

Nº 113 - JANUARY 2012

The EU's approach to fragility in Guinea Bissau: Between Ambition and Coherence

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»» As the European External Action Service (EEAS) becomes operational, European Union (EU) efforts to address state fragility in West Africa continue to record mixed results.

In Guinea Bissau, weak political economy analysis, perfunctory multilateralism and mistimed reform incentives remain critical roadblocks. Guinea Bissau's history of state fragility has been exacerbated in recent years by recurrent military mutinies and the permeation of state institutions by global narco-trafficking networks. EU policy frailties meanwhile provide few options for Guinea Bissau's reformers, while inconsistencies put EU achievements in Security Sector Reform (SSR) at risk.

A succession of developments triggered a March-July 2011 Political Consultation (PC) between the EU and government of Guinea Bissau, based on Article 96 of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. Military uprisings between 2003 and 2010 had claimed the lives of three senior political figures, while two ringleaders of 1 April 2010 mutiny were subsequently promoted to the military leadership. However, a dynamic EU approach to PC was impossible due to a lack of flexibility. Opportunities to reward nascent improvements, address drivers of fragility and restart stalling reform were thus missed.

To unlock the EU's potential for influence in Guinea Bissau, future engagement must overcome dissonance between analysis and priorities, address weaknesses in the EU's situational awareness, and prioritise smarter partnerships with myriad stakeholders.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU's policy weaknesses constrain its efforts to address state fragility in Guinea Bissau.
- Inflexibility in political consultations with Guinea Bissau prevented the EU from reinforcing reform.
- The EU must better calibrate reform incentives and develop smarter partnerships with the UN and regional actors.

FRIDE acknowledges the generous financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, for this project.

»»»»» **POLITICAL DISSONANCE**

The EU committed serious tactical errors in the manner and extent of its scale-back in development cooperation with Guinea Bissau. Sanctions produced perverse effects, including eroding EU reform influence in critical areas. In late 2010, the EU withdrew its modestly successful SSR mission to the country soon followed by the suspension of all non-allocated aid. The funding freeze (excluding humanitarian support) totalled €120 million under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF). The ensuing dialogue has failed to improve governance blockages and a narco-trafficking problem seen as potential elixir to organised crime and terrorism in the Sahel region.

Firstly, a short-termist and events driven EU approach failed to generate policy traction or sustained impact. The commencement of the PC foreclosed opportunities for the EU to incentivise even modest governance improvements. Moreover, the removal of EU budget support weakened civilian actors when they were most in need of external aid. Meanwhile, military actors - buoyed by illicit wealth - were partially immune from the direct pressure of sanctions. This explains the lack of progress in military reform despite tough EU sanctions.

Secondly, cognitive dissonance in policy and priority setting contributed to inadequate EU situational awareness. Given Guinea Bissau's history of military interference and truncated state formation, the standardised reform timetable demanded by the Article 96 consultation sat at odds with the sustained engagement needed for a transformative effect. The military's anti-reform leadership, long hostile to externally led reform initiatives, clearly aimed to derail progress. One of their key targets was the SSR legal framework that had been elaborated with the support of the first EU SSR mission between 12 February 2008 and 31 May 2009. The EU's downgrading of development cooperation as an intended sanction merely strengthened the obstructionists. The EU also appeared to lack a political-economy perspective when it drove a hard bargain in fishery

negotiations with the Guinean government in June 2010. In this case it missed a key opportunity to boost the fiscal capacity and legitimacy of reformers.

FRAUGHT MULTILATERALISM

Differences in approach and differing priorities prevented better cooperation among myriad international stakeholders. Failure to reconcile EU positions to the gradualist approach favoured by the UN sapped European initiatives on fragility of needed multilateral support. The dispute with the UN was especially debilitating, preventing international convergence on coordination, leadership and sequencing of reform goals.

Article 21 of the EU Lisbon Treaty identifies promotion of multilateral solutions to common problems within the UN framework as one of the guiding principles of EU foreign policy. However on the ground, the EU's practice of multilateralism in Guinea Bissau has been perfunctory and fraught. Actors including the IMF and the World Bank notably continued support for the government in the aftermath of EU withdrawal. Meanwhile, emerging reform actors like the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) chaired by Angola took more pragmatic stances. Unsurprisingly, many reform pledges extracted from the civilian administration through Article 96 consultation remained unfulfilled even as EU leverage waned.

EU-UN rivalry and poor management of policy differences fed a fragmented international agenda. UN officials warned repeatedly in the lead up to the PC of the need to break the 'face-off dynamics' pitting the EU against Guinea Bissau officials. Citing the delicate internal military-civilian balance, the UN wanted regional (ECOWAS/CPLP) leadership on SSR and EU concentration on justice reform and combating narco-trafficking. Observers were alarmed when the Spanish head of

the EU SSR mission publicly denied the existence of a drug-trafficking problem in Guinea Bissau, ostensibly to discredit the UN's view.

These schisms dominated high level meetings. For example, Germany's ambassador charged that reports prepared by the UN Special Representative for the Security Council painted an unduly rosy picture. Some also accused the UN office of harbouring a lead mutineer in the run up to the 1 April mutiny. The disagreements also led to UN diplomats characterising the EU's approach as 'infantile'. EU officials meanwhile countered that the UN disowned the EU SSR mission till the end. However, UN officials did express appreciation for EU SSR contributions, including the consolidation of nine different police units into four streamlined outfits.

On sensitivity to political stability, both organisations maintained radically different approaches. For example, UN officials favoured a gradual roll

out of a retirement roster with pensioned retirement for about 400 or so officers of the top-heavy, aging military hierarchy. The EU wanted a faster revamp. Crucially, lack of a united international front left reform minded politicians unwilling to take political risks. Like-

wise, EU demands in the PC included judicial prosecution of the April 2010 mutineers. The UN preferred immediate action on the March and June 2009 assassinations, including of both former President and Chief of General Staff (COGS) on the same night. With both incumbent COGS and navy chief having led the April mutiny, the UN viewed EU demands for their immediate prosecution as politically fraught. Such divisions seriously dilute international leverage and the EU should take greater account of them in its pursuit of coherence and effectiveness in fragile states.

EU re-engagement within coordinated international efforts backed by the UN could provide renewed impetus for reform

MISTIMED INCENTIVES

The lack of results from the consultation reveals weaknesses in the EU's approach to addressing fragility. The European Council formally closed the PC in July 2011, even though fundamental issues remained unresolved. The European Scrutiny Committee of the British House of Commons concluded it had been a 'pretty fruitless' exercise. A new roadmap outlining steps towards resuming full cooperation betrayed the EU's flagging influence and the ineffectiveness of sanctions. Guinea Bissau failed to deliver on key EU demands, including the release of former COGS detained by mutineers.

The consultation was replete with demands on which civilian leadership could not deliver in the short term without close external support. Right from independence, the state in Guinea Bissau performed very few functions. Technocrats in its elected government recently attempted to improve governance. However, EU demands based on a mechanistic timetable remained too rigid to bolster these efforts. Indeed, the effects of EU sanctions kicked in just when reformists were beginning to deliver better management of public payrolls, roads and other infrastructural projects.

EU pressure on civilian leadership ignored the organic link between political and military leadership and the practical difficulties this imposed. As the civilians depended existentially on the military, any meaningful assertion of civilian supremacy remained a longer term goal beyond the EU's short term outlook. As veterans of the country's war of independence, the military top brass constrain politicians' options and maintain unfettered control over key military appointments. This explains the seeming acquiescence of the political leadership to the controversial elevation of lead mutineers.

Supporters of the Article 96 consultation argue that it produced frank political dialogue. However, disengagement as a sanction only pushed the EU to the margins of SSR processes and isolated Guinea Bissau's progressives within a



»»»»» complex process of compromise and negotiations among national actors. It is only through patient incentivising and careful co-opting that the government can push through SSR initiatives and other reforms feared by the military. To ignore these complexities risks a political rupture, such as the April mutiny against the reformist former COGS and the Prime Minister. Therefore, a longer term EU strategy calibrated to strengthen reformist constituencies would be more effective.

THE 'FISHERY SAGA'

The ultimatum like dynamics of the Article 96 consultation dominated important dialogues – including commercial talks – whilst raising unrealistic expectations on reform. The prospects of reformers gaining the upper hand through tangible developmental achievements were especially hobbled by sanctions. The EU approach did not reflect fully an understanding of the delicate internal political-economic balance. In mid-2011, the EU missed a key opportunity to boost the legitimacy of reformers from the bottom-up. A protracted EU-Guinea Bissau fishing negotiation was concluded in June with the initialling of a €9m million 'interim agreement' broadly restating the terms of an agreement expiring in the same month. In 2011, weaknesses in public finance constrained governance and political legitimacy amidst falling prices for cashew, the country's primary exports. Despite fast imports growth, a 4.7 per cent economic growth forecast for 2012-13 is expected to be offset by a 6.5 per cent current account deficit in 2013. Given the fragile economic outlook, it seemed counter-productive that the PC delayed conclusion of the fishery agreement until mid-2011.

Critics including Angola lambast the EU for signing a commercial agreement whilst scaling back development cooperation. The EU in response points to the opaque mineral deals between Guinea Bissau and international interests like Angola, criticising the secrecy around royalty negotiations. The EU's hard

bargaining replicated the experience of a regional Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) seen by some analyst as incongruent with development objectives.

REGIONAL OWNERSHIP TO EU IRRELEVANCE?

Regional ownership, one of the EU mantras on tackling cross-border threats and drivers of fragility, has produced unintended consequences in Guinea Bissau. Gaps in this rhetoric are revealed on two levels. Internally, meaningful local ownership of anti-narco-trafficking initiatives is constrained by weak public administration, limited civic capacities and a civilian-military imbalance. Practical considerations to unblock these constraints were not evident in the timing and scope of EU demands on Guinea Bissau's civilian leadership. At the regional level, the EU failed to translate its expanding outreach to ECOWAS into a shared undertaking on reform. ECOWAS officials argue they have a long track record and vested interest in preserving regional stability, including in Guinea Bissau. Yet, they complain many EU initiatives, including the one on SSR, operate in parallel to regional and UN initiatives. The EU formally supports the ECOWAS-CPLP SSR Road Map of 2011, even if its financial contribution to this initiative has been comparatively modest.

Angola's efforts to outflank the EU could have also been better managed through a more grounded political-economy analysis. Luanda has expanded its clout at the expense of a retrenched EU. Angola's bold deployment of its Military Mission (MISSANG) in Guinea Bissau on 21 March 2011, with a contingent of 200 military advisers, left EU commentators wary. As ECOWAS and the CPLP joined up the EU appeared reactive. In the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of the €5 million EU SSR mission and its 21-man staff, a joint ECOWAS -CPLP pledge of \$95 million in support of the military Pension Fund followed swiftly. This fitted the

longstanding UN position on regional, rather than EU, leadership of frontline reforms. It also boosted Angolan influence as Guinea Bissau's largest bilateral contributor. A subsequent EU pledge of €3 million for military pensions – announced at the end of the PC and conditioned on Guinea Bissau's contribution – paled in significance to the \$95 million regional envelope.

The EU SSR exit strategy was designed to force Article 96 dialogue, but crucially lacked a clear plan for 're-entry' or re-engagement in a more enabling future scenario. EU inertia became the default approach as Brussels' fixation on narrowly defined consultation outcomes constrained flexibility in responding to regional and internal evolutions in Guinea Bissau. Most crucially, incipient governance improvements failed to trigger new impulses for EU re-engagement. Under the pressure of sanctions, the reform minded finance minister even postponed planned discussions with creditors on reducing further the country's debt stock.

Both ECOWAS and Angola argue they bring unique strengths to the table to complement existing efforts. However, the expansion of their SSR footprint in Guinea Bissau need not have been at the price of EU withdrawal. Angola craves the lead role in military reform as demonstration of its regional emergence. It sees its historical relationship with Guinea Bissau's military as key to providing reassurances that reform is not intended for wholesale retrenchments. Luanda's intentions are also geo-economic, focused on expanding its West African foothold via Bissau. Its commercial interests have also grown with rising expectations that Guinea Bissau is set to become a key mineral producer, with large scale bauxite exports expected to start soon. Luanda tellingly insisted during the ECOWAS-CPLP negotiation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that its \$32 million pension contribution will be managed on a bilateral basis.

Yet, given limited technical capacity and divergent political goals between ECOWAS and Angola, a vacuum lingers in policy areas vacated

by the EU. Progress on establishing the Pension Fund has been held back by political dithering and faltering capacities. Desperate pleas from Guinean officials were heard at the UN Security Council in November for the release of ECOWAS's \$63 million contribution. Having concluded the required banking agreement to administer the pension fund, Guinean reformers successfully cajoled their own government into donating the first \$200,000. Even then, the weakening position of Guinean reformers has emboldened Guinea's COGS to block the ECOWAS interposition force envisaged under the MOU. Had the EU remained engaged, current regional initiatives would offer outlets for a joint reform push. With a scaled back EU firmly on the back foot, concern is rife about the uncertain reform outlook. The potential for renewed instability was highlighted by the death of Guinea Bissau's ailing president on 9 January 2012, only two weeks after an alleged coup d'état.

CONCLUSION

Following the consultation, the EU appears an increasingly fringe actor with an uncertain approach to development cooperation and shrinking reform influence. While it was right to toughen its stance in the aftermath of the mutiny and military appointments, the EU incurred a tactical error in withdrawing without a clear re-entry plan. Shifting priorities post-Arab Spring make it particularly unlikely that Guinea Bissau SSR will re-emerge as a EU policy priority. Yet, competencies and experience required to manage coherent reform are in short supply among regional actors. EU re-engagement within coordinated international efforts backed by the UN could provide renewed impetus for reform.

As ECOWAS scrambles to tackle internal instabilities, transnational crime, narco-trafficking and terrorist challenges in the Sahel, its capacities are stymied. A more coherent EU involvement could bolster existing regional capacities through closer partnerships in contexts like Guinea Bissau. This could open up



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»»»»» policy spaces for expanded implementation of the EU's new Sahel Strategy with closer ECOWAS involvement, and help link disparate EU initiatives across the region. A bolder use of expanded EU Delegations is also called for. Expanded delegations in-country should house specialist units with cross-border remits, linked horizontally to monitor reform-related regional trends and consolidate country level EU SSR achievements. Recent improvements in EU-ECOWAS cooperation offer hopes of greater adaptation to reform and development needs. Working alongside regional actors, the EU would be better able to craft a role that is assertive as well as flexible, supportive without underplaying ownership, and matches ambitions with effective multilateral outreach.

Closer EU policy linkages, for example across capacity building, commerce and development cooperation, are also needed. Continued blockage of EU assistance in justice, civil and military administration reforms serves few purposes beyond masking the disappointing results from consultation. A forward looking re-engagement is needed in policy pillars beyond the road sector and energy cooperation which

are now unblocked. Nuanced objectives, grounded in deep political-economy analysis, can help reverse diminishing EU leverage. Such analysis would also improve partnerships between the EU and local reform constituencies, while aligning European demands with wider international positions. Future EU engagement will be more effective if its focus is on building functional partnerships rather than dominating the international agenda.

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The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE or any of its funders.

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