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# Regionalism and humanitarian action in West Africa and Southeast Asia

Alice Obrecht and Justin Armstrong

Regional organisations' humanitarian ambitions have grown in recent years, both in terms of their engagement in humanitarian activity and in terms of the attention they have received in humanitarian research and policy fora. While the potential of regional organisations is there on paper, in reality there are several obstacles to identifying how regional organisations can best contribute to humanitarian action – and the role of other key humanitarian actors in this shift.

This short paper discusses the factors that shape the humanitarian approaches of regional organisations, as well as the issues that they identify as key in developing their humanitarian roles and responsibilities. It describes the experiences of facilitating an exchange programme between two regional organisations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As the first initiative of its kind linking regional organisations specifically on humanitarian issues, the exchange provides some key lessons for future work in building stronger links between regional organisations in this area. The paper also analyses the dynamics

that affect and therefore define regional organisations as a particular kind of humanitarian actor. We argue that both regional organisations' current approaches to humanitarian action have been shaped by their strategic attempts to enhance their credibility and power as regional bodies; as such, their engagement in humanitarian affairs is shaped by the political and economic factors that constrain ASEAN's and ECOWAS' capacities more broadly.

The paper concludes with the following points to consider as humanitarian actors continue to discuss the future role of regional organisations in humanitarian action:

1. Supranationality has substantial trade-offs and will only lead to more effective humanitarian action when appropriately resourced and backed by the necessary political will, both within these organisations and externally by other international actors.
2. Regional organisations' humanitarian action will always involve broader political and socio-economic concerns, but this may not be an entirely negative factor.
3. Moving forward, the key question

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should be how humanitarianism fits within the mandates and interests of regional organisations, rather than how regional organisations fit within the humanitarian system.

4. Exchange programmes and meaningful partnerships between regional organisations should be given greater attention by these organisations, as well as – crucially – by donors and external partners if they are to remain viable and valuable.

## 1 Introduction

Humanitarian crises are increasingly occurring across national borders, requiring coordinated responses from multiple states. However, international responses to humanitarian emergencies often lack the appropriate contextual knowledge and convening power to work adeptly with multiple state actors in a multi-country crisis. In light of this, regional actors, in particular regional inter-governmental organisations, have assumed greater prominence in the humanitarian sector in recent years<sup>1</sup> due to their perceived potential as ‘an effective bridge between the international and national systems’.<sup>2</sup>

While the potential is there on paper, in reality there are several obstacles to identifying how regional organisations can enhance their humanitarian role – and clarifying the role of other key humanitarian actors in this shift. One of these obstacles is the variance in size, function and capacity of institutions that fall under the label of ‘regional organisation’. While it is clear that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to regional organisations as humanitarian actors will not be appropriate,<sup>3</sup> it is less clear what the differences across regional organisations mean for their approaches to engaging in humanitarian action, or for their ability to learn from one another. Due to the limited information available on the humanitarian activities of regional organisations, much of the present research on regionalism and humanitarianism has sought to establish a descriptive

understanding of regional organisations’ humanitarian programming, policies and structures.<sup>4</sup>

This paper contributes to this body of work by comparing and contrasting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)’s humanitarian approaches and their origins.<sup>5</sup> After this introduction, Section 2 provides some background to this comparison, describing the exchange programme that took place between ECOWAS and ASEAN in 2014, facilitated by the Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) at King’s College London. Sections 3–5 then provide a broad comparison between the intra-regional dynamics and humanitarian approaches of the two regional organisations. The paper argues that both regional organisations’ approaches to humanitarian action have been informed by their strategic attempts to enhance their credibility and power as regional bodies; as such, humanitarian action is shaped by the political and economic factors that constrain ASEAN and ECOWAS’s capacities more broadly.

The paper makes the case for this conclusion across two sections: Section 3 discusses the economic and political dynamics and types of humanitarian risk that shape ASEAN and ECOWAS’ approaches to humanitarian action. Section 4 argues that these intra-regional dynamics limit the bargaining power of a regional organisation, while the humanitarian risks provide opportunities for regional organisations to strengthen their bargaining power with Member States.

The different risk profiles of the two regions have therefore led to two distinct approaches to humanitarian roles and responsibilities. ASEAN’s approach to humanitarian action has been shaped primarily by large-scale natural disasters, with the scale and spread of these disasters prompting remarkable progress towards greater regional integration in disaster response. ECOWAS, though no stranger to natural disasters, has substantial experience of intervention in conflict settings and in humanitarian responses to displacement. Both areas of expertise

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1 For example, see B. Hettne and F. Soderbaum, ‘Regional Cooperation: A Tool for Addressing Regional and Global Challenges’, in *International Task Force on Global Public Goods, Achieving Global Public Goods* (Stockholm: Swedish Foreign Ministry, 2006); S. Zyck, *Regional Organisations and Humanitarian Action*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2013); E. Ferris and D. Petz, in *The Neighborhood: The Growing Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management* (Washington DC/London: Brookings Institution & LSE, 2013).

2 Ferris and Petz, *In the Neighborhood*, p. 2.

3 Zyck, *Regional Organisations*.

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4 *Ibid.*

5 This report uses the term ‘regional organisation’ to describe ASEAN, ECOWAS and other comparable inter-governmental organisations, without regard for the delimitation of regions and sub-regions (see Zyck, *Regional Organisations*).

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draw on and facilitate different sets of capacities and different bodies of expertise.

Building on this analysis, Section 5 explores how the growing capacities and influence of these two regional organisations may complement each other as they move towards more comprehensive approaches to the full range of humanitarian crises in their own regions. Finally, the paper lists key areas for future collaboration and learning identified in the exchange visit between ECOWAS and ASEAN in April 2014 and, from this experience and the analysis of the paper, draws broader lessons for the engagement of regional actors in humanitarian action, including the benefits of inter-regional exchange and collaboration.

## 2 Background to the ECOWAS–ASEAN exchange programme

In 2011, based on prior engagement with ECOWAS, the Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) at King's College London began a three-year project, the Facilitating Organisational Responsiveness for Effective West African Risk Reduction (FOREWARN) Initiative, with generous support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (formerly Australian Aid).<sup>6</sup> This project sought to enhance disaster risk reduction (DRR) in West Africa by strengthening institutional conditions and capacities, particularly at regional level. The FOREWARN Initiative utilised applied research and capacity-building activities to address state- and regional-level institutional engagement in disaster risk analysis. FOREWARN projects looked specifically at understanding and strengthening the special capacities and standing of regional organisations in order to overcome the oft-cited challenges in reducing disaster risk and increasing preparedness in West Africa, namely those concerning data collection and analysis for risk monitoring, low state capacity for implementing DRR policies and lack of technical expertise to provide plans for mitigating and responding to the specific risks faced by West African states.

During the 2012 HFP Annual Stakeholders' Forum, representatives from the humanitarian divisions of ASEAN and ECOWAS met informally to exchange perspectives on developing humanitarian policies and

programming within a regional organisation. This exchange of ideas and experience was deemed worthy of a much longer discussion with a broader range of individuals from ECOWAS and ASEAN involved in humanitarian and DRR work, and this led to the facilitation of a longer visit by one regional organisation to the other. A delegation from the ECOWAS Commission met officials from the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in Jakarta over two days in April 2014. The programme featured briefings by senior officials of each organisation on their approach to humanitarian and DRR issues and their respective departments and roles (see Box 1).

### BOX 1: ECOWAS–ASEAN EXCHANGE PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

#### ECOWAS

**Dr Daniel Eklu**, Director, Humanitarian & Social Affairs

**Mr Mohammed Ibrahim**, Head of DRR Division, Humanitarian & Social Affairs

**Dr Florence IHEME**, Director, Early Warning

**Dr Johnson Boanuh**, Director, Environment

**Mrs Benetta Tarr**, Principal Program Officer, External Relations

#### ASEAN

**H. E. Alicia Dela Rosa Bala**, Deputy Secretary General, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

**Mr Larry Maramis**, Director, Cross-Sectoral Cooperation

**Ms Adelina Kamal**, Head, Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance Division

**Dr Marqueza Reyes**, Technical Advisor for DRR

**Ms Neni Marlina**, Technical Officer

**Ms Yuliana Nur Samad**, Technical Officer

#### ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management

**Mr Said Faisal**, Executive Director

**Mr Khiam Jin Lee**, Head, Corporate Affairs Division

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/forewarn/ecowas-asean-exchange> for more information on the ECOWAS–ASEAN Exchange programme.

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The programme also included a tour of the facilities for disaster monitoring and response at the AHA Centre and several question and answer sessions, which gave delegates the opportunity to explore issues of shared concern over the two days. A summary of key issues identified by the delegates is presented in Section 5 of this paper.

While considered a success by all involved in the exchange, there were several key challenges involved in bringing about the exchange as well as in following up on the key areas identified for further collaboration:

- **Bureaucratic processes and procedures:** Like any large multinational or intergovernmental organisation, ECOWAS and ASEAN have often cumbersome processes for managing the formalities of external relations and partnerships, as well as getting approval for projects and the release of funds or planning for events and travel. Arranging these on both sides, particularly when adjustments to the dates of the exchange were repeatedly made, often took weeks if not months.
- **Responding to crises and emergencies:** The humanitarian divisions of both ECOWAS and ASEAN are short staffed, so when crises and emergencies flare up in either region attention is necessarily drawn elsewhere and other activities, such as sharing and learning, are de-prioritised. The exchange visit from ECOWAS was repeatedly postponed, predominantly by ECOWAS as it dealt with the Mali crisis and the Sahel drought, and later on one occasion by ASEAN due to Typhoon Haiyan. Later attempts by ASEAN to engage with ECOWAS were not reciprocated due to the emerging Ebola crisis that consumed the region's attention in the summer and autumn of 2014.
- **Role of independent interlocutor:** HFP's role as interlocutor was essential in helping to identify the mutual interests of ECOWAS and ASEAN and fostering the relationship, as well as helping to address the two constraints above.

### 3 Constraints and opportunities for ASEAN and ECOWAS

This section discusses the key constraints and opportunities that have shaped ASEAN and ECOWAS's approaches to humanitarianism. It focuses specifically on two factors – risk dimensions (e.g. hazards, vulnerabilities and the coping capacities of

each region) and intra-regional dynamics (history, culture, politics and economics) – and how they influence the structures, mandates and priorities of the two organisations.

#### 3.1 Risk dimensions

Although both Southeast Asia and West Africa face many similar types of hazards, natural and manmade, their frequency and level of impact vary significantly. Citizens of ASEAN states are more exposed to hazards, though they are generally less vulnerable to them and possess greater coping capacity. This leads to an overall lower level of average risk.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, over four-and-a-half times more people have been affected by natural disasters in the past decade compared to ECOWAS.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, many more people in the ECOWAS region have been displaced by conflict: over 3.5 million people are internally displaced in ECOWAS countries, compared to fewer than 900,000 in ASEAN states (over three-quarters of whom are in one state, Myanmar), nearly eight times as many relative to their total populations.<sup>9</sup>

Along with their frequency, the level of impact of these risks is also heavily influenced by the different geographies of the two regions. Although population density in ASEAN is more than double that of ECOWAS,<sup>10</sup> ASEAN's members are spread widely across mainland Southeast Asia and the Malay Archipelago.<sup>11</sup> Many conflicts within ASEAN have been confined to individual states, small sub-state regions or even islands. This may in part explain why massive natural disasters affecting multiple states have played a larger role in driving ASEAN's humanitarian mandate, rather than the intertwined conflicts and cross-border impacts which have motivated ECOWAS' humanitarian action.

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7 The Index for Risk Management offers a way of understanding and measuring the risk of humanitarian crises based on three dimensions of risk: Hazards & Exposure, Vulnerability and Lack of Coping Capacity; further information on this collaboration between the IASC and EC is available at <http://www.inform-index.org>.

8 Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT), 2004–2014, <http://www.emdat.be/database>.

9 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2014, <http://www.internal-displacement.org>.

10 It should be noted that much of ECOWAS' population is concentrated along its coastline and the sparsely populated Sahel comprised much of the north and east of the ECOWAS region.

11 Over half of ASEAN's external land borders belong to Myanmar, leaving the remaining member states with under 3,000km of external land borders between them.

### 3.2 Intra-regional dynamics

While an extensive examination of the complex historical, cultural, political and economic dynamics amongst the member states of each organisation is beyond the scope of this paper, this section highlights salient differences in the wealth of the two regions, as well as differences in the political systems of member states which may contribute to the overall capacity and influence of regional organisations.

Overall, ASEAN serves a considerably wealthier region, with an average regional GDP per capita of \$3,820, nearly double that of ECOWAS, at \$2,065. ASEAN also features far greater intra-regional economic inequality than ECOWAS. GDP per capita within ECOWAS ranges from \$412.52 in Niger to \$3,784.60 in Cape Verde, while in ASEAN the range<sup>12</sup> stretches from Cambodia at \$1,007.57 to Singapore at \$55,182.48. The share of ECOWAS' population living in low-income countries, at 28%, is also far higher than ASEAN, at 11%, and over 87% of ASEAN's residents live in middle-income countries.

Most of the states that now make up ECOWAS gained independence from their former colonial powers relatively peacefully and swiftly (11 of ECOWAS' 15 members gained their independence between 1957 and 1961, many of them among the earliest independent states in Sub-Saharan Africa). In contrast, most of ASEAN's members emerged as independent states following protracted wars, some of which were critical theatres of the Cold War. The five states that founded ASEAN made a point of asserting their autonomy from either side of the Cold War, and the organisation was in part founded as a bulwark against intra-regional aggression and external influence. It largely remained as such until 2003, when the Bali Concord II was signed by ASEAN member states. This reform formalised the idea of

an 'ASEAN Community', comprising three pillars of increased regional integration: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation. Between the founding of ASEAN in 1967 and the reforms set forth in 2003, many ASEAN states spent considerable time under authoritarian rule, developing assertive political and security actors, many aspects of which remain despite progress towards more open democracy across much of the region (see Table 1). In West Africa, by contrast, states are more democratically open and crises are accompanied by greater internal competition for power.

These economic and political disparities within each region highlight the unique power dynamics at play within each organisation. They also significantly influence each organisation's relationships with external political and humanitarian actors, and challenge any one-size-fits-all approach to regional organisations as humanitarian actors.

### 4 Two paths to humanitarian action

This section describes the development of the humanitarian mandates of ECOWAS and ASEAN, and the implications of this evolution for their approaches to humanitarian issues today.

Both ECOWAS and ASEAN were originally established to promote regional economic integration and cooperation, including socio-cultural cohesion, and later evolved mandates and mechanisms for humanitarian action in response to crises in their regions. Formed in 1975 for the main purpose of regional cooperation and economic integration, ECOWAS developed its approach to humanitarian issues slowly, beginning with a significant shift towards peace and security issues in the 1990s. The earliest instance of this was in 1990, when the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)

**TABLE 1: POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN ASEAN AND ECOWAS**

	Freedom in the World <sup>13</sup> (Freedom House)					
	Not free		Partially free		Free	
	Number of states	% population	Number of states	% population	Number of states	% population
ECOWAS	2	1.1%	9	83.4%	4	15.5%
ASEAN	5	26.8%	5	73.2%	0	0%

<sup>12</sup> Per capital GDP for Myanmar is estimated to be approximately \$868 in 2012–13. The World Bank does not consider the available data sufficiently reliable for comparison.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.freedomhouse.org>.

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was formed within the space of 17 days to respond to the first civil war in Liberia.<sup>14</sup> While it never had strong legal foundations in ECOWAS' protocol or constitution, ECOMOG was deployed again in 1997 to the conflict in Sierra Leone, and was perceived as contributing to ending the civil war in Guinea Bissau in 1999.<sup>15</sup> These conflicts provided an opportunity for ECOWAS to exercise greater agency, paving the way for both ECOWAS' humanitarian role and its enhanced role in the region more generally.

These successes also brought ECOWAS face to face with humanitarian response needs, as soldiers deployed with ECOMOG were used simultaneously to provide relief and protection to victims of the conflict to which ECOMOG was responding. These experiences were influential at a critical time in ECOWAS' history: for the first 15 years of its existence, there were serious concerns that ECOWAS was not achieving its mandate, in part because of the continued influence of state sovereignty and respect for non-interference.<sup>16</sup> Member states refused to implement agreed policies and there was no mechanism by which ECOWAS could enforce compliance.

A Committee of Eminent Persons (CEP) formed in 1990 recommended that ECOWAS transition from an inter-governmental to a supranational organisation. This transition is reflected in the redrafted ECOWAS Treaty in 1993 and the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security. The 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) has the goal of achieving an 'ECOWAS of Peoples' instead of an 'ECOWAS of States', and places supranationality at the heart of that transition: 'as steps are taken under the new ECOWAS Strategic Vision to transform the region from an "ECOWAS of States" into an "ECOWAS of the Peoples", the tensions between sovereignty and supranationality, and between regime security and human security, shall be progressively resolved in favour of supranationality and human security respectively'.<sup>17</sup>

The move towards supranationality is tied explicitly to human security, including humanitarian aid and assistance. Both the revised ECOWAS Treaty and the ECPF significantly expand ECOWAS' approach to humanitarian intervention and assistance in connection to its work on peace and security. These documents established ECOMOG and a separate Department for Humanitarian Affairs as formal entities within ECOWAS, while also mandating ECOWAS to 'intervene to alleviate the suffering of the populations and restore life to normalcy in the event of crises, conflict and disaster' and 'efficiently undertake humanitarian actions for the purposes of conflict prevention and management'.

In contrast to ECOWAS, ASEAN's fundamental principles centre on sovereignty and non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution and effective cooperation, known as 'The ASEAN Way'.<sup>18</sup> These principles steered ASEAN away from involvement in contentious regional issues, particularly those connected to conflict within the region,<sup>19</sup> fulfilling its intended role 'as a regional platform for strengthening the region – but only as long as it does not violate the national interests of individual members'.<sup>20</sup> Instead, natural disasters have played a key role in the evolution of ASEAN, both in terms of its humanitarian mandate and its power as a regional actor. The key treaties and policy documents outlining ASEAN's approach to humanitarian and DRR work reflect the prominence of natural disasters and deference to state sovereignty. For example, in contrast to ECOWAS' ECPF, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)<sup>21</sup> respects 'the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity' of member states, including the recognition that each state 'shall have the primary responsibility to respond to disasters occurring within its territory and external assistance or offers of assistance shall only be provided upon the request or with the consent' of an affected member state.<sup>22</sup> AADMER, ASEAN's

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14 J. O. Lokulo-Sodipe and A. J. Osuntogun, 'The Quest for a Supranational Entity in West Africa: Can the Economic Community of West African States Attain the Status?', *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*, 16 (2), 2013.

15 *Ibid.*; Herbert Wulf and Tobias Debiel, *Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: Tools for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Regional Organisations? A Comparative Study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF*, Working Paper 49, Regional and Global Axes of Conflict, 2009.

16 Lokulo-Sodipe and Osuntogun, 'The Quest for a Supranational Entity in West Africa'.

17 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, II.4.

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18 C. Drummond, 'Non-interference and the Responsibility To Protect: Canvassing the Relationship Between Sovereignty and Humanity in Southeast Asia', *Dialogue*, 7 (2), 2009; <http://www.asean.org/news/item/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976-3>.

19 See L. Fan and H. Krebs, *Regional Organisations and Humanitarian Action: The Case of ASEAN*, HPG Working Paper, September 2014.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

21 AADMER has global as well as regional significance as one of the few commitments to DRR supported a legally binding treaty.

22 AADMER Section 3: Principles.

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key instrument for disaster management, was drafted and signed in 2005 immediately following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which overwhelmed the response capacities of four ASEAN member states, galvanising political support for enhancing region-wide capacities for disaster risk reduction and management and accelerating the evolution of ASEAN's role.

ASEAN's humanitarian capacity – and its credibility – regionally and internationally were tested and again strengthened when Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in May 2008. The government of Myanmar initially deflected most offers of assistance and calls for access for the international aid community. As the scale of the destruction came to light these calls escalated and pressure on the government increased. With the support of its member states, ASEAN sent its first-ever Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) to Myanmar, whose report led to the establishment of an ASEAN-led mechanism to coordinate relief efforts through a tripartite group with the government of Myanmar and the United Nations. ASEAN was seen as a crucial link between the government and the international community, with the mechanisms put in place allowing for unprecedented humanitarian access to the affected area. While its diplomatic role in the crisis response was crucial, its part in the operational coordination of assistance from ASEAN member states, international organisations, bilateral donors and civil society also played a significant role in bolstering trust and credibility amongst these diverse actors. The crisis also accelerated the development of ASEAN's disaster management mechanisms.

## 5 Analysis of the implications for ECOWAS and ASEAN as humanitarian actors

### 5.1 Bargaining power, credibility and the development of the humanitarian mandate

Surprisingly, the influence of economic and political dynamics of member states on the design and strategic decisions of regional institutions has yet to be explored in detail in the social science literature on regionalism. A recent edited volume on comparative regionalism notes that 'While influences of regional organizations on the processes within member states have been studied, there is very little research on the reverse correlation. Systematic research to determine the effects of regime types on regional integration is hardly available'.<sup>23</sup>

The impact of state-level dynamics on regional actors' capacities and strategies is of particular relevance to the questions and expectations increasingly asked of regional actors in the humanitarian system. The extent to which, and means by which, member states can influence and shape regional institutions' actions may have significant implications for the willingness and ability of regional organisations to engage in humanitarian coordination and action that treats the humanitarian needs of its member states' citizens equally.

The concept of *bargaining power* can be usefully employed to explain and predict the humanitarian roles of regional organisations: specifically, the humanitarian policies, programmes and actions of regional organisations are shaped by the greater bargaining power that regional organisations possess in relation to their member states in certain crisis contexts. We build a case for this hypothesis drawing on the experiences of ECOWAS and ASEAN in the development of their humanitarian capacities, which can be the basis for further empirical study.<sup>24</sup>

We define bargaining power as the amount of relative influence one actor has over another in an interaction.<sup>25</sup> Bargaining power is often a function of costs and benefits that each actor incurs through the interaction. Regional organisations offer benefits to their members but can also be viewed as threats to state sovereignty. The credibility and prominence of a regional organisation are shaped by the extent to which member states perceive the benefits of a stronger regional power as outweighing its costs, particularly costs defined as threats to state sovereignty. Exposure to risk, discussed in the previous section, constitutes one cost to state sovereignty; two other factors that may impact the perceived benefits of cooperating with a regional organisation are the political culture and socio-economic status of a member state.

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23 V. Kirschner and S. Stapel, 'Does Regime Type Matter? Regional Integration from the Nation States' Perspectives in ECOWAS', in T. Börzel and L. Goltermann (eds), *Roads to Regionalism: Genesis, Design, and Effects of Regional Organizations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

24 As called for in Börzel and Goltermann, (eds), *Roads to Regionalism*.

25 Bargaining power is a contested concept in the economic and political literature; the definition we use here is pre-theoretical and meant to be colloquially accessible.

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The authoritarian nature of many ASEAN states, contrasted with the more democratically open yet conflict-prone states of West Africa, points to challenges for ASEAN and opportunities for ECOWAS as regional inter-governmental organisations. Previous research has indicated a positive correlation between democratic regimes and support for regional coordination. In the ASEAN region, strong non-democratic political forces still hold considerable sway over states' internal affairs and have a vested interest in maintaining the impression of control. There is also a strong memory in the region of the widespread direct Western military intervention during the Cold War. This may make ASEAN member states less receptive to external intervention, including from a regional body such as ASEAN, and points to why such a high premium has been placed on respecting state sovereignty in the region. In West Africa, more openly democratic regimes may be more willing to invest in regional alliances and accept intervention from an external body such as ECOWAS. This may go some way to explaining why there has been a higher rate of ratification amongst ECOWAS member states for security-related policies than for economic-related policies: security-related concerns are what primarily motivate member states' support for regional integration.<sup>26</sup>

Crises have provided opportunities for both regional organisations to play a larger role in the affairs of their member states and thus acquire greater credibility and power. Early opportunities for ECOWAS to advance its credibility and status as a regional actor came through conflict-driven crises in which the authority of member states was severely compromised, thus pushing ECOWAS to move towards supranationality earlier than ASEAN. In the revision of the ECOWAS Treaty and the development of the 1999 Protocol, ECOWAS drew on its experience in conflict intervention and resolution to expand this mandate, along with a new mandate for humanitarian action and response in natural disaster contexts. A specific unit for DRR was created within the Directorate for Humanitarian and Social Affairs in 2006, and the following year ECOWAS heads of state adopted a regional 'Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction'. A 'DRR Plan of Action' for 2010–2015 was adopted in October 2009. Meanwhile, the 'ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework', adopted in 2008, established the ECOWAS Standby Force as a replacement to ECOMOG, as well as a new unit, the ECOWAS Emergency Response Team

(EERT), housed within the Directorate for Humanitarian and Social Affairs. ECOWAS' Humanitarian Policy was formally adopted in 2012. In this way, the creation of ECOWAS' humanitarian mandate was a core element of its strategic approach to enhancing its power and credibility as a regional body.

Like ECOWAS, ASEAN's role as a regional actor was enhanced at moments when the authority and thus comparative bargaining power of its members was significantly weakened. In the case of ECOWAS, this occurred through conflict, which fundamentally destabilised state powers, leading to an enhanced humanitarian role through supranationality. In the case of ASEAN, natural disasters weakened its member states by overwhelming their capacity to respond to humanitarian needs, but without fundamentally destabilising their governance regimes. As a result, ASEAN's enhanced role as a regional actor grew with its stronger humanitarian profile, yet this has until recently remained highly deferential to state sovereignty.

## **5.2 Areas of complementarity between ECOWAS and ASEAN**

The difference in ECOWAS and ASEAN's approaches to the sovereignty/supranationality dynamic results in two distinct approaches to humanitarian action and disaster risk management. ECOWAS' Humanitarian Policy outlines its approach to humanitarian action, including its fundamental humanitarian principles, scope of responsibilities and strategic objectives. This policy treats humanitarian action as a public good to be delivered, sometimes above and in contradiction to the actions or preferences of the state:

*ECOWAS, as a conglomeration of states, is essentially the state writ large in functional terms and therefore is committed to the noble objective of promoting and protecting the collective good of the citizenry and residents at all times. This establishes an organic linkage between humanitarian action, security concerns and the development goals of ECOWAS as affirmed by the ECOWAS Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Resolution and Management, Peace and Security, namely, that social and economic development and security of the people and Member States are interlinked.*

While in recent years ASEAN has increased its direct provision of disaster assistance, its broader

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26 Kirschner and Stapel, 'Does Regime Type Matter?'

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humanitarian accomplishments are those in which ASEAN performed more as a broker of the relationships and space needed for humanitarian action. ASEAN's role in humanitarian action in this sense is in contrast to ECOWAS', treating humanitarian action and disaster risk management more like a *public space* to be negotiated, created and coordinated.

ASEAN's 'Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015' articulates humanitarian action as a political, security and social issue – part of 'bring[ing] ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane'.<sup>27</sup> In it, ASEAN views strengthening regional cooperation on disaster management and emergency response as well as humanitarian assistance for conflict-affected populations as an element of its 'shared responsibility for comprehensive security'. Although it outlines ASEAN's function as including direct assistance provision and does not emphasise as strongly the traditional ASEAN values of non-interference, most of ASEAN's priority actions and functions around humanitarianism remain concerned with coordination, improving cooperation and promoting common operating procedures and preventative plans.

These distinct approaches point to many potential areas of complementarity between the two regional organisations. Box 2 lists the specific areas that were identified by ECOWAS and ASEAN at the conclusion of the ECOWAS–ASEAN Exchange in Jakarta as priorities for further collaboration and sharing. Three particular areas where each could substantially advance their own capacities through shared learning are:

*Early warning systems: ECOWARN vs. the AHA Centre.* Although still developing, ASEAN's AHA Centre has already demonstrated its value to the region, and built impressive technical capacity for monitoring and coordination amongst the region's national disaster management agencies. ECOWAS' ECOWARN network draws more on human capacity and ground-level analysis of risk indicators, using a rota of journalists and civil society organisation staff members in each member state to provide ongoing monitoring. ECOWARN arguably has more direct human capacity throughout the region and monitors a broader range of crisis indicators, but is

less integrated than the AHA Centre with member states' own disaster management capacities. Both regional organisations would be far better served by early warning systems integrating the strengths – technological and on-the-ground human capacity – of both systems.

*Member state relations.* Both ECOWAS and ASEAN are keenly aware of the need to balance regional integration against respect for state sovereignty, though ASEAN may feel a tension here more strongly than ECOWAS. ECOWAS' right to intervene in a member state is a rarity in regionalism and it remains to be seen what the comparative benefits of this right might be, particularly if it is rarely exercised.

*Engaging with humanitarian principles.* While ECOWAS and ASEAN may take separate approaches to dealing with state sovereignty, it is important to note that, because their humanitarian aims are conditioned by their broader political aims and roles, there are clear points of tension between the traditional principles of humanitarian action and the way in which ECOWAS and ASEAN define and codify their humanitarian approaches. While much can be said about the practical difficulties of ensuring aid impartiality, given the imbalances of risk and geopolitical influences in both regions, the more significant gap between traditional humanitarian principles and the approaches of the two regional organisations lies in the principle of independence. In theory, as regional rather than state institutions, ASEAN and ECOWAS can maintain their independence from states and state interests. Yet, while distinct from one another, the positions of both ECOWAS and ASEAN leave little space for 'traditional' approaches to independent humanitarian action, at least on paper. For example, the ECOWAS Humanitarian Policy states:

*At the global level, the principle of independence implies that humanitarian agencies formulate and implement their own policies independently of government policies or actions. However, within the West African humanitarian space, it is expected that all humanitarian agencies abide by the provisions of this Policy.*

While arguments can be made for the value of more coherent approaches to humanitarian collaboration directed from the regional level, such positions

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27 'Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015', ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint II.6.

## BOX 2: PROPOSED AREAS OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECOWAS AND ASEAN

### ECOWAS' proposed priorities:

1. Learning from ASEAN on the development of its AHA Centre and ASEAN cooperation on disaster management
2. Improving ICT deployment and use of Earth Observation (EO) technology in ECOWAS and ASEAN to monitor the environment for information to support policy decisions
3. Promoting data sourcing and sharing capabilities to enhance access to information for decision-making and for early warning/early response, especially in emergency situations
4. Mainstreaming DRR and climate change into regional development strategies
5. Promoting the establishment of regulations and standards for risk reduction
6. Creating a resource mobilisation strategy for disaster risk management with increased financial investment and resources in DRR

### ASEAN Secretariat's proposed priorities:

1. Knowledge exchange around conflict prevention, refugees, human rights and responding to conflicts
2. Knowledge management: sharing of documents, policies and programmes
3. Enhancing the role of technology and innovation in our work, technological-based partnership, earth observation technology
4. Learning from ECOWAS' experience in related socio-cultural fields, such as gender, labour and social protection
5. Learning from ECOWAS' approach to managing the above issues with member states and promoting cohesion
6. Learning from ECOWAS' work with the private sector, scientific communities, research centres and civil society

from regional organisations do not provide, on paper, recognition of the necessity of independent humanitarian actors in crises that are protracted and politically charged (e.g. Rakhine State and Boko Haram); crises which influential member states – and by extension regional organisations – have largely ignored in their humanitarian operations.

## 5.3 The future of humanitarian action and regional cooperation

Taking into consideration the complexities and variables discussed above, we offer four conclusions to guide how the future humanitarian roles of regional organisations should be viewed and approached by the international humanitarian community and other external partners.

### **1. Supranationality has substantial trade-offs and will only lead to more effective humanitarian action when appropriately resourced and backed by the necessary political will, both internal and external**

The vision set forth in 2003 of building an ASEAN Community implies that ASEAN is quietly stepping back from its staunchly non-interventionist roots, the 'ASEAN Way', though it is still far from embracing the supranational ambitions of ECOWAS. Significant progress has been made towards this vision, but much work remains to translate these policies into greater assistance for vulnerable people in crises. Most ASEAN states remain highly vulnerable to crises, natural and manmade. At present ASEAN itself has little experience in addressing the humanitarian consequences of manmade crises, and there is scant evidence of willingness to address such crises in the near future.

ECOWAS' supranational vision – and its envisaged humanitarian role – has been articulated, but it is far from being realised. Many within the region remain among the world's poorest, beset by recurrent and overlapping natural and manmade hazards. ECOWAS' now separate military and humanitarian intervention arms, though laudable from a purely humanitarian perspective, have not been able to fulfil their respective roles adequately, as evidenced by the delayed response to the crisis in Mali. This indicates that, while regional organisations such as ECOWAS on paper offer attractive long-term solutions to regional crises, donors and partners must offer pragmatic and sustained support for capacity-building sooner rather than later, as this will take time to mature.

### **2. The involvement of regional organisations in humanitarian action will always involve broader political and socio-economic dynamics and concerns, but this may not be entirely a negative factor**

ASEAN and ECOWAS's approaches to humanitarian action must be understood as part of each organisation's overall purpose and structure. They

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are political and economic unions of national governments, and as such are unlikely ever to fit neatly within the traditional boundaries of humanitarian actors. Although humanitarian action may be an increasingly important aspect of each organisation's role within their region there is little reason to believe that humanitarian priorities will fare well against political and economic priorities in the foreseeable future. The European Union, a considerably more established regional organisation, struggles to collaboratively respond to humanitarian issues within its region (such as migrants crossing the Mediterranean).

### **3. Moving forward, the key question should be how humanitarianism fits within the mandates and interests of regional organisations, rather than how regional organisations fit within the humanitarian system**

As both organisations seek to realise their own regional visions for humanitarian action, how such regional initiatives will complement or compete with global initiatives must be considered. Regional processes are likely to remain predominantly influenced by regional rather than global political forces, and as increasingly assertive actors, regional organisations may understandably expect that external humanitarian priorities and programmes adapt to their own strategies and plans, rather than vice versa. Not only will priorities have to be aligned, but the effective use of humanitarian resources must also be considered. To slot regional initiatives into the global humanitarian architecture as simply an additional layer would seem likely to increase inefficiency and redundancies. Therefore the roles of regional and global intergovernmental humanitarian structures will need to be rationalised. Member states and other humanitarian actors will need to make judicious choices about how to invest in coordination and policy-making.

A dominant role for regional organisations in humanitarian action may raise other concerns, particularly with regard to the independence, impartiality and neutrality of assistance. Neither

organisation overtly endorses fully independent humanitarian action. And by definition the impartiality and neutrality of state or state-aligned humanitarian actors can be questioned when the state is a party to or abettor of a crisis. Both regions are home to groups of people which some in the external humanitarian community view as intentionally marginalised or excluded by their governments. Leaving access to such communities – and crucially the determination of what qualifies as a humanitarian crisis – to regional organisations can clearly lead to conflicts of interest, and the potential for humanitarian concerns to be superseded by political priorities.

### **4. Exchange programmes and meaningful partnerships between regional organisations should be given greater attention by regional organisations, but also – crucially – donors and external partners if they are to remain viable and valuable**

Regional organisations face a number of challenges and constraints, including complex bureaucracies with insufficient funding and staff resources to implement policies; balancing regional goals against individual state preferences, particularly when states have strong bargaining power; and donor timescales that are too short to build sustained capacity. In recognition of the unique challenges and opportunities surrounding the role of regional organisations in long-term humanitarian planning, the FOREWARN Initiative has sought to facilitate an exchange of learning between West Africa and Southeast Asia on how different regional organisations are managing these long-term changes and challenges. Although challenging to organise, the exchange programme has been very positively received by both organisations, has spurred interest in broader inter-regional cooperation and has influenced proposals for further donor support on related issues. This clearly presents opportunities for potential donors and partners to recognise complementarities beyond those noted above and build on successes in various regions, without the need to reinvent the wheel and, crucially, based on priorities and possibilities identified by regional organisations themselves.