

CULTIVATING A GOLDEN LEGACY: ECOWAS AT 50 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF WEST AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

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As the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marks the milestone of its 50th anniversary this year, the region finds itself at a critical juncture characterized by renewal and change. Since its inception in 1975, ECOWAS has become a strong and dynamic force for promoting regional integration, economic growth, and social development among member states. Today, even as the sub-region is faced with a myriad of great challenges such as the pressing challenges of climate change, widespread food insecurity, and rapidly changing market conditions, the Economic Community of West

African States (ECOWAS) is leading the way through its flagship agriculture policy, aptly captured in the comprehensive framework of the ECOWAS Agricultural Policy, more commonly referred to as ECOWAP.

Half a century ago, ECOWAS was established with a well-defined vision of fostering cooperation among West African nations for the realization of common goals. Over the decades, this visionary grouping has evolved from an infant political and economic bloc to a robust regional institution that champions peace, security, and development. The 50th anniversary of this historic event is not just a celebration of an extraordinary milestone along the journey toward regional integration but also a sobering reminder of the immense sacrifices and visionary strategies embraced by its founders. As ECOWAS takes time to reflect on fifty years of spectacular progress, its unwavering determination to revolutionize the agricultural sector has emerged as a critical foundation for constructing a resilient and successful future in the sub-region.

Modernizing Agriculture Through Innovation and Technology

Through the strides made by the Directorate of Agriculture and Rural Development, one of the most striking aspects of ECOWAP's current agenda is its commitment to modernizing agriculture through technology and innovative practices. These have been through the different intervention sectors.



In 2005, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) made a move towards agricultural transformation when it approved the Economic Community of West Africa Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP). ECOWAP, being a strategic policy, targets attaining sustainable food security, good compensation for agricultural producers, and improved trade in West Africa and beyond. Essentially, ECOWAP is based on three pillars: Improving productivity and competitiveness of agriculture, setting up an intra-regional trade regime, and adapting trade regimes with exterior markets

ECOWAP is not an independent program but is consistent with the general Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (AU/NEPAD) flagship program. Their complementarity demonstrates the region's determination to achieve the ambitions of the 2014 Malabo Declaration, which reconfirmed CAADP's goals for 2015–2025. They consist of eliminating hunger, reducing poverty by half by 2025, a 6% yearly growth in agriculture, and ensuring that at least 10% of the national budget is spent on agriculture.



In the area of institutional and organizational capacity building, several initiatives have been undertaken and are ongoing regarding institutional and organizational capacity building as well as Monitoring & evaluation at both the governance organs and institutional structure levels and with support from ECOWAS

and its partners. These initiatives include; Capacity building for ECOWAS Parliamentarians on Accountability in Social Sectors, Capacity Building Programme for the private sector to benefit from the AfCFTA, Capacity building workshop on Digital Trade for the AfCFTA E-

Commerce Agenda, Capacity building of National and Regional Stakeholders on the use of the ECOWAP M&E Platform and related initiatives, development/review of ECOWAP M&E tools and systems, and engagement with stakeholders (Continental, regional and national) on reporting towards the seven Malabo commitments related to agricultural growth and transformation through the Biennial Review process. -ECOWAS DARD, “<https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/1>”

Several initiatives have been undertaken and are ongoing around pesticide management, Plant Pest Control, Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures. The West African Regional Pesticide Registration Committee (COAHP/WAPRC) has launched several initiatives to manage pesticides, plant pest control, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures. These



include the establishment of four pesticide application packages, the West Africa Pesticide Management Integrated System (WAPMIS), and five regional instruments. The Regional Innovative Fruit Fly Control System in West Africa (SyRIMAO) was established in 2022, and two low environmental impact control technologies have been successfully implemented. The Inter-professions of Burkina Faso and Mali have adopted a flat-rate financial contribution (CFO) to ensure surveillance and control. A monitoring system has been developed to track fruit fly infestations in 36 agro-ecological mango production zones. The ECOWAS food safety strategy framework was developed in 2021, and a regional Action Plan for the prevention, surveillance, and control of plant pests and diseases has been validated. -ECOWAS DARD, “<https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/2>”

ECOWAS is dedicated to enhancing West African animal health, and one of its priority target goals is to eradicate Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR) by 2030. The initial Mass Vaccination Campaign in December 2019 was aimed at Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and the second campaign in 2022 supplied close to 5 million doses of vaccine to Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, and



Senegal. Through PEPISAO, ECOWAS promoted conflict prevention and peaceful transhumance by way of dialogue and regional collaboration. In collaboration with UNOWAS, the Commission issued a compendium of best practices in farmer-pastoralist conflict management. The French Development Agency (AFD) financed a rehabilitation program of livestock investments in six coastal states and is preparing new stock-breeding proposals for Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. A grant of €11 million from AFD also co-finances a pilot program aimed at developing local milk value chains in the Sahel and West Africa. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has also extended finance to assist in better livestock and meat marketing throughout the region. In addition, ECOWAS also capacity-trained 35 Beninese, Burkinabé, Nigerien, and Togolese officials in social engineering of agro-pastoral infrastructure, and high-level meetings in border areas have been initiated to promote regional collaboration. -ECOWAS DARD, [“https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/3”](https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/3)

West Africa's agricultural productivity and competitiveness are essential to food security, rural livelihoods, and economic growth, but the sector is characterized by long-term problems. Smallholder farmers predominate in the region and generally have limited access to modern technology, quality inputs, and infrastructure, constraining productivity. Climate change, unpredictable weather, pests, and soil erosion further undermine crop yields and food output. Barriers to trade, value addition constraints, and the lack of appropriate storage and processing facilities undermine the competitiveness of West African farm produce in domestic and export markets. The ECOWAS Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP) attempts to turn the tide through complementary interventions, such as research, investment in infrastructure, and policy harmonization. Flagship programs like the West Africa Agriculture Productivity Program (WAAPP), ECOWAS Rice Offensive, and Regional Food Security Reserve are aimed at enhancing productivity, minimizing post-harvest loss, and improving

resilience. Collaborating with institutions like RAAF, CILSS, and international donors, more than \$300 million of agricultural program investment has been leveraged. With gains realized, additional conflict, hunger, and climatic disruptions hinder advances, so sustained regional cooperation and investment are needed. Value chain improvement, female and youth empowerment in agriculture, and climate-smart agriculture continue to be at the core of West Africa's agricultural transformation. -ECOWAS DARD, [“https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/4”](https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/4)

Agriculture accounts for approximately 29% of West Africa's GDP, employs more than 60% of the labour force, and sustains the livelihood of more than 80% of the population, yet food insecurity is still a major concern. The region's undernourished population has almost doubled since 2010, standing at 62.8 million in 2022 and 40 million in dire need of food support in 2023. West African nations are confronted with environmental and economic pressures that undermine agricultural output despite the availability of rich arable lands, hence calling for sustainable food systems. ECOWAS, through the Directorate of Agriculture and Rural Development, aims to enhance food access, enhance resilience, and mainstream nutrition into agricultural programs. Some of its key interventions include the ECOWAS Regional Food Security Reserve, national storage policies for food, and programs like the Zero Hunger initiative, Climate Smart Agriculture, and the West Africa Food System Resilience Program. Along with partners like UEMOA, CILSS, the EU, and the World Bank, ECOWAS continues to implement regional food and nutrition security policies and programs. -ECOWAS DARD, [“https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/5”](https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/5)



Despite accounting for only 1.8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, West Africa is extremely vulnerable to climate change in the form of increased temperatures, unpredictable rainfalls, prolonged droughts, and catastrophic floods. These climatic stresses exacerbate food insecurity, jeopardize livelihoods, and impose colossal strain on agriculture, risking the well-



being of 360 million individuals, especially women, youth, and the vulnerable. If not tackled with urgency, the region's potential for food security and economic development will continue to deteriorate, increasing poverty, displacement, and conflict. Conscious of these, ECOWAS has prioritized climate resilience in agriculture through strengthening risk management, building sustainable agro-industries, and enhancing value chains. Over the past decade, ECOWAS has developed strategic policies like the Renewable Energy Policy, Climate Smart Agriculture Framework, and the ECOWAS Regional Climate Strategy, which was adopted in 2022. In collaboration with UEMOA, CILSS, CORAF, and international development agencies, ECOWAS is marshalling resources and adaptive solutions to mitigate climate threats. Flagship programs, like the Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture and the ECOWAP 2025 Strategic Orientation Framework, are promoting sustainable practices across the region. Through regional coordination and the formation of climate-adaptation initiatives, ECOWAS is dedicated to protecting food security, preserving rural livelihoods, and building a stronger future for West Africa. -ECOWAS DARD, "<https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/6>"

The marine and coastal waters of West Africa are some of the most productive in the world, producing more than 3 million metric tons of fish every year and providing a livelihood for over 9 million individuals. Notwithstanding such richness, the region also faces some quite serious issues that include overfishing of fish resources, poor governance, illegal and unregulated fishing, and limited aquaculture investment. These issues add up to a growing fish gap, and West Africa has no choice but to import more than 1.7 million metric tons of fish annually, earning it a status as one of Africa's biggest seafood importers. ECOWAS is confronting these challenges through enhancing fisheries governance, sustainable aquaculture, and improving food and nutrition security. With the assistance of major partners like the EU, USAID, UEMOA, and CILSS, ECOWAS has initiated several high-impact programs like the PESCAO program and the creation of an integrated strategic framework for

fisheries and aquaculture. The creation of a regional Satellite Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and joint vessel inspections aim to put an end to illegal fishing, while regional platforms for non-state actors ensure increased stakeholder involvement. Besides, ECOWAS is restructuring national policies and enhancing capacity building for the long-term sustainability of the sector. Through regional collaboration, enforcement of regulation, and investment in aquaculture, ECOWAS is establishing a firm and self-sustaining fisheries sector that guarantees livelihood and food security for millions of individuals. -ECOWAS DARD, “<https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/7>”

ECOWAS is determined to promote environmental management and sustainable natural resource management under its Agriculture Policy (ECOWAP), which confronts the acute issues of biodiversity and forest conservation. The subregion is confronted with serious environmental challenges such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, desertification, pollution, and the growing threat of climate change, as exacerbated by illegal logging, shifting cultivation, and over-exploitation of natural resources. Against such threats, ECOWAS has formulated policies and programs with external partners such as the EU, USAID, FAO, and UNEP. The major accomplishments include the creation of a regional climate strategy, the support of national wildlife crime strategies, and programs for making forestry more gender-inclusive. The WA BiLED program backed by USAID and the PAPFor and PAPBIO supported by the EU works towards biodiversity conservation, ecosystem protection, and climatic resilience building. In addition, ECOWAS has enhanced environmental governance through the West African Convergence Plan policy and the ECOWAS Environmental Policy. Capacity-building interventions based on training in environmental assessment tools and land management are consolidating conservation practices within the region. Through partnership and strategic interventions, ECOWAS is promoting sustainable development without undermining West Africa's rich biodiversity for future generations. -ECOWAS DARD, “<https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/8>”

Agro-forestry-pastoral fisheries sector plays a critical role in West Africa, supporting over half of the population and significant intra-community trade. Low participation of the youth in the key sector has prompted ECOWAS to launch a 2019 youth employability plan. It aims for 30% youth participation by 2030 to stem rural underemployment, emigration, and guarantee economic



stability. ECOWAS will enhance the sector through increased productivity, developing climate-resilient systems, and reducing post-production losses. Its key initiatives are a regional investment plan and a plan to double milk output to 10 billion litres a year by 2030. EU and Swiss Cooperation finance activities to improve the value chain, ranging from livestock productivity to market access. ECOWAS aims to foster regional development by improving youth employment and sustainable agriculture. -ECOWAS DARD, [“https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/9”](https://ecowap.ecowas.int/ecowap-sector/9)

ECOWAS's 50th anniversary is a chance to reflect on what has been realized and anticipate what is possible. In 50 years, ECOWAS has brought economies and cultures together and encouraged cooperation for regional expansion.