ECOMIG's overall impact has been positive, fragmented efforts arose due to the various states' differing national priorities.[149]

The interplay between Senegal's focus on border security; Ghana's emphasis on regional stability and Nigeria's objective of maintaining leadership and influence created operational frictions, particularly around command structures, deployment locations and rules of engagement. For example, reports highlighted instances where Senegalese forces acted independently of central command, generating tensions over mandate interpretation and host-state sovereignty.[150] The dynamics underscore the need for strong political and operational coordination to ensure unified command and strategic coherence in regional interventions. In addition to ECOMIG contingents, international partners developed projects based on independently identified gaps, often driven by their own interests rather than the priorities of the Gambian government.

Although the AU — and especially ECOWAS — were the leading partners mandated to support the SSR process, the government continued to rely on international support and donors for security assistance and capacity-building. This may have stemmed from a combination of Western geopolitical and strategic interests in ensuring stability in the region, and international actors' ability to offer specialised expertise or resources in areas beyond AU or ECOWAS mandates or capacities. At the time of writing, the government holds bilateral agreements with countries such as the UK, the US (which has also deployed security advisors), France, Germany, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and, of course, Senegal. The last four host VIP training programmes for Gambian presidential security.[151] In 2019, France's National Police trained the Gambian Police Force (GPF) on public order, while the US Institute of Security Governance conducted training on civil-military relations.[152] These efforts overlapped with those of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and DCAF. The GIZ capacity-building plan for The Gambia included strengthening human resource management within the GPF; establishing a police complaint mechanism; and working with the Ministry of Interior to support police stations and immigration control. It has also supported the ECOWAS Stabilisation Fund, with The Gambia as a pilot country through refurbishing police stations.[153] DCAF supported reforms to the State Intelligence Services (SIS).[154]

The Final Evaluation of the UNDP Security Sector Reform Project noted that a total of 12 foreign security advisors were deployed to the ONS by UNDP and another six to the Ministry of Defence, the GAF and ONS by the AU.[155] This contributed to weak coordination and a duplication of efforts among advisors, development partners and donors themselves. Another outcome was that equipment donations sometimes failed to match operational needs, and training programmes were delivered without regard to the GAF's capacity to implement lessons learned.[156] The proliferation of actors

not only complicated coordination among support entities, but also overwhelmed government institutions, limiting their ability to absorb the support provided and translate it into effective implementation.[157] Ultimately this lack of coherence —stemming from both from external dynamics and domestic choices — undermined the sustainability of efforts on the ground.

Managing expectations

Interventions should be targeted, time-bound and have a clear exit strategy. In The Gambia, however, several factors hindered the effectiveness and sustainability of such interventions. There have been significant achievements — including the restoration of democracy and stability, the establishment of the TRRC and the National Human Rights Commission, and the adoption of the NSP. However, structural challenges between the AU, ECOWAS and the host government, as well as the local context and a difficult political situation, eroded confidence in the reform process. The sustainability of the partnership and efforts between the AU, ECOWAS and the Gambian government have also been undermined as a result.

There have been significant achievements — including the restoration of democracy and stability, the establishment of the TRRC and the National Human Rights Commission, and the adoption of the NSP.

The stalling of key reforms illustrates this reality.[158, 159] The constitutional review process collapsed in 2020 when the National Assembly rejected the draft constitution, which would have replaced the 1997 framework and introduced a two-term presidential limit. Concerns also persist over commitment to TRRC implementation given President Barrow's alignment with the APRC, Jammeh's political party. Meanwhile, socio-economic pressures are mounting: the number of university graduates has increased, unemployment is very high, crime rates are rising, and drug and alcohol abuse are major concerns.[160] Localised conflict, especially in the Foni and Casamance areas (Jammeh strongholds), has led to clashes with ECOMIG forces. Communal tensions are also growing, creating division across the country.[161] The AU and ECOWAS have struggled to meaningfully address these grievances, contributing to an escalation of tensions that cannot be resolved through national security interventions alone.

Reflections on the AUTSTG approach

The AUTSTG arrive with a promising mandate centred on fostering national ownership by embedding itself in relevant government institutions. However, what seemed like a pragmatic solution did not actually yield the desired outcomes. Even

though the mandate was targeted and context-specific, it concentrated narrowly on providing support in three specific areas aligned to the expertise of the team of experts deployed, rather than pursuing the comprehensive or cross-cutting initiatives outlined in the AU's 2006 PCRD policy. Engagement with the wider Gambian population was limited. Instead, it remained largely elite focused — concentrated within technocratic circles, ministries and formal institutions.

Notably, the gender pillar of the PCRD Policy was not meaningfully implemented. The marginalisation of women in politics and governance remained prominent. Yet some workshop participants highlighted that the AU made no deliberate efforts to integrate gender considerations or address sexual and gender-based violence. Rising community tensions and divisions suggest a missed opportunity for the AUTSTG to prioritise conflict prevention and community-based peacebuilding.

The limited size and make-up of the mission further constrained its effectiveness. Only 10 experts were deployed, six of whom were military personnel. This resulted in a heavy emphasis on security. As a respondent observed: "Constitutional reforms should have always been the priority, and I have not seen any real involvement of the AU or ECOWAS in this area."[162] While ECOWAS did engage in some constitutional issues, little is known about how the two institutions coordinated in this domain.

Overall, the AUTSTG struggled both with visibility and with meeting the PCRD principle of being "people-centred and (…) multi-dimensional in a way that it goes beyond the traditional notion of state security."[163] An assessment across PCRD pillars reveals that while AU-ECOWAS coordination supported political transition and elite-level stability, it fell short in delivering on other critical components of the PCRD agenda — including socio-economic recovery, justice, reconciliation and gender. The AU's normative frameworks were present in discourse, but not systematically translated into joint planning, programming or implementation. Coordination was functional in moments of crisis but remained institutionally shallow — with ECOWAS carrying the bulk of the operational weight and the AU's contribution often being symbolic or delayed.

Perhaps one reason for this perception is the AUTSTG's limited visibility during its deployment. Public awareness of the AU's presence and its work was low. While respondents knew of the AU experts and their technical contributions, many were unaware that the AU had deployed a technical mission at all — arguing that both the AU and the government could have communicated more strategically across society.[164] Respondents highlighted that the AUTSTG was a small, technical mission, embedded within specific ministries and agencies. A military force like ECOMIG, on the other hand, maintained a physically presence and was visible to the general public in the streets. While the AUTSTG's contributions were less publicly visible, stakeholders stressed that they were nonetheless meaningful in areas like human rights, the judiciary and national security.

Respondents from the GAF expressed frustration, suggesting that the AUTSTG "… did not bring any innovative expertise" and lacked knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics and the GAF specifically. "What would have met our expectation, and what would have helped in sustaining the efforts was the AU having a team that was more capacitated," one noted.[165] Funding constraints further limited the mission's capacity to conduct its planned activities.[166]

Although the AUTSTG received voluntary support from external partners such as the EU, UN and Germany, this funding also had limits and timelines. When the funding expired, the mission — which lacked a clear exit plan or strategy — withdrew The Gambia unexpectedly with no formal closure process. One respondent even noted "the laptop you see before me, I got from the AUTSTG".[167] Its abrupt departure likely reinforced perceptions that the mission's contributions were incomplete or insignificant.[168]

Resource and capacity limitations meant the AUTSTG had to prioritise policy advice and drafting over hands-on engagement and capacity-building with communities, CSOs and NGOs.[169] Given the complex dynamics in The Gambia, respondents felt the intervention required highly specialised technical competence.

A notable achievement was the AUTSTG support in drafting and developing the NSP. However, respondents noted that the mission did not sufficiently invest in building institutional capacity to take the policy forward to sustain long-term impact. Many efforts were also challenged by the lack of coordination and communication among actors. As one member of the National Early Warning System observed, the AU and ECOWAS have the expertise that The Gambia needs, but "collaboration is not there".[170] Government representatives also noted that national institutions were not yet prepared to take full ownership and needed more sustained assistance given the scale or reforms required limited domestic capacity.[171] Others argue that optics and rhetoric seemed to outweigh substantive action, pointing to a deficit of political will and responsiveness.[172]

ECOMIG was initially given a six-month mandate to help create a secure environment for the effective enforcement of the rule of law and stability. However, repeated extensions of its mandate raise questions domestically about its role and extended presence.[173] Many observers argue that official requests for continued ECOMIG deployment are linked to President Barrow's fear of losing political power.[174] This has become a controversial matter, as it is seen to have stalled much-needed reforms. The residual components of ECOMIG have also been slow to evolve into more technical roles to assist in SSR.[175] Its continued presence is further noted to have demoralised the GAF and frustrated ordinary Gambians,[176] many of whom receive little if any information about the mission's continued necessity.[177]

Perceptions of ECOMIG vary, Some view it as an 'occupying force' that works primarily to protect the president. Others see its posture as consistent with an "assurance mandate" — providing security guarantees, supporting leadership and strengthening institutions.[178] This mandate is reflected in capacity-building initiatives, joint patrols and the mission's presence across key locations in the Greater Banjul Area, Yundum airport, the Foni Area near Casamance (by Senegalese contingents) and the northern regions (by Ghanaian contingents).[179]

While ECOMIG also conducts trainings to build GAF capacity, respondents noted that these efforts have been intermittent and insufficiently institutionalised. In practice, ECOMIG often undertakes key security functions directly rather than enabling the GAF to assume them. For instance, they conduct joint patrols with the GAF, instead of providing the capacity building that would allow the GAF to carry out the patrolling on their own.[180] Several respondents observed that the GAF has the skills and resources to conduct nationwide

patrols, but limited investment in transitioning responsibilities has constrained national ownership, which directly affects prospects for sustainable gains. One respondent stated: "If you want sustainability, you do not need continuous foreign military patrolling, you need local sustainable solutions," — further suggesting that part of SSR should involve transitioning ECOMIG toward an 'ECOPOLICE' model.[181] This would be consistent with the Formed Police Unit (FPU) approach, where well-trained, well-equipped units are able to act cohesively to perform functions that individual officers could not address.

In principle, the transition process was designed as a partnership between the three main entities, namely the AU, ECOWAS and The Gambian government. In practice, structural weaknesses, compounded by external influences, limited the partnership's ability to achieve its long-term objectives. The following recommendations emerge from this analysis.

Conclusion

The intervention in The Gambia succeeded in averting immediate crisis and restoring constitutional order. Yet it also exposed enduring gaps in AU–ECOWAS coordination, ambiguities around subsidiarity, and insufficient investment in sustainable, nationally owned reforms. The political transition in 2016, which brought President Adama Barrow to power, was widely perceived as a chance to reset the country's democratic trajectory. Although early AU and ECOWAS engagement delivered important initial gains, sustaining these achievements over time proved difficult, and efforts in coordination and engagement have been lost. A surge of support from the international community, while critical, overwhelmed a state with limited capacity to coordinate assistance. This contributed to a 'traffic jam' of institutional congestion and reform stagnation. Consequently, the AU-ECOWAS engagement in The Gambia can be described both as a model of decisive regional action — and a missed opportunity for deeper institutional learning.

During the restoration of constitutional order, ECOWAS' strong diplomatic stance, backed by a credible military threat through ECOMIG, ensured Yahya Jammeh's departure without prolonged conflict or further crisis. The intervention was a clear demonstration of an intervention led by an African institution, designed to stabilise the country using force. Acting outside a UN Security Council resolution, the response embodied the principle of "African solutions to African problems". It also illustrated what robust regional deterrence can look like and what when political will, regional consensus and AU PSC support converge.

Whether this initial success was facilitated by contextual factors — such as The Gambia's small territorial size, the proximity of neighbouring states and their willingness to engage — remains difficult to determine. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: internal dynamics and societal readiness were key to the success of the intervention; an important consideration for any bloc implementing such a response. Civic mobilisation, CSO activism, political will and community resolve helped create the enabling conditions for ECOWAS and the AU to intervene.

While it was clear from participants' responses that the AU's and ECOWAS' engagement was decisive, there was considerable ambiguity over sustained efforts linked to subsidiarity.

While collaboration was effective initially, subsequent ambiguity over roles led to duplication, fragmentation, and diminished

legitimacy. While communication and coordination between the AU and ECOWAS were clear at the outset, gaps emerged over time — obscuring the division of roles, creating duplication, reducing efficiency and raising concerns about legitimacy. Weak formal mechanisms for in-country coordination compounded these issues. Neither the AU's technical engagement nor ECOWAS' military-political response evolved into a coherent, integrated approach. Limited national ownership further undermined reform processes. Without strong Gambian buy-in, efforts were largely externally crafted, driven and, in some cases, dictated.

The sustainability of the intervention remains central to assessing whether The Gambia could serve as a future model of AU-REC engagement. Politically, constitutional and transitional justice reform processes stalled or were diluted, undermining the long-term consolidation of democracy. The indefinite extension of ECOMIG, although initially justified, further eroded national ownership while fostering perceptions of dependency. Socially, AUTSTG efforts did not extend deeply into communities, focusing instead on elite-level institutions. Grievances in regions such as Foni and Casamance persisted, fuelling mistrust and perceptions of ECOMIG as an "occupying force". Economically, reliance on external funding — coupled with the Gambian state's limited absorption capacity — resulted in duplicated and fragmented donor-driven projects, leaving reforms vulnerable to attrition once external support declined. These gaps challenge the social legitimacy of the intervention and directly affect the sustainability of its efforts and its outcomes.

As a result, both the AU and ECOWAS missed opportunities to support The Gambia's transformation into a durable example of democratic consolidation, enabled by African-led stabilisation efforts. ECOWAS succeeded in resolving the immediate crisis, but neither long-term democratic consolidation nor security sector reform were adequately embedded — and significant challenges persist. The case of The Gambia therefore highlights the challenges of translating AU-REC coordination into durable solutions.

Nevertheless, the case offers valuable lessons for future AU-REC engagement. It underscores the need for clear subsidiarity frameworks, sustained joint planning and communication, early investment in national ownership and public engagement, and a holistic approach to peace and security that prioritises community-level resilience alongside elite-level stability. The Gambian experience demonstrates that decisive regional intervention can be effective — but durable peace requires coordinated, inclusive, and sustained follow-through.

Additional reading

Birchinger, S., Jaw, S. M., & Witt, A. (2025). Neighbours as Peacekeepers: Senegal and the Ambivalence of Proximity in African Regional Interventions. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2025.2533720.

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