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THE WEST AFRICA INSTITUTE
Based in Praia, Cape Verde
A Knowledge Tool for Meaningful Regional Integration

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Introduction

Over the last four years, a number of institutions based in West Africa and elsewhere have joined forces in pursuit of a common goal: to establish the West Africa Institute for international research on Regional Integration and social transformations (WAI, or IAO in French and Portuguese). ECOBANK, ECOWAS, the government of Cape Verde, UEMOA, and UNESCO shared the conviction that such an institute could play an unprecedented role in furthering the regional integration agenda in West Africa and ultimately contribute to the sub-region’s economic, social, and cultural development. From being a simple idea a few years ago, it is now a reality with legal existence, a Governing Board, an interim Executive Director, its own physical premises, a status of UNESCO Category II institution, the full endorsement of the Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government, and a strong ambition. This can be considered a preliminary success and an indication of the magnitude of the challenges ahead.

The purpose of this presentation is to take stock of the Institute’s key achievements and the lessons that can be drawn so far. It examines the new starting point marked by the establishment of the Governing Board, and the new challenges and opportunities; it also reviews contributions to the formulation of the scientific and programming agenda of the new born Institute and makes a few recommendations. Finally, a number of key issues that require immediate attention are identified and discussed to ensure a smooth transition into the operational phase and increase its chances of success from the start. More generally, we want to share with you an experience and a conviction: the creation of a unique institution and the hypothesis according to which the knowledge deficit and lack of articulation between thinking and doing are the main weaknesses of the regional integration movement in West Africa.

1. Achievements of the West Africa Institute

1.1 Genesis and main steps

I will attempt to tell the story of the West Africa Institute (WAI) through 10 dates:

2. **February 2008** - First meeting of the Steering Committee and formulation of a road map and identification of priority actions (Lagos, February 26-29, 2008).

3. **May 2008** - Consultation meeting between the President of ECOWAS Commission and the Cape Verde Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reiterate their joint support for the creation of the Institute (Praia, May 3, 2008).

4. **December 2008** - Decision by the 33rd Ordinary Conference of ECOWAS Heads of State to create the West Africa Institute (Ouagadougou, December 18, 2008).

5. **March 2009** - Second meeting of the Steering Committee, which followed-up on i) the legal status plan, ii) formulated the work program and budget of the preparatory phase (April – December 2009), iii) took note of the report on the Synthesis Report on National Seminars of the UNESCO / MOST project, and iv) discussed the strategy of resource mobilization (Abidjan, March 9-10, 2009).


7. **May 2009** - At its 62nd Ordinary Session, the Council of Ministers of ECOWAS supports the creation of WAI and urges the Commission, Members States, other founding members and stakeholders to agree on the organization, administration and operations of the Institute – see C/REG.2/05/09 (Abuja, May 27, 2009).

8. **June 2009** - The Council of Ministers of UEMOA authorizes the Commission to take part in the process leading to the establishment in Cape Verde of the WAI for international research on regional integration and social transformation - DEC. 3/2009/CM/UEMOA (Dakar, June 26, 2009).


10. **November 2009** - National consultation of Cape Verdean stakeholders on the link between scientific research, economic development and regional integration to pave the way for hosting of WAI in Cape Verde. A 500-page book entitled *Science, Regional*
Integration and Development: Reality and Perspectives (Praia, November 12-14, 2009) was published in 2011.

1.2 Key achievements and lessons

WAI is in its infancy but can claim to have already recorded a number of significant achievements, not the least being its own creation and operations. In this regard, six key aspects can be listed. First, considering the institution’s considerable ambition, coverage and complexity, it took only 18 months since the decisions by the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government (December 2008) to create it to housing it in the physical headquarters. In the process Cape Verde, the host-country, had to modify its laws to accommodate the establishment of WAI on its soil, on behalf of all promoters. In the African context simpler and smaller organizations have taken much longer to create.

The second achievement is illustrated by the commitment made at the top of each of the key founding organizations to support WAI and be directly involved in its design, funding, governance and promotion. The list includes ECOWAS, UEMOA, UNESCO, ECOBANK and the Government of Cape Verde. Third, from the start, discussions on the creation of the Institute have elicited a high degree of acceptance and engagement of quality dialogue among various groups of policy stakeholders. Fourth, WAI can be considered the first African region-wide policy-oriented think tank that is jointly created, funded and governed by the public and private sectors in a climate of team-spirit and collaboration.

Fifth, the establishment in Cape Verde and the strong commitment of the Government of the host country have contributed to significant expansion of the geographical circle of regional integration policy thinking in West Africa. Finally, even before its inception, the West Africa Institute has been able to mobilize pledges for significant funding support from its founding members and others, the disbursement of which is pending commencement of operations. However, the institute still faced significant financial constraints as much of the initial funding pledged for release during the preparatory period by some founding members was not honored.

These achievements also provide the basis for a few lessons to be learned from the short history of the institute. Its design and the broad consultation that led to it underscore the role of regional integration as an instrument of economic and social development for the West Africa sub-region. They also illustrate the limited knowledge base and scientific
research available on this topic. Therefore, the creation of WAI is a much needed initiative. It is imperative for all stakeholders to have a better understanding of all the dimensions of the sub-region’s development process and, to this end, a center that enjoys intellectual and financial autonomy is of paramount importance.

WAI commences its operations with a high degree of legitimacy thanks to a high level of inclusiveness, participation and democracy that characterized the process of its creation. It draws additional legitimacy from the strong expectations expressed by various stakeholders who supported the idea of its creation. WAI’s presence in Cape Verde will serve as a catalyst for the regional integration agenda because it will bring the host country closer to the heart of the West African community and enhance the diversity of ECOWAS. The institutional collaboration that led to the establishment of the Institute has proven that organizations with different statutes, missions, and operations can collaborate over time to reach common objectives.

1.3 New starting point

WAI is legally in existence, has a Governing Board, an Executive Director and its own premises; it also starts its operations with a number of assets that will considerably determine its future prospects and chances of success. These factors are diverse and, put together, can be considered the most important launching pad of an African institution in recent history. They are listed and discussed below.

1.4 Partnership

The years of inception of the West Africa Institute have witnessed the forging of strong collaborations and cohesion among the founding members – ECOWAS, UEMOA, UNESCO, ECOBANK and the Government of Cape Verde. This process was a deliberate effort on their part and took time to materialize, resulting in a degree of complementary actions that were unprecedented in the sub-region.

1.5 Endowment fund, legitimacy, and efficiency

West Africa Institute was born of a decision made by the Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government. Its legitimacy is also enhanced by the diversity and level of institutional support and the decision to give it full intellectual and financial autonomy under the
governance of organs that are created in total transparency. Its plan to set up an endowment fund is in line with this spirit of independence.

1.6 Role and commitment of host country

One of the West Africa Institute’s key assets will be its location in Cape Verde. The National Assembly (parliament) passed a law that accommodates the Institution. It has also expanded the consultations to include all segments of Cape Verdean society to gain support for the modification of the country’s law and host the Institute despite its limited financial resources. To illustrate the paramount importance in which it holds the project, it has included it in the plans to build a new complex that will house the University of Cape Verde, the Court and other key official institutions.

1.7 Governance

Governance of the Institute is organized in concentric circles and the institutions that have the highest stakes are at the heart of its organs, being all members of the Executive Committee. A broad-based and representative Governing Board will reflect diverse sensitivities in West African society and make accountability more transparent. It is noteworthy that the pooling of resources that has characterized funding sources so far will, if it continues in its current format, ensure a high degree of fiduciary responsibility for the Institute.

1.8 Sub-regional environment and beyond

Arguably, West Africa is the African sub-region with the most advanced regional integration agenda. Every country in the sub-region considers economic and social development to be easier to achieve through regional integration than through individual strategies. ECOWAS is the Regional Economic Community (REC) that is the most involved in peacekeeping and resolution of internal political crises as well as cross-border conflicts or forced displacement of populations. The sub-region’s two main groupings, UEMOA and ECOWAS, have long worked to achieve higher levels of sub-regional integration.

Despite its renewed attempts to attain more unity through the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union and the launching of the New Partnership for Africa’s development (NEPAD), Africa has had limited success in this regard.
and West Africa stands to contribute significantly by sharing its positive experience thanks to the conceptual work and advocacy of the West Africa Institute.

2. Scientific and policy agenda

An issue of paramount importance is the area of intervention of WAI in the conduct of its triple mission of research, training, and policy debate. While there is broad consensus on the need for West Africa to pursue economic, social and cultural development and on the key role of regional integration to achieve it, the specific contribution of WAI in this agenda needs to be clearly specified and agreed upon. In order to be sustainable the chosen agenda must be policy-relevant and provide significant marginal contribution to the debate on development in the sub-region. In other words, it must play a useful intellectual and scientific role.

However, formulating such an agenda cannot be done in a vacuum but must instead take into consideration prior contributions and visions that may have been the very reasons for such initial broad-based support for the creation of WAI. The table below gives a summary of the priorities identified in the treaties of ECOWAS and UEMOA as well as the areas of focus in the 15 national studies conducted under UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations (MOST) project for West Africa:

- Harmonization and coordination of sectoral policies
- Establishment of a common market and of an economic union
- Establishment of an enabling legal environment
- Establishment of funds for solidarity and joint development
- Promotion of competitive and efficient productive systems
- Promotion of citizenship and improved relations among segments of society.

While these references provide a strong basis for the formulation of WAI’s research and training agenda, new issues could be addressed by its key stakeholders and require its active participation in their scientific treatment. It can also be expected that through its partnership with other knowledge institutions, proposed areas of collaboration may not coincide with the Institute’s main focus. In both cases, flexibility and the capacity to seize new opportunities could inspire WAI to show openness in its areas of intervention.
2.1. Issues for action
WAI has come a long way in its process of establishment; it has legal existence, a Governing Board, an Executive Director, physical premises, and a limited staff that will soon be increased and some seed money. However, it still needs to address a few important issues whose resolution will ensure smooth operations and help avoid some problems from the start. They are organized in four categories: i) Governance, ii) Operational issues, iii) Collaboration and iv) Medium-term strategy and action plan.

2.2 Governance
During its formative years, the Institute will require steady and constant leadership through the joint actions of the Director General and the Chair of the Governing Board. While the task of recruiting and retaining an Executive Director who will concentrate exclusively on the work of WAI can easily be performed by the Governing Board, it should be noted that the Chair will be assumed by a senior official selected by the Government of Cape Verde. In this regard, it is important that the Chairperson will be able to devote considerable time and attention to WAI matters bearing in mind that he/she may have other important duties that could hinder effectiveness.

In order to properly carry out its mission from the start WAI needs to demonstrate a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness despite its limited staff. Indeed, it may face large and complex tasks for which professional expertise may be required. One solution may be to enlist the contribution of members of the Executive Committee or even of the Governing Board to perform functions for which they have some expertise. For instance, resource mobilization or development of international cooperation could be partly assigned to Board members who would assist the Chair and the Director General. Other functions could be identified and assigned later as the need arises. Assigning functions to Board members who perform them regularly will also help enhance the team spirit throughout the governance of WAI.

From the start WAI will be characterized by broad diversity among the member States that it serves, the multiplicity of development issues that it will address, an uncertain level of future financial resources, a thinly staffed secretariat and a three-organ governance structure. Coordination and complementarities between the Governing Board and the Executive Committee is likely because the latter is a subset of the former. However, care should be taken to ensure the same relationships between the Governing Board and the Scientific Committee. Indeed, there are risks of duplication of jurisdiction, confusion on the nature of their respective attributions and powers, degree of command on the use of WAI’s resources and conflicts of interest. Measures to mitigate those risks and maintain efficiency could include a high level of communication between the Scientific Committee and the Board, timely
submission of reports, clear definition of the attributions of the Scientific Committee relative to the Secretariat and mutual representation at meeting of organs.

2.3 Operational issues
The Governing Board needs to examine a number of operational issues and formulate related policies aimed at providing guidance to the Executive Director. They relate to financial resources and human resources.

Financial resources
The Institute commences its operational activities with practically no money at its disposal. Furthermore, recruitment of the permanent staff has already begun and resources are not available to cover their compensation. While understandably some pledges were not honoured until the legal status of WAI was finalized, it is now a matter of urgency to release those funds. Therefore, one of the first tasks of the Governing Board should be to take measures to secure some immediate short-term funding as well as chart the course for attainment of long-term financial viability of the Institute. Two immediate actions could consist in releasing the funds already pledged by founding members of WAI, and identifying the team that will conduct the long-term resource mobilization campaign with Ecobank.

WAI is an institution whose format is unprecedented in many ways. Therefore, although it can capitalize on the experience of other knowledge organizations, it also needs to find specific answers to some of its challenges. One such challenge is the determination of the resource allocation mechanism that will reflect the Institute’s policy of funding research conducted outside the Institute. Guidelines are needed to ensure that research funds will target the WAI’s stated priorities and that the allocation process is transparent and agreed upon.

In its regular operations the Institute will require considerable travel for its staff, researchers and other partners (consultants, sabbaticants, lecturers, etc.). The large volume of travel that will be needed, thus large budget, the difficulties of traveling in Africa, the need for policy consistency and the obligation for sensible spending may necessitate formulation of a clear and transparent travel policy that will be implemented by the Secretariat and monitored by the Executive Committee.

Human resources
Increased effectiveness of WAI’s operations could be achieved through the resolution of the following three issues. First, efforts should be made to reflect on the composition of the organs and the diversity of academic disciplines to which WAI’s agenda pertains. The current composition of the Governing Board has an inordinate representation of social sciences and a rather weak presence of disciplines such as agronomy, transport, engineering, law, natural sciences, economics, etc. The
composition of the Scientific Committee will hopefully restore the proper balance of knowledge areas. Second, WAI’s staff will work better if they are linked to Liaison Officers attached to the founding members: ECOWAS, UEMOA, UNESCO, Ecobank and Government of Cape Verde. This will simplify and expedite work relations and maintain a continuous line of communication. Finally, the efficiency of the Secretariat is predicated on the availability of personnel and financial manuals that are approved by the Governing Board. Their diligent production will help prevent confusion in the early stages and avoid setting faulty precedents.

2.4 Collaboration
Collaboration will be one of the key ingredients of WAI’s future success. Sound policies and proper planning will help seize the best opportunities in this regard without any meaningful departure from the Institute’s mission or stated objectives. In this regard, three areas merit special attention, namely the role and status of donor organizations, partnerships with other knowledge institutions and the collaboration with the United Nations system.

Donor support is expected to help fund ongoing activities as well as contribute to the endowment fund and therefore play a significant role in the financial sustainability of the Institute and the success of its overall mission. Therefore, it should be welcomed but organized and, as much as possible, made consistent with the pursuit of WAI’s objectives. Core support should be preferred to program funding and earmarking should be discouraged to give the Secretariat maximum flexibility. While the current governance structure of WAI does not provide for the presence of donors in its organs, the Institute could either maintain an active dialogue with individual donors or organize regular donor forum meetings to which all current and prospective donors could be invited for in-depth discussion of WAI’s activities and environment.

Considerable financial and programming leverage can be achieved through partnerships with knowledge institutions based in Africa and overseas. By developing such partnerships, WAI will extend its reach, create opportunities for mutual learning and cross-fertilization, and provide direct support to other regional and sub-regional organizations of Africa. This constitutes an ideal channel for collaboration with the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) Agency and institutes sponsored by ECOWAS and UEMOA. Foreign institutes could also benefit from this partnership.

During preparations for the establishment of WAI, several contacts were made with the United Nations University and plans were initiated to take advantage of the Institute’s status as a Category II organization of UNESCO. Current discussions with United Nations University – Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS)
are promising in this regard. These efforts could come to fruition if WAI obtains the distinction of being a UNU Centre of Excellence and therefore reaps the financial and programming benefits. The Secretariat should be encouraged to pursue this course of action as a matter of priority.

2.5 Medium-term strategy and plan of action
By the sheer nature of its mission, WAI will, over the next few years, conduct a variety of activities and undertake a broad range of new initiatives that must be coherent, thus the need for a medium-term strategy. This document will rationalize the work of the Secretariat, facilitate the supervisory role of the Governing Board, build consensus among all levels of the governance structure and provide a clear image of the Institute to its stakeholders, partners and the world at large. It should ideally be a collective effort of the constituents of WAI but ultimately be drafted by the Secretariat. The medium-term strategy should have two key properties: i) be responsive to the needs and concerns of the Institute’s main stakeholders to ensure relevance of the work that will be carried out, and ii) be visionary by anticipating issues and challenges that are not of immediate concern but will emerge in the future and will then require immediate attention and answers. The first phase of the strategy could have a span of four to five years.

A plan of action will translate the strategy into actual activities that will be planned, budgeted for, financed and implemented as the main business of the Institute. In order to facilitate monitoring and evaluation of its implementation a plan should be designed, agreed upon in advance and perhaps revised from time to time as circumstances change. The plan of action should also serve to identify the staff complement that will be needed for the Institute to function properly.

4. Observers and new partners
4.1 Observers. Historic partners of the West Africa Institute include the IDRC (International Development Research Center, Canada), UNU-CRIS (United Nations University – Comparative Regional Integration Studies Institute), based in Bruges, Belgium, and ZEI (Center for European Regional Integration Studies, Bonn University).

4.2 New partners. More recently other regional or international big players, such as the African Development Bank Group, EBID (ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development) and NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) have been approached.

Moreover, EARN (Europe-Africa Research Network) and WAI have jointly organized an international seminar on Africa-Europe: changing relationship? The
event took place in Praia, on October 14-15, 2010. As we have seen during the forum on science and development organized in Ouagadougou by the ECOWAS Commission and other places, many national, regional and international organizations welcome WAI with enormous expectations.

Promoting research, education and systematic debate based on evidence among representatives from academy, political organizations and civil society on national, regional, and interregional, continental or island issues, the West Africa Institute may be a lighthouse against the knowledge deficit and a promoter of sustainable and efficient integration processes with the goal of improving people’s lives.

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