

WEST AFRICA AS AN AREA OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

ÁFRICA OCCIDENTAL COMO ÁREA PARA LOS DESAFÍOS DE LA SEGURIDAD INTERNACIONAL

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ABSTRACT

The transformations that have taken place since the end of the Cold War on the security field have triggered new risks and threats which must be understood from a multidimensional perspective. Thus, in a globalized and interconnected world, the interest for security threats and crisis management has increased considerably.

In that sense, this paper aims to present the West African region as a key strategic actor in today's international community. On the one hand, it has gained importance in the last years due to its economic, commercial, and demographic potential. On the other hand, it encompasses a series of threats to security, which have a destabilization power throughout the region, but also an international range, such as terrorist and rebel group acts, illicit trafficking routes to Europe or internal convulsions in those weak African states, which affect not only African countries but also international security. The increasing tensions in this area stress the fact that preventive measures tackling the root causes of violence are not effective enough.

Keywords: human security, international security, state fragility, transnational threats, West Africa.

RESUMEN

Las transformaciones que han tenido lugar en el campo de la seguridad desde el final de la Guerra Fría han desencadenado una serie de nuevos riesgos y amenazas que deben contemplarse desde una perspectiva multidimensional. En un mundo globalizado e interconectado, el interés por la gestión de las amenazas a la seguridad y la gestión de crisis ha aumentado notablemente.

Teniendo este contexto como marco, en el siguiente artículo se presenta la región de África occidental como un actor estratégico clave para la comunidad internacional. Por

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un lado, tiene un potencial demográfico, económico y comercial muy importante. Por otro lado, alberga una serie de retos y amenazas para la seguridad con un poder desestabilizador a lo largo de la región, pero también con un impacto internacional, reflejado en aspectos como las actividades terroristas y de grupos rebeldes, las rutas de tráfico ilícitos que desembocan en Europa o las convulsiones internas en países africanos frágiles que afectan de forma directa a los países europeos. Las tensiones crecientes en esta región demuestran que las medidas preventivas que se han tomado para abordar las causas estructurales de los problemas de la zona no han sido lo suficientemente efectivas.

Palabras clave: seguridad humana, seguridad internacional, fragilidad estatal, amenazas transnacionales, África occidental.

INTRODUCTION

The transformations that have taken place since the end of the Cold War has set up a new approach in the security field (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998). These changes have triggered new risks and threats that must be understood from a multidimensional perspective. In this context, there is a new nature of conflicts where threats to security are not only of military nature but also of a wider and dynamic nature.

A paradigm of security has been established where threats cross borders and they are not analyzed from the traditional notion of security; they are seen from a transnational perspective. Considering these new threats are interconnected, as a result of a globalized world, they cannot be tackled in an isolated way; they need to be managed through a comprehensive approach.

Thus, in a globalized and interconnected world, the interest for those transnational security threats and crisis management has increased considerably. There has been a change in the international community's interest in interstate conflict, where some threats are now considered as international interest. Aspects that were seen some decades ago as internal issues are nowadays of international concern, following normative and conceptual changes. Take for instance terrorist and rebel group acts, illicit trafficking routes, or migratory movements, but also internal convulsions in some states, underdevelopment or natural disasters, which are contemplated as global issues.

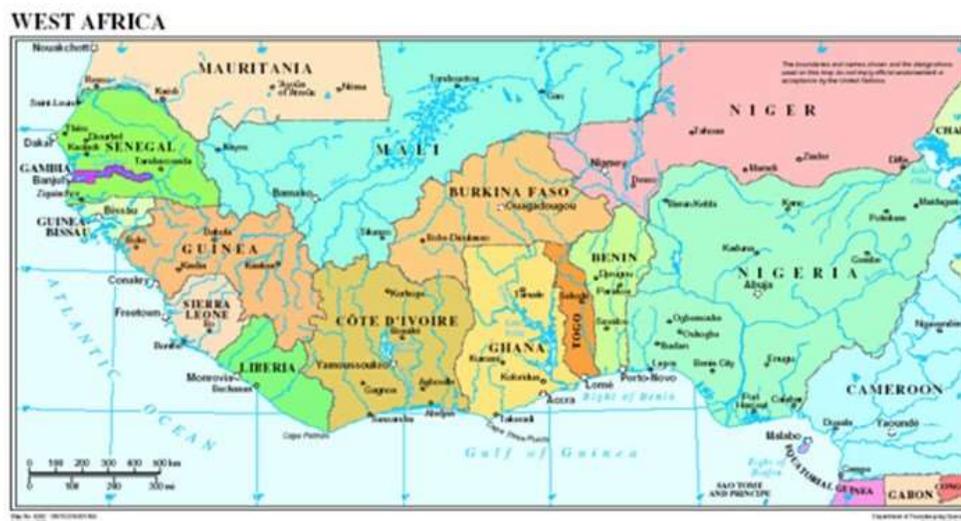
The international community considers these challenges a threat to global peace and security, as demonstrate by the fact that some international organizations (like the United Nations–UN, the European Union, the World Bank or the OECD) have

developed, during the last two decades, an increased number of policies and measures dedicated to conflict prevention, management and resolution.

The UN has had to transform its policies to face international security and peace goals, where preventive measures have gained an important place for the last two decades (Zyck and Muggah, 2012). These policies offer important advantages, as they are “less resource-intensive crisis management” than reaction measures (International Peace Institute, 2011, p.1). Prevention can avoid an escalation towards violence and can help to control the spread of security threats.

One of the most alarming areas of the recent years in the security field is the West African region, which is composed of the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo⁷. This region has caught the attention of the international community due to the huge challenges concerning state fragility and violence it faces (also occurring in most of the other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa).

West African region map.



Source: United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA).

The region encompasses a series of threats and challenges to security, which must be seen in a wide way. The stress factors present in the area are connected, which increase regional vulnerability to violence. This sort of threats growing in the region has reached a transnational scope. For this reason, the international community's agenda has had to

⁷ These are the fifteen countries which integrated the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

adapt to these threats, developing mechanisms and measures working on managing cross-border challenges.

Also, West Africa is positioned as an area of major interest due to its economic, commercial and demographic potential, which has given it a key strategic role.

These aspects must be taken into account for the immediate next years since they will transform the region into a decisive territory for the competence of the main international actors.

Because of the dimension of threats on the state stability and the strategic perspective of the area, this region has been selected as study case.

Challenges in West Africa endure in the security field and cannot be undervalued. The sort of security threats lying in the region needs to be analyzed and managed from an international view, such as they are its repercussions.

The role the sub-regional organization, the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS), is fundamental. In that sense, international organizations with large experience in peace and security issues, like the European Union, which has also special interests in the region due to its geographic proximity and its historical relations, have important work to develop in cooperation with the ECOWAS, with the objective of dealing with root causes of security threats.

This paper examines the variety of threats existing in West Africa and its transnational reach. It also analyzes and values what policies and measures have been developed in order to manage them.

Due to violence situations are still present in the region and even intensity of threats are higher nowadays in some aspects, it cannot be said that preventive measures tackling root causes of violence are effective enough.

The group of practices political actors have taken have been superficial and the main progress achieving human security has been in the theoretical level.

In this paper, the author attempts to present what are the main obstacles and gaps dealing with the “new threats” to security in the West African region and tries to expound some windows of opportunity for the future, focused on preventive policies.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. A new paradigm of security

Before analyzing what are the principal threats to security living in the West African region and their transnational repercussions, it is fundamental to contextualize and develop the theoretical framework. It is essential to understand the evolution of security concept⁸ and the importance of its multidimensional perspective.

During the last years of the Cold War the debate around the new global order brought transcendental changes in the peace and security agenda. Within these changes, Africa has been undoubtedly a scene of ‘experimentation’.

In the context of new threats to states as well as individuals, a new paradigm of security has been established. There are new dimensions of international security and new approaches, so it is considered from multidimensional parameters. Elements being securitized have changed and new factors that were overlooked before have appeared on the scene and they are valued these days.

This is the idea German sociologist Ulrich Beck explains in its *World at Risk* book, where he informs about a ‘globalized risks’ society and the failure of any country to manage problems by itself (Beck, 2009).

The world context we live in is characterized, as Solana has pointed out, by “the interdependency”, which is responsible for:

actions or omissions going beyond of who makes them and its immediate consequences. Interdependency makes all of us neighbors. It conditions and force us to change patterns and analysis frameworks [...] Interdependency changes responsibility concept for all [...]. All are connected by an interrelation network (Solana, 2014, p.3).

This can be translated as a reality characterized by a source of risks that are globalized among people, countries and generations.

Therefore, there is a world in change, with a different nature of conflicts. In the new paradigm of security, the no-intervention and sovereignty principles have been overcome and a conceptual framework where risks cross borders has been established; these risks are not contemplated from the traditional notion of security. For this reason, threats to security, in its wider concept, are considered as an international matter.

⁸ A wider analysis of the evolution of security studies can be seen in Buzan and Hansen (2009).

Changes in the new threats' nature or perception have also modified notions of security. Vision about what must be protected has been broadened. In this paradigm shift, there has been a leap from the protection of states of external military threats to the protection of individuals. Security is contemplated as a public good that must be guaranteed by the state with all the instruments it has, and besides, where state relevance's loss is related to individual and its rights. Sovereignty has to be based not only on national interests, but it also needs to go beyond this and to become a responsibility.

Within this framework the concept of 'human security' has acquired relevance. It was mentioned for the first time in the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) of 1994. The Report defended a multidisciplinary vision of security, contemplating two dimensions: the freedom from fear and the freedom from want. The first one refers to the idea of guaranteeing security with regard to physic violence to individuals. The second one involves the idea of providing security to individuals by a certain socioeconomic wellbeing, with the basic necessities covered.

The notion human security has gained weight over time and it has nowadays become an unquestionable value, with the establishment of a nexus between security, peace and development as public goods for the global society.

This paradigm or doctrine has an implicit link to security and peace agendas (as well human rights' agenda). Relationship between these concepts and their interdependence is perfectly reflected in the General Secretary Report *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all* (United Nations, 2005).

1.2. How to manage transnational threats

With the normative changes and the priorities contemplated in the international agenda (where different agendas are actually assemble), a securitization of problems presented in Africa and a better management of those challenges have been reached.

During the nineties decade, United Nations peacekeeping operations lived a transcendental change in their nature, their function and their composition (Ramsbotham, Miall y Woodhouse, 2005). The missions have evolved, they have passed from carrying on traditional task like ceasefire to developing a multiplicity of tasks with objectives such as security, humanitarians and political activities as main goals.

In other words, international actors have been aware “beyond the humanitarian imperative to address global poverty where it is concentrated, fragility matters because of the risk it poses to regional and global stability” (OECD, 2012, p.27).

Thus, human security has become, on the one hand, the goal of humanitarian action, towards saving lives, avoiding or alleviating human suffering and safeguarding human dignity and, on the other hand, the objective of peace building, which includes a wider range of security, development and human rights programmes and mechanisms.

This evolution has helped to perceive internal problems in fragile states as challenges for the international security. Thus, those states are presented as a reality where the development, peace and security different agendas overlap.

Within this dynamic in threats management, a tendency has been established with an increasing importance of regionalization of security. Take for instance the West African states, which share interests in the security field: maritime vulnerability; expansion of radical ideology movements; or abusive exploitation of natural resources, among others. In this region, experience has demonstrated that the magnitude of regional effects due to instability problems within a particular state can be enormous. It was the case of the civil wars in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) or Liberia (1989-1996; 1999-2003); both conflicts had regional and international repercussions, through natural resources and arms illegal trade. Focus is currently concentrated on Nigeria, due to nexus with transnational terrorism, or in maritime insecurity. In this region, experience has demonstrated that some instability problems within a particular state can have regional effects (Annan, 2014).

Stress factors existing in the region feed vulnerability to violence and conflicts. Interconnection between governance, conflict and development implies each change produced in any of those three aspects have repercussions in the others (Marshall y Cole, 2014, p.11).

There are transnational connections between West Africa and the Sahel with the North of Africa that mean an increasingly worrying concern presently; never before there has been such a violent network and such illegal activities in such a huge scale (OECD, 2012, p.36).

For this reason, the sub-regional organization, the ECOWAS, has during the last years intensified its agenda in the security field. Regarding situations like armed rebellions, contested elections, or unconstitutional regime changes, the African regional

organization is increasingly demanded to engage in peacemaking activities within their member states to manage the new threats to security, where human security appears as a main goal.

Due to the new way of understanding global security, the sort of threats presented in West Africa has acquired an international attention. Some of these multiplying threats, which are permanent issues of insecurity in the region, have a transnational reach, due to their effects and to the sharpening importance the security paradigm has gained. It has triggered international responses, which have created positive and lasting effects in some cases but where a culture of reaction still remained, with an *ad hoc* posture.

2. WEST AFRICA AS A MATTER OF INTEREST

2.1. Africa in the international scene

During recent years, the West region of the African continent has attracted an increasing interest from the international community, which goes beyond humanitarian campaigns or military interventions. Similar to the rest of the continent, the West Africa has reached a better position in the global scene, due to different factors: economy prosperity; energy and resources; successes in democratic governance; a rise of middle class; better standards of education; enterprise development, etc.

Thus, the negative image associated with the African continent as one full of wars and hunger is giving way to another one that places the continent in a better and more relevant position in the international scene.

Some of the factors which have helped to improve that perception of Africa and its future are the macroeconomic datum. As pointed out in the African Economic Outlook 2015, the rise of the gross domestic product (GDP) of West African region is estimated to reach 5% during 2016 (AfDB, OECD and UNDP, 2015, p.21). And if economic global tendencies of moderate rise continue, the region could reach its previous levels to the economic global crisis, above 6% (AfDB, OECD and UNDP, 2015, p.21). Since 2010, West Africa is the African region with better results in economic growth (AfDB, OECD and UNDP, 2014, p.8).

The area has an important economic and commercial potential, so it increasingly attracts the attention of more international actors. Its natural resources –oil, gas and minerals– are attractive for powers like China or India, which are competing with the traditional ones, mainly France. During recent years, natural resources exploitation has risen and

new oil and gas reserves have been discovered in different West African countries. Around 13% of oil and 7% of gas importations of Europe come from there (Arteaga, 2014).

The region is also important because of the large concentrations of youth, especially in Nigeria (soon it will be the third most populated country in the world). They are young societies where 32% of the population between 10 and 24 years old and where the average of child per mother is 5.6 (United Nations, 2011; United Nations, 2014). This could be seen like an opportunity, since “skilled and mobile Africans could assist in boosting both Africa’s and Europe’s economic performance” (Barrios and Vines, 2014, p.2).

Even with this positive datum related to West Africa, as it occurs in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, there are structural problems that can stain the outcomes reached.

2.2. Security threats outlook

Challenges presented in West Africa in the security field, from different dimensions, are numerous and they show an uncertain future. These challenges answer to endogenous roots as well as exogenous factors: some underlying from the pre-colonial era, some inherited from the colonial control and administration but others have appeared since the decolonization process and still are presented, affected by effects of the global society dynamics.

The region serves as a perfect model to expose threats that converge and challenge African societies and governments in different places of the continent. In the West African context a wide range of connected problems coexist like: impunity for corruption; weak state authority; discrimination, social and ethnic exclusion; poverty and underdevelopment; economic and social diversity; severe income inequality; privatization of violence; environmental and humanitarian catastrophes; gross violations of human rights; big rates of youth unemployment; political repression; massive population displacement; deficit in health conditions.

These are some of the main stress factors in West African states which increase the countries’ vulnerability to violence.

These challenges and security threats present both multidimensional and transnational reality as well as an interconnection.

This nexus creates a destabilization effect along the different countries, where the challenges cross the borders (Marshall, 2006), those have a destabilizing effect along the different countries, turning into regional problems.

2.1.1. State fragility

One of the main problems in West Africa is state fragility, as reflected by different indicators⁹, where the region countries are at the lowest positions in the different ranks of these indexes. Experience has demonstrated that contexts with weak institutions and combined stress factors are usual cause of recurring violence (Walter, 2002). As highlighted by the World Development Report 2011, “sustained over time, fragility is almost always associated with violence.” (OECD, 2011, p.35).

Through consulting different statistics¹⁰, it can be seen that world armed conflicts have giddily decreased from last decade. However, Africa is one of the most violent places on a global level and the ‘hot belt’ spread from West Africa across the Sahel to the Horn of Africa (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2014).

Currently, insecurity focuses are concentrated on internal weakness of the states’ region, unconstitutional changes of government, lack of opportunities for a more and more numerous young population or the development deficits. From the international community, warnings are also focused on threats coming from jihadist terrorism due to the entrenchment of some groups with a radical conception of Islam and the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb presence in the Sahel. Increasing interest is in the organized crime groups and illicit trafficking networks (OECD, 2012, p.36).

The main unstable countries currently are the followings: Ivory Coast, where militia groups loyal to the ex-president Laurent Gbagbo (who will be prosecuted in the Hague for crimes against humanity at the end of this year) are involved in violent attacks from the Liberian border; Niger and Mali, with a rather intense presence of rebel and insurgency groups with a radical ideology of Islam; countries like Togo or Burkina Faso, where tensions between government and opposition movements are at a high-intensity level.

However, the most alarming situation is in Nigeria, where there are a different nature of conflicts overlapped: between government and opposition; pastoralist conflicts;

⁹ Take for instance Worldwide Governance Index, of the World Bank, Fragile States Index, of the Fund for Peace or the Fragile State Index and War List, of the Center for Systematic Peace.

¹⁰ Like Uppsala Conflict Data Program, of the Uppsala University, or the Armed Location and Event Data Project, a project based on the United States.

secessionist movements; fights by resources control (where the International Oil Companies of the Niger Delta have a key role); north-south tensions and between Muslims and Christians; but overall, the threat Boko Haram group presence means for the stability of the country and some parts of the region.

Following data of Conflict Barometer 2014, during the last seven years (between 2007 and 2014), there has been a worsening of some indicators concerning violence, for instance: arms trade, which has increased a 27% until nowadays; terrorist activity (25%); or the homicides rates (20%) (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, 2014).

2.1.2. Terrorism

One of the major problems and concerns for the international community is the terrorist expansion in the region; those warnings may be confirmed with the increasing violence of Boko Haram and its connection (*bayah*, oath of allegiance to a leader) to the Islamic State. Activities of this radical Islamic fundamentalist group at the north-east of Nigeria (up to the Chad Lake) take up more and more space in the communications media over the world. According to Hiroute Guebre Sellassie, Special Envoy of the United Nations for the Sahel, terrorist activities increased by 60% in the zone during 2013 (Strange, 2014).

Although warnings about terrorism in Nigeria and the Sahel are high, the fact is that with the exception of Nigeria, which gets the third position in the Global Terrorism Index of 2015 (Institute for Economic and Peace, 2015), the rest of West African countries do not have the first places on that index, which are for countries of Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan or India.

2.1.3. Organized crime and illicit traffics

The governance fragility mentioned above is one of the main causes for the expansion of transnational criminal networks in West Africa (OECD, 2011, p.56): these networks are the root of risks for the whole region. This area is place of attraction for groups of organized crime and illicit trafficking, like drug, arms, minerals or human beings, which provide these criminals millions of dollars in a grey economy (Mail & Guardian, 2014). West Africa has become a transit place between drug production centers of Latin America and Asia and consumption trades of Europe and the United States. As stated in

a recent International Alert's report, in the last years there has been a "displacement of Colombian-sourced drug smuggling from its earlier transit route of the Caribbean to the West Africa coast." (International Alert, 2014). Following INTERPOL information, around two thirds of drugs coming from Latin America sold in Europe in 2009 passed through West Africa (Correa, 2011, p.31). Cocaine flows have their highest rates between 2004 and 2007 and they could have decreased since then, according to UNODC (Arteaga, 2014, p.62).

These activities have caused a consumer growth and a transit rise along the region of cocaine, heroin and amphetamines locally produced (Annan, 2014). This has a sharpening effect on countries' economic structures, affecting their societies and even altering and corrupting the political system, as it has occurred in Mali or especially in Guinea-Bissau (named the first narco-state of Africa). The report of International Alert mentioned above highlights the fact that "political actors can be complicit in organized crime as part of their strategy of rule, whereby crime proceeds finance patronage settlement systems." (International Alert, 2014, p.4).

To figure out the value these traffics means, it is useful to look at some UNODC data, that pointed out in 2008:

an estimated 25 tons of cocaine passed through West Africa, with a transit value of about US\$1 billion by the time it reached West Africa, and an ultimate value of some US\$6.8 billion at its destinations in Western Europe (OECD, 2011, p.56).

Sub-Saharan Africa is also the region, after Latin America and the Caribbean, where there has been a major rise in homicides and crimes in the last decade. Arms trade is one the identity signs of the region. Organized crime is closely connected to the people and resources mobilization and in post-war contexts, where there are still active militias and guerrilla groups, arms concentration and survey easily promote organized crime expansion in wide 'ungoverned spaces' (Marshall and Cole, 2014, p.15).

2.1.4. Maritime vulnerability

West Africa region shows a great maritime vulnerability and it is the most alarming area of African continent in this field; it is the most threatened. The wider Gulf of Guinea coastline (5.000-nautical mile) provides huge opportunities for illicit traffics. It is the area of faster container traffic rise of Sub-Saharan African –around 14% yearly since 1995– (Osinowo, 2015, p.1). It is also the area where there is most illegal fishing (Osinowo, 2015, p.1).

Concerning piracy acts, the region is at the top of world lists. The number of these type of acts has risen since 2011 in the Gulf of Guinea, exceeding since then those of the Gulf of Aden (which was until that year where incidents occurred the most) (Osinowo, 2015, p.1).

These kind of acts directly affect countries' economic development. It is the significant case of Nigeria. According to a journalist report published in a Nigerian newspaper, *Leadership*, 84 ships were intercepted in 2014, and that year the country lost to the equivalent of 2 billion dollars by oil theft (Blede, 2014). Following other resources, Nigeria loses between 40.000 and 100.000 barrels a day due to oil theft (Osinowo, 2015, p.1).

Besides, these kind of activities threaten international trade partners. It is the case of the United Kingdom, which in 2013 saw how at least 10.2 billion dollars from its trade in the area were “declared at risk of theft” (Osinowo, 2015, p.2).

2.1.5. Poverty and underdevelopment

Although these are the main alarming situations for the international community, the underlying structural aspects of the West African societies cannot be ignored. Valuing positions West African countries have in different human development indicators, it is observed that most of the countries are ranked in the lowest positions. Following the Human Development Index 2015 of the UNDP, of this region the only country reaching a “medium human development” is Ghana, number 140 of 188; the rest (but Cape Verde) are among the last positions of the list, of “low human development”, with Niger in the last place. This must be seen from the perspective where poverty and underdevelopment can be allies of violence¹¹.

In West Africa, living conditions are tremendously precarious, with health, education and incomes standards very low. Consulting World Bank statistics about gathered data to assess the poverty gap (at \$2 a day), it can be verified that the ECOWAS area has the biggest poverty concentrations in the world, with percentages which exceeds the 30%, or the 40% in the case of Nigeria (World Bank, 2015).

In these countries, lack of economic and human development trigger a nexus between poverty, violence and security.

¹¹ As it stands by authors like Paul Collier, who defends that the bottom billion, mainly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, are much more prone to violence and civil war (Collier, 2007).

Besides problems of wealth distribution, the demographic growth in the region is also a problem. According to the United Nations Population Fund forecasts, in 2050 West African population will reach 700 millions inhabitants (surpassing Nigeria the 440 million), more than the double the current 330 million.

With such a demographic rise, important challenges appear concerning basic services, food, education or health survey. In future, tensions by territory control and lack of resources, like water, would be a constant in the region. It needs be added the environmental deterioration in the Sahel.

Another worrying factor is youth unemployment. In a context with such concentration of youth, being marginalized of the social, cultural, economic and political structures, and where radicalism, terrorism, insecurity, organized crime and gangs are increasing, the potential of destabilization is huge. They are unemployed youth without expectations. The relevance of this aspect is reflected by the fact most of who join the radical and terrorist groups, like Boko Haram, Al-Shabab or the RUF (during the Sierra Leone civil war), are young.

It is perfectly explained by Paul Melly, associate fellow in the African Program of the Chatham House think tank: “poverty, a lack of economic options and the resulting frustration among young men seeking livelihoods [...] certainly are a substantial contributor” (Strange, 2014) for violence proliferation.

These pressure factors, added to other situations like endemic corruption or impunity with regard to human right abuses have driven towards an increasing public protest rate since 2010; they have risen three times more since then. Arab Spring and its echoes and inspirations in other parts of the continent play an important role, as is the case of Burkina Faso (OECD, 2014, p.12) or Gambia (in 2016).

While armed conflicts have decreased, the general tendency in Africa leans towards a rise of political violence levels and of protest episodes which turn into violent situations –more than 60% of them were violent in 2013– (Hutton, 2015, p.4).

These are fundamental aspects to take into account to understand the development of these kinds of security threats. The rise of young rebel groups, extremist ideologies and terrorist movements, cannot be explained without knowing the structural and root causes.

As it has been pointed out before, threats presented in West Africa have both internal and external roots. The structural dysfunctions in these societies have collaborated

towards the emergence and expansion of different problems, which at the same time feed the fragility of those countries.

These threats are connected and they defy territorial boundaries. Armed violence is often geographically concentrated in borders and West Africa is increasingly vulnerable to drug trade and organized crime. This is what has happened in the Sahel, where:

[the] collapse of border controls in preceding years enabled armed groups to operate within a substantial ungoverned space [...] this was facilitated by wider problems of governance in some countries (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014, p.253).

To better cope with these threats they should be framed within a regional and integral approach. Tensions and violence in West African borders turn into regional problems, thus requiring a common strategy in order to deal with them.

Some of them have triggered important transnational repercussions and are nowadays of international concern. This is due to the new paradigm of security, where there is a wider concept of it and its global implications. Thus, aspects like political instability, underdevelopment, gross violations of human rights, big displacement of people, or lack of resources in those countries are seen as factors of international relevance, going beyond their internal and regional repercussions.

That is why there has been a greater involvement of different international actors in the continent or, if not greatest, it has been a deeper implication, answering to the new security threats.

3. CHALLENGES FOR THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

These challenges and security threats have in turn a multidimensional and transnational dimension as well as an interconnection. This nexus makes them threats with a destabilization effect along the region, crossing borders and defying territorial boundaries (De Andrés, 2008). In this sense, the regional organization, ECOWAS, plays a fundamental role. Thus, international organizations with large experience in peace and security issues, like the UN, need to improve its cooperation with the regional organization, dealing with root causes of security threats. Within this objective, conflict prevention strategies are an interesting field to explore.

ECOWAS has developed an important experience in managing cross-border security threats in the region (UNCDF, 2015), whose activities have increased in recent years. Actions are focused on different directions, such as a better and greater maritime

surveillance¹², based on a collaboration between all Member States of ECOWAS¹³, a more effective control over smuggling of migrants (UNODC, 2010; UNODC, 2013), or a more effective and integral approach in fighting against the terrorism spread over the region (Fulgence, 2015; Ewi, 2013)¹⁴.

By its part, the continental organization, the African Union, has developed a broader security policy. It has come to different agreements in order to take action in cases of political instability (for example, during electoral processes) or forced government changes. This demonstrates how much Member States are committed to democracy and good governance. Therefore, the Constitutive Act gives the African Union the right to intervene in a Member State in cases of “grave circumstances [...] as well as a serious threat to legitimate order to restore peace and security”.

Likewise, from organizations like the United Nations or the European Union different policies and measures have been deployed, from the strengthening of security sector or of state institutions, to the cooperation and humanitarian aid or the co-development practices. One of the main paths international community has addressed security threats in the continent is through peacebuilding operations. In that sense, words of the African expert Hutton are interesting:

Even in the absence of a record of successful intervention, instead of decreasing ambitions, the weight of expectation placed on intervention in the present age as a means of reordering is historically unprecedented (Hutton, 2015, p.3).

A wide range of actions has been taken from the local and national to the international level to deal with security problems like the expansion of extremist groups, human trafficking, violent ethnic disputes or high rates of youth unemployment. Those measures involve structural actions, such as those addressing security sector reform, governance, child-soldiers, reinforcement of police resources and security forces, and also more operational and tactic measures, like peacekeeping operations, border control in order to manage trans-border activities developed by criminal networks., or economic sanctions with the objective of dissuading governments from committing crimes. Europe is involved in the security of the region through activities like security sector reform, disarmament, demobilization and a reintegration process, or in the fight against proliferation of insurgency groups advocating radical ideologies.

¹² See recent Lomé Summit: <http://www.sommetdelome.org/>

¹³ See ECOWAS Common Approach On Migration (2008).

¹⁴ See the ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan (2013).

Along the second half of the twentieth century, it has been an important evolution on mechanisms destined to conflict management. Within the different mechanisms destined to conflict management (Duffield, 2001), we would like to highlight prevention as a very interesting option international actors should foster when concerning to international peace and security purposes in the West Africa region, since it helps to face cross-border security threats. They provide the opportunity of working over the dynamics of transnational threats (United Nations, 2013) and can prevent the escalation towards violence and even transform contexts of security threats into stable and pacific processes (Ramsbotham et al. 2011, p.113). Furthermore, experience has demonstrated the investment on prevention is less costly¹⁵, can be more useful managing root causes, more efficient and durable than other short of measures, especially military interventions.

However, the current scene presents important gaps concerning the management of those threats from their more integral approach. The sort of steps taken for 'solving' problems existing in many African countries, as such building stronger state institutions, have become mere cosmetic measures.

The frequent dynamic has been to adopt a series of practices, like celebrating elections, which in the long-term are not turned into a real transformation of the security context. The problem is underlying structural issues are not addressed, or not enough. Thus, even African governments have showed a deeper compromise with managing these root causes, human insecurity challenges are still present in West Africa.

Reality has demonstrated these measures are in many cases superficial, since there is not a comprehensive lecture of factors feeding them. Nor those measures are translated in early and effective responses. Take for instance the case of rise and expansion of radical ideology groups who resort to violence for achieving their aims. So it is said by the African expert Sebastian Gatimu:

Instead of calling for dialogue and working to get a clear understanding of the underlying issues that fuel crime and radicalization, most African governments have opted to silence all dissenting voices, labelling them as criminals. In this way, certain parts of the population are systematically pushed to the edges and categorized as unwanted. The majority of these are young people (Gatimu, 2015, p.2).

Measures taken to improve state building have not been enough, due to the state in West Africa has been unable to accomplish basic functions; they are not only guaranteeing

¹⁵ In this way the Secretary General of UN pointed out in his last report on conflict prevention (September 2015, p.4): "prioritizing conflict prevention is by far our most pragmatic and cost-effective option".

security against physical violence, but also promoting socioeconomic development and employing opportunities to the citizens.

Without offering solutions to unemployed youth and social, ethnic or religious groups who can be isolated from the central government, threats to security in those countries cannot be achieved. That will present a possibility for violence to increase and a vicious cycle with a destabilization effect of threats along the region and beyond.

African governments have to overcome tense situations and to deal with the root causes of conflict latent in these societies. Transitional experiences processes in West Africa include countries escaping fragility and conflict, while dealing with the challenge of achieving a combination of economic, social, cultural, military, humanitarian and political changes.

ECOWAS has succeeded in managing its own security problems but it still has to achieve many issues. There is a long and complicated path due to the complexity of challenges it has to face, many of them feeding from external elements.

The organization has lack of strategy to transcend traditional conflicts when it must deal with human security issues (Grasa and Mateos, 2014, p.86). Challenges the region is confronting open an interesting as well as uncertain framework for experimenting.

Implementation of governance improvement in fragile countries with these kinds of security threats is seen as a requirement for preventing and managing political violence and controlling the expansion of such transnational threats like arms and drogue trade or criminal activities. Thus, during recent years, measures considering that aspect have increased in places like West Africa.

Together with the strengthening of state institutions, political legitimacy and transparency, education is one of the main pillars for building a safer society.

Also, there are some more steps that can be taken to improve West African countries situation and meliorate underlying stress factors.

For example, a better inclusion of African economy in the world economic system, solving some economic obstacles, developing infrastructure or promoting participation of African companies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In an international context where threats are contemplated in a connected, interdependent way, the necessity of showing interest in instability in a region such

West Africa is perfectly understandable, which furthermore has a geographical proximity to the south of Europe, to countries like Spain. A wrong and weak reading of security threats present in this region can have durable effects, as it has regrettably been the usual practice.

The type of threats this zone hold is multiple, but different in their features and in the factors they feed on. Some of their repercussions go beyond national or regional borders, beyond the African continent. There is in the area a global interest for a series of key factors, like demographic explosion, natural resources, expansion of international terrorism, illicit trafficking networks or irregular population movements. Cross-border security threats has acquired great attention since one of the principal features of this region's problems is the transnational effect of its security threats. The current tendency is a growing rate in these kind of challenges, thus being urgent an effective regional approach strategy, as it has been developed in some fields.

For this reason, different measures are deployed, from government' countries, regional organization to international institutions. The measures are variable and focused on different fields.

However, underlying problems are not well managed, in an efficient way, due to remaining threats and they are still expanding. Some measures have worked, but effort must be focused not only on operative, superficial measures, but also on the factors that continue to trigger security threats.

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