

From Delegated Authority to Constrained Actorness: ECOWAS and the Limits of Supranationalism in West Africa

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Abstract

The paper examines the extent to which the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a supranational actor in subregional governance. ECOWAS's actorness is tested against actorness criteria - autonomy, recognition, and capacity developed from the broader literature on actorness in the international system. The article's originality, therefore, lies in the simplified analytical framework used to systematically assess the degree to which ECOWAS is a supranational actor. The paper adopts a qualitative approach. It specifically relies on documentary content analysis of both primary and secondary sources. These include reports from institutions such as ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN); their official websites; and academic journal articles. The paper finds that ECOWAS's actorness has evolved considerably over the years as it has undergone significant institutional reforms. This has given the organisation some degree of supranationality, through which it has promoted subregional economic integration and democratic governance, and prevented or resolved subregional conflicts. However, the paper finds ECOWAS's supranationality constrained by uneven member-state commitments, lingering institutional constraints (such as limited enforcement powers), and subregional political complexities. ECOWAS has thus become a significant but constrained supranational entity in West Africa. This offers a nuanced evaluation that goes beyond portraying ECOWAS as either a mere intergovernmental entity or a complete supranational body.

Introduction

Scholars have interpreted actorness and international organisational actorness in different ways, as the following sections will show. Nevertheless, the supranational actorness of international organisations (IOs), such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is critical as the world continues to pursue international cooperation through global governance institutions. This is particularly important given the state-centric tendencies of great powers in recent years, which threaten the current rules-based order (Hakimi & Cogan, 2025). This development has increased uncertainty in the international system, as power is no longer concentrated among traditional great powers, whose dictates emerging global powers increasingly resist (Nuruzzaman, 2020). Consequently, the international system has become increasingly multipolar (Peters, 2023), reinforcing the need to strengthen supranational global governance institutions, based on agreed terms of participation, to make international cooperation smoother and more acceptable to all sovereign states.

A limited body of literature has shown that ECOWAS can be studied as an international actor, although approaches and perspectives on ECOWAS's actorness differ. For example, Hulse (2014) developed five-point criteria and applied it comparatively to ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) relative to trade, in which he found ECOWAS with relatively greater actorness, mainly in decision-making and institutional capabilities. Other scholars have assessed ECOWAS's actorness through a broader institutional, material, and ideational lens. On the one hand, several findings on ECOWAS have shown an evolving institution in terms of autonomy and capacity (Kufuor, 2006; Lokulo-Sodipe & Osuntogun, 2013; Trondal et al., 2022).

However, recent research has highlighted the lingering tension between ECOWAS institutions and its member states, raising questions about its status as a unitary actor rather than a collective actor whose agency relies on interactions between regional institutions and national governments (Trondal et al., 2022). Despite these academic contributions, the literature on the relationship between ECOWAS's delegated supranationalism and its uneven implementation across subregional governance departments remains under-researched, creating a research gap and supporting the claim of novelty. This paper thus fills this research gap by developing a simplified three-point actorness framework – autonomy, recognition, and capacity. This is applied more broadly to ECOWAS, specifically, its economic, political, and security governance. The paper thus goes beyond assessing the extent to which ECOWAS is an actor to examine the factors that shape how its delegated supranational authority translates into effective actorness. The paper therefore seeks to answer the following research question: Why does ECOWAS show significant supranational authority in some aspects, yet fail to translate that authority into effective action in other domains?

This question is answered by arguing that ECOWAS has, over the years, developed important albeit differentiated supranational actorness. The organisation has developed greater institutional autonomy, with significant formal recognition by member states and beyond. However, implementation capacity has not developed commensurately. ECOWAS's actorness is thus conditional on the extent to which its member states commit politically, which has varied across subregional policy areas. The withdrawal of its Sahel member states not only demonstrates the reversibility of member states' delegated authority, but it also shows that regional supranationalism in the subregion remains politically dependent rather than linear.

Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the extent to which ECOWAS manifests supranational actorness in subregional political, security, and economic governance. A qualitative approach best suits this study, as it does not seek to quantify variables, which would require a quantitative approach (Polkinghorne, 2005). Instead, it seeks to analyse institutional processes based on an actorness framework comprising three-point criteria, namely, autonomy, recognition, and capacity, developed from the broader literature on actorness in the

international system. This simplified actorness framework aided a systematic assessment of ECOWAS's supranational characteristics and its role in West African governance.

The study is based exclusively on documentary content analysis of primary and secondary sources. The documentary method served two purposes. First, it offered information as rich as that from other data sources, such as interviews. Second, it was a convenient approach, as one did not have to travel (Bowen, 2009). The primary sources included the 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty, ECOWAS Protocols, and resolutions of the Authority of Heads of State and Government (AHSG). Other sources included communiqués and reports from ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN. Secondary sources included academic journal articles, policy reports, and academic books. All documents used were cited appropriately, and copyright rules were respected.

A qualitative data analysis was used, allowing careful perusal of all documents to find evidence to test the three-point actorness criteria. First, evidence was sought for autonomy, specifically, the degree of ECOWAS's institutional independence in decision-making. Second, evidence was sought for recognition, specifically, the degree of acceptance and legitimacy accorded to ECOWAS's autonomy. Finally, documents were reviewed to assess the extent of ECOWAS's capacity. It specifically sought evidence of competent institutional personnel and the extent to which ECOWAS is financially capable of covering its administrative expenses and operationalising sustained coercive action, such as peacekeeping, with little or no external support.

The Concept and Criteria of International Actorness

Different understandings of what constitutes actorness exist. This remains an area of academic contestation, with scholarly criteria varying in content, number, and terminology (Huigens & Niemann, 2009, p. 8). Consequently, this paper examines a representative sample of the literature on actorness through which the three-point actorness criteria – autonomy, recognition, and capacity are developed. *Autonomy* is defined as the possession, by an entity, of administrative structures comprising executive, legislative, and judicial arms with manifest supra-national power over its member states in decision-making; *capacity* is defined as the possession by an entity of a considerable degree of material and human resources, enabling it to support both policy formulation and implementation. It is important to distinguish autonomy from capacity, as institutional presence may itself be understood as capacity. For this paper, autonomy refers to ECOWAS's ability to make decisions independently through its institutional structures. Capacity, by contrast, asks whether ECOWAS can implement its decisions through funding, personnel, diplomacy, logistics, and peacekeeping. This implies that an entity's institutions may have autonomy but lack capacity, and vice versa. Finally, *recognition* is defined as the willingness of ECOWAS member states and other external states and non-state actors to accept it as a legitimate decision-making authority. In other words, terms such as compliance, institutional participation, external engagement, and policy implementation indicate recognition but are not recognition itself.

The three are broad enough to encompass the criteria identified by the selected scholars. This is justified on two grounds: first, selecting just three criteria removes duplication across scholarly criteria, simplifying the concept while maintaining its meaning, as shown in this section. Secondly, these three indicators feature prominently in the literature and are therefore quite indispensable for ascribing actorness. Consequently, the criteria offered by each selected scholar are realigned to fit the three selected criteria, as shown in this section, illustrated in Table 1, and simplified in Fig. 1 below.

Vogler and Bretherton have set out an elaborate set of criteria for international organisational actorness. According to them, an entity must fulfil five criteria to be considered an actor. Firstly, the entity must display a 'shared commitment to a set of overarching values and principles' (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006, p. 9). This article refers to this as shared values. They describe it as a set of values an entity identifies with, and that both member states and the entity itself must commit to. Second, they argue that the entity needs 'the ability to identify priorities and to formulate coherent and consistent policies' (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006, p. 9). This paper refers to this as policy formulation capability. The third criterion for Vogler and Bretherton is 'the ability to negotiate effectively with third parties and to implement agreements' (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006, p. 10). This is termed 'negotiating ability' in this paper. They explained this criterion as the ability to engage with other entities to negotiate a given issue, leveraging each entity's competence to advance its interests. However, it should also be able to implement agreements reached with third parties, which, for them, further indicates an entity's actorness (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006).

The fourth criterion is the 'capability in the deployment of diplomatic, economic, and other instruments in support of common policies.' (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006, p. 10). This criterion is termed capacity in this paper, as Vogler & Bretherton describe it as using an entity's diplomatic resources and economic leverage, among others, to ensure the successful implementation of its shared purpose. It includes using its diplomats for negotiation and applying economic sanctions and economic inducements to achieve a common purpose (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006). Their final criterion is 'public and parliamentary support to legitimise action' (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006, p. 10). This is termed legitimacy in this paper, denoting the idea that all actions taken by the entity must be seen to have the approval of parliament and, by implication, the public of the state concerned (Vogler & Bretherton, 2006).

Bearing in mind the definitions offered in this paper for *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *capacity*, and juxtaposed with Vogler and Bretherton's explanations of their actorness criteria, their shared value criterion connotes *autonomy*; their negotiating ability and legitimacy criteria connote

recognition; and their resource capacity and policy capacity criteria connote *capacity*.

Wunderlich (2008, p. 17) also identifies five criteria for actorness. They are, first, 'internal identity/self-perception', which he explained as having a self-image. In other words, the entity must clearly state what it is and what it is not. This criterion matters because an entity's identity shapes its international interests and activities. His second criterion is 'external recognition' (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 17), namely the idea that an entity must be recognised by actors in the international system beyond its regional domain to be recognised as an actor relative to its identification (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 17). The third criterion is 'international presence' (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 17), explained as being similar to the preceding criterion, as it relates to how much an entity can use its recognition in the international system to influence the external environment actively; that is, the ability to get favourable outcomes at the international level that serve the entity's interest. The fourth criterion is 'some form of institutionalisation' (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 17), through the creation of administrative structures and institutions for the entity's day-to-day operations. Finally, according to this framework, an actor requires 'a set of instruments and policy-making procedures' (Wunderlich, 2008, p.17), which 'enable an international actor to engage in external relations.' (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 17).

Factoring in the definitions offered in this paper for *autonomy*, *recognition* and *capacity* and juxtaposed with the explanations offered by Wunderlich for their actorness criteria, his self-perception and institutional policy-making procedure criteria connote *autonomy*, and their explanations of external recognition and international presence criteria connote *recognition*.

Brattberg and Rhinard set out four criteria for actorness. They are context, coherence, capability and consistency. They explain the first criterion, context, as the extent to which others recognise an entity as an actor within the international system and the perceived legitimacy of its purported actions (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2013). Their second criterion is coherence, which they define as an entity's ability to articulate its values and clarify its preferences, and to maintain institutions that represent those values and policy preferences as it seeks to exert influence internationally. Their third criterion is capability, that is, the entity's ability to implement policy instruments and mobilise other supporting resources to achieve its policy goals. Finally, consistency, namely the extent to which agreed policies are carried out with particular focus on coordination among member states in the implementation process (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2013).

With reference to the definitions offered in this paper for *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *capacity*, and juxtaposed with the explanations offered by Brattberg and Rhinard for their actorness criteria, their Coherence criterion connotes *autonomy*, their context and consistency criteria connote *recognition*, and their capacity criterion connotes *capacity*.

Jupille and Caporaso also identify four criteria for any organisation to attain actor status. These are: autonomy, recognition, authority, and cohesion. They explain autonomy as an entity with a distinctive institutional apparatus that manifests independence from different actors in decision-making and policy formulation (Jupille & Caporaso, 1998; Greiçevci, 2011). They define recognition as other actors' acceptance of an entity as an actor, manifested in their willingness to engage with it. From this viewpoint, they reckon that recognition is indispensable for conferring actorness. Jupille and Caporaso define authority as the legal basis on which an entity can act; from this paper's perspective, this connotes autonomy. They define cohesion as the extent to which an entity can articulate a consistent, internally formulated policy preference. This criterion, according to them, addresses how well an entity can coordinate member states' policy preferences with its own policy position (Jupille & Caporaso, 1998).

Given the definitions of *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *capacity* in this paper, and juxtaposed with Jupille and Caporaso's actorness criteria, their autonomy criterion connotes *autonomy*, and their recognition and cohesion criteria connote *recognition*.

Hocking and Smith also explain international actorness through three criteria: autonomy, representation, and influence. They defined autonomy as the degree of freedom an actor has to pursue its core objectives. This centres on the entity's independence from member states and external entities in its policy formulation. They explained representation as representing a definitive constituency in terms of people and territory. Finally, they define influence as how much sway an entity can exert at any given time and in a specific context. The implication is that for an entity to be considered an actor, it must be seen to wield influence within its constituency and, to some degree, beyond it (Hocking & Smith, 1990, pp. 71-2).

Building on the definitions of *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *capacity* offered in this paper, and juxtaposed with Hocking and Smith's actorness criteria, their autonomy criterion connotes *autonomy*, and their representation and influence criteria connote *recognition*.

Finally, Cosgrove and Twitchett argue that three indicators can assess an international actor. The first is the extent of its institutions' autonomy in decision-making. They argue that the process should give institutional structures the power to initiate policies and the discretion to put the entity's interests ahead of member states' interests. The second concerns the extent to which an entity impacts the international system, both among member states and beyond, and is referred to in this paper as "international impact. This criterion concerns getting states to comply with the central entity's or IO's policy direction. The third, and what they consider the most important, is an entity's ability to formulate or guide the foreign policy of its member states. This is termed in this paper as the 'foreign policy consistency' of member states, masterminded by the administrative structures of an IO (Cosgrove & Twitchett, 1970; Niemann & Bretherton, 2013).

Given the definitions of *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *capacity* in this paper, and Cosgrove and Twitchett's actorness criteria, their autonomy criterion connotes *autonomy*, and their international impact and foreign policy consistency criteria connote *recognition*.

	Vogler&Bretherton	Uwe Wunderlich	Brattberg&Rhinar	Jupille&Caporaso	Hocking & Smith	Cosgrove & Twitchett
Autonomy	Shared values	- Self-perception - Institutional policy-making procedure	Coherence	Autonomy	Autonomy	Autonomy
Recognition	- Negotiating ability - Legitimacy	- External Recognition - International presence	- Context - Consistency	- Recognition - Cohesion	- Representation - Influence	- International impact - Foreign policy consistency
Capacity	- Resource Capacity - Policy capacity		Capacity			

Table 1. Illustration of realigned actorness criteria into *autonomy recognition and capacity*.

Source: Authors' compilation from actorness literature.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Institutional Presence)

Over the years, ECOWAS has built institutional structures for sector-specific objectives. The organisation thus has the structures to act autonomously in policy formulation and decision-making. One reason for revising the ECOWAS treaty in 1993 was the realisation that a viable ECOWAS organisation would require member states to cede some sovereignty to it (Obiri-Korang, 2021). Until then, the Authority of Heads of State and Government (AHSG) handled decision-making and policy-making, leaving the then ECOWAS secretariat, now the Commission, with only an executive role (Trondal et al., 2022). As part of efforts to empower ECOWAS's administrative organs and make them more autonomous, a committee of eminent sub-regional citizens was established to examine the organisation's challenges, and it recommended that ECOWAS be made a supra-national body (Kufuor, 2006). This was incorporated in the 1993 revised treaty (Lokulo-Sodipe & Osuntogun, 2013).

ECOWAS' supranationality is thus seen in Article 7 of the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (ECOWAS, 1999, Art. 7). It states, 'Without prejudice to its wide-ranging powers as provided under Article 9 of the Treaty...the Authority hereby mandates the Mediation and Security Council to take, on its behalf, appropriate decisions for the implementation of the provisions of this Mechanism' (ECOWAS, 1999, Art. 7). To further cede state-level powers to ECOWAS, member states agreed to establish new community institutions with supranational powers. The idea of supranationality was considered necessary given the roles member states are expected to play to manifest ECOWAS's actorness, such as implementing its policies at the national level (Elowson & MacDermott, 2010). For instance, in addition to the executive arm, the West African Community Parliament was established (Musavengana, 2011), as was a community Court (Banjo, 2007).

This means it now comprises the executive, legislative and judicial arms. This section, and the sections on each arm, will outline only the structures, their composition, and powers, as a test of autonomy. A discussion of the policy directives from these structures and states' responses to them will follow, to test ECOWAS' recognition. Finally, ECOWAS's ability to implement its policies and programs, both materially and diplomatically, will be tested.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Executive Autonomy)

The AHSG sits at the top of ECOWAS' governance hierarchy and wields the organisation's apex executive and policy-making authority. (Edodi & Ahimbisibwe, 2024). It is headed by a yearly, alternating leadership of the Heads of State of member countries (Omo-Ogbebor & Sanusi, 2017, p. 60). The country presiding at a given time also enjoys the privilege of having its foreign minister chair a sub-executive body known as the Council of Ministers. In addition to these structures, the ECOWAS Commission, established in 2007, embodies the organisation's autonomous structures. The Commission is headed by a President appointed by the Authority for a four-year, non-renewable term and supported by a Vice President and 13 commissioners (Trondal et al., 2022, p. 40). Under the executive arm, the Commission comprises several autonomous institutions headed by experts in different fields, who usually meet to develop memoranda before the AHSG meetings, having undertaken background work and formulated policy initiatives (Omisakin, 2013).

This contrasts with the period before ECOWAS established the Commission. For instance, before 2007, the AHSG, as stated in Article 7, Clause 3(a), of the 1993 ECOWAS revised treaty, was responsible for determining the organisation's policies and offering key guidelines for the Community. Under 3(b), it oversaw the operations of all ECOWAS institutions and monitored policy implementation (ECOWAS, 1993, p. 8). The Commission's introduction mattered because executive functions no longer rest exclusively with the heads of state of member states. Under the Commission, empowered community institutions now handle decision preparation, agenda setting, and policy formulation, leaving member-state capitals with a limited role. For instance, Article 19 (5) of the supplementary Protocol amending the Revised ECOWAS Treaty states: 'The Commission shall formulate proposals that will enable the Authority and Council to take decisions on the main orientations of policies of Member States and the Community' (ECOWAS, 2006a, p. 8). This particularly demonstrates autonomy, as the Commission retains institutional memory, maintains policy consistency, and ensures continuity as state governments and policies change under democracies, which is the hallmark of institutional autonomy.

Nevertheless, because member states retain ultimate authority through AHSG, the ECOWAS Commission is not completely independent. It is even more so because the executive arm comprises sub-regional civil servants, such as commissioners, as well as representatives of member states at the ambassadorial and ministerial levels. This might suggest a lack of institutional autonomy from member states. However, a counterargument is that the rules governing an institution such as ECOWAS matter more than who occupies a given office. More importantly, given the AHSG's reduced role after ECOWAS became a commission, the organisation can be said to possess significant discretion within the powers delegated to it. It is important to emphasise that even when policy suggestions originate with state representatives and are ultimately implemented, they can still be said to have come from an autonomous ECOWAS executive structure. This is because the policies would have gone through the organisation's decision-making process, not solely through the AHSG.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Legislative Autonomy)

The idea of the ECOWAS parliament was first mooted in 1994 but came into effect in 2000, with its first session the following year (Musavengana, 2011). Parliaments are often considered the heartbeat of democratic institutions (Saiegh, 2005), given that they enact laws that define an entity's identity. Within the paper's framework, this formal delegation reflects emerging parliamentary autonomy. The real manifestation of legislative autonomy is seen in the supplementary protocol on the Community Parliament's establishment, of which article 4(2) reads: 'The powers of the ECOWAS Parliament shall be progressively enhanced from advisory to co-/decision making and subsequently to a law-making role in areas to be defined by the Authority' (Born et al., 2011, p. 84).

This means that member states have officially committed themselves to gradually transferring legislative authority to the ECOWAS parliament. Thus, although the process is incomplete, the framework adopted in the paper shows that the formal commitment itself amounts to delegated authority, which affords the ECOWAS parliament autonomy. Accordingly, a subsequent supplementary protocol in 2016 enhanced the powers of the ECOWAS parliament. Article 9 of the protocol requires that specific issues, such as the ECOWAS budget, treaty amendments, and annual audit reports, be referred to parliament. However, matters such as sanctions, admission of members, and defence, peace, and security are not to be referred to the ECOWAS Parliament by mandate, though they may be referred to it voluntarily.

From the preceding paragraph, it is clear that the ECOWAS Parliament is currently limited in its legislative power. For instance, it presently draws its members from parliamentarians of member states, pending the implementation of universal adult suffrage (Nelson, 2025). Consequently, as Kizito and Patrick argue, the ECOWAS parliament is essentially a step toward an ECOWAS of people through representation. They added that the parliament remains only an avenue for dialogue and seeking advice on regional integration (Kizito & Patrick, 2012). What is thus crucially lacking at present is the legislative arm's ability to exercise binding oversight over the executive and to enact laws for the judiciary to interpret. For instance, parliamentary decisions are currently non-binding, except in relation to the review of ECOWAS treaties and acts and issues of human rights protection, on which its opinion is binding under Articles 11 and 12, respectively, of the 2016 supplementary act (ECOWAS, 2016, p. 10).

However, autonomy, as used in this paper, does not necessarily imply absolute legislative independence. It is about the presence of institutions that can exercise delegated authority, which the ECOWAS Parliament does, in line with the limited role assigned to it in the treaties and protocols. The ECOWAS Parliament therefore signifies evolving autonomy. This is supported by the fact that the parliament's positions are binding on important issues such as treaty review and human rights matters. It shows that member states have accepted parliamentary authority in specific policy areas. This can be described as limited supranational autonomy, but not as absolute dependence on national governments.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Judicial Autonomy)

The idea of the court is not new, as it was contained in the 1975 maiden treaty. The treaty established a tribunal to settle disputes between member states. This has evolved with the adoption of the 1991 Protocol, which established the ECOWAS Community Court (Ladan & Tawfiq, 2023). However, the court did not come into force until after the 1993 revised treaty. Even then, the court operated for the first ten years essentially as before, focusing mainly on disputes between member states and ECOWAS (Ojomo, 2014). The entry into force of the 2005 supplementary protocol expanded the court's scope. First, its institutional presence signifies autonomy, serving as a vehicle for its more concrete manifestation. In other words, the court's independence from member states matters more, as it amounts to delegated authority for the court to

act; hence, autonomy. For the first time, after 2005, the protocol granted individual citizens of ECOWAS states the right of access to the court for human rights-related justice (ECOWAS, 2005). It is also important to stress that the initial restriction, mainly requiring citizens of member states to exhaust local remedies before resorting to the court, no longer applies (Nwaogu, 2022, p. 274). On this basis, Yaya (2014) notes that by 2004, ECOWAS was the only REC in Africa to have given its Community Court a regional role, serving as an arbiter between its citizens and member states, even before they exhaust national remedies.

The Community Court's core mandate, like that of other international courts, is to interpret international law within its jurisdiction and ensure justice. The court comprises five Justices whom the AHSG appoints upon the recommendation of the Judicial Council. As part of the institution's ownership, the Justices must be West African citizens. They must be qualified as Supreme Court judges or have expertise in a specific area of international law, especially on regional integration (ECOWAS, 1991, Art. 3(1)). Crucially, the judges are accorded considerable independence from member states in their work. For instance, 'The Court of Justice shall carry out the functions assigned to it independently of the Member States and the Institutions of the Community' (ECOWAS, 1993, Art. 15(3)). This highlights a key element of ECOWAS's supranational attribute, as citizens of member states have an avenue within ECOWAS to seek justice when they feel they are being denied justice at home.

The Court's jurisdiction over individuals shows that disputes can sidestep exclusive state control. Crucially, this means ECOWAS member states have delegated some judicial authority to a supranational court. Accordingly, member states are legally obliged to obey the Community Court's rulings. Therefore, although ECOWAS does not have as much supranational authority as advanced entities such as the European Union (EU), the ECOWAS Court's independence and jurisdiction mean member states have delegated a considerable degree of authority and, by implication, institutional autonomy.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Executive Recognition)

Recognition, as shown in this section, results from ECOWAS member states voluntarily accepting its legal authority through treaties they have signed. Their adherence to, or implementation of, some of these treaties, as shown below, constitutes evidence of ECOWAS recognition by member states and beyond.

From a security perspective, one case in point is the 2006 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (ECOWAS, 2006b). Member states implement this instrument, and the Commission has acted on the mandate given by member states to support the sub-region's agenda to control small arms proliferation. Since the ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme (ECOSAP) was established, the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security has facilitated the establishment of affiliate offices in all member states. It has also built member states' capacity, with support from international partners, to implement ECOSAP effectively (Darkwa, 2011). This shows recognition of the administrative structures, given that it is a Commission policy accepted by member states for the collective good.

ECOWAS' recognition is also evident in member states' responses to the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. For example, in 2001, the ECOWAS Commission adopted a zero-tolerance stance against military rule. This aimed to achieve constitutional convergence among member states, grounded in the principles of democracy and good governance (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024). The sustained and improving democratisation of the sub-region, until the recent re-emergence of coups, demonstrates the impact of this directive and thus supports the argument that member states recognise ECOWAS' supranationality. Crucially, despite the recent coups, sustained democratic governance in leading states such as Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Ghana provides recognition and hope for democratic revival in the sub-region.

The executive arm now has the authority to defend democratic governance, pass the necessary protocols, and, where necessary, restore democracy through legitimate coercive power. Accordingly, ECOWAS has suspended some of its member states, namely Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, for offences such as the military overthrow of democratically elected governments. From this perspective, Bah et al. argue as follows:

West Africa, perhaps more than any other region, has one of the most robust and proactive decision-making organs, the Mediation and Security Council (MSC)...It has taken very intrusive and binding decisions, including the deployment of peace operations to Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia in 2003. It has suspended several of its members from its Council for failing to comply with its norms (Bah et al., 2014, p. 43).

However, acquiescence does not necessarily mean recognition of ECOWAS's autonomous supranational authority. In other words, recognition is better understood as unambiguous and persistent acknowledgement of its autonomous authority, as compliance may result from national interests rather than an automatic admission of ECOWAS' supranationalism. Accordingly, recognition is not based on the concept of one voice but on its ability to act legitimately in accordance with its decisions, even when some member states disagree. ECOWAS has always been accorded legitimacy by its member states, as shown by its subregional military interventions below.

ECOWAS has intervened militarily in member states several times, some without unanimous agreement. Crucially, where dissent over initial deployment has arisen, it is, as Marco Wyss argues and as pointed out earlier, often a consequence of concerns over factors which do not relate to ECOWAS legitimacy but to issues such as '...the nature of an individual crisis, as well as the political, strategic, and economic interests of... member states.' (Wyss, 2017, p. 495). One typical example is the Liberian intervention, to which some member states, mainly the Francophone

members, objected. Nevertheless, the intervention went ahead under ECOWAS auspices, with initial dissenters later joining the mission (Tuck, 2000). This raises questions about cohesion as a component of recognition among ECOWAS member states. However, this does not negate recognition of the executive arm, since in a democratic institution some member states may hold dissenting views on an issue. Besides, some may genuinely fail to comply due to a lack of capacity, as is the case for most ECOWAS member states, as shown in the section on capacity. This does not imply a lack of recognition, since dissenting and incapable member states never based their positions on ECOWAS's illegitimacy.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS's recognition is constrained because its member states have been reluctant to cede certain aspects of their sovereignty. This is especially true of punitive actions against member states, particularly when such measures intersect with complex subregional political realities. This assertion is reflected in the current scholarly and policy debate over the effectiveness of ECOWAS's sanctions regime in bringing about constitutional order. First, ECOWAS's authority to sanction member states for violating the organisation's norms reflects a significant element of supranational recognition. However, affected states have occasionally contested ECOWAS's application of this authority. The most recent example is the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the organisation after ECOWAS sanctioned them for coups. They have since formed an alternative group known as the Alliance of Sahel States.

On the one hand, ECOWAS's willingness to exercise its legally accorded authority to impose sanctions constitutes recognition through delegated supranational authority. In other words, ECOWAS exercised the authority its member states delegated to it to enforce the organisation's normative framework. By contrast, the withdrawal of the above-mentioned states underscores ECOWAS's limited supranational recognition, as their decision to exit diminishes the organisation's authority. This underscores the lingering supremacy of state sovereignty. In effect, although ECOWAS is, in principle, a recognised supranational authority, member states' acceptance of that authority is not absolute but conditional. This may be attributable to the limited benefits member states perceive from the organisation relative to their domestic political dynamics and other external alliances, which further puts ECOWAS in a difficult position in securing broader recognition. For instance, their closer ties with Moscow are largely for security reasons, which they think ECOWAS and their Western allies have failed to provide (Knubel, 2026).

Beyond ECOWAS's political and security recognition, member states also recognise it as an economic actor striving for economic integration. ECOWAS has recently been working through the Department of Industry and Private Sector Promotion to increase intra-regional trade from its current level of less than 12% to 40% by 2030 (Igwe et al., 2021, p. 290). This initiative, driven by the ECOWAS Commission and implemented through the West African Common Industrial Policy (WACIP), is backed by member states, further demonstrating ECOWAS's recognition. For instance, member states have begun implementing it, albeit slowly. (Eyo & Aniah, 2021, p. 22). This is one of the latest sub-regional attempts at economic integration, building on a global trend toward regional trade integration. Policies like this have led Engel and Jouanjean to argue that ECOWAS has comprehensive trade policies aimed at fostering coordination and boosting trade integration among its member states. They cited the idea of standard tariffs, which facilitate trade in the sub-region (Engel & Jouanjean, 2013, p. 3).

Building on this, one of ECOWAS's major initiatives for sub-regional economic prosperity is the free movement of goods, services, and persons. Article 2(1) of the 1979 Protocol provides the legal basis for this idea. It states, 'The community citizens have the right to enter, reside, and establish in the territory of member states' (ECOWAS, 1979, p. 4). The policy was set to be achieved in three main phases over 15 years: first, the right of free entry and the abolition of visas; second, the right to residence; and finally, the right to establishment. Article 3 (2) of the protocol, which requires the abolition of visas and entry permits, has been implemented by all member states, according to data from the ECOWAS Silver Jubilee Anniversary achievements (Butu, 2013, pp. 51-2). However, these policies face challenges at the national level, as they are only partially implemented. Maj Gen. Akwa acknowledges these challenges, yet argues that, despite them, the visa abolition is an achievement in itself and a manifestation of ECOWAS' supra-nationality (Akwa, 2015). Crucially, these achievements also demonstrate member states' recognition of ECOWAS' authority.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Legislative Recognition)

Despite the current limitations of the ECOWAS parliament, it can be said to have recognition from member states on two grounds: first, ECOWAS member states' contributions to the parliament's membership through their respective National Parliaments attest to that recognition. Secondly, the parliament's current mandate to give advice when consulted, some of which is mandatory, also implies recognition amongst member states. The parliament can thus influence policy-making at the Commission level by offering opinions and advice, as its mandate allows, and by suggesting changes to documents referred to it (ECOWAS, 2016), often at the ECOWAS Commission's request (ECOWAS, 2010, p. 110). More importantly, acting on its own initiative, the parliament has usually advised the Authority on key security and political issues in the sub-region (ECOWAS, 2010).

ECOWAS' Actorness (Judicial Recognition)

In terms of recognition, the Court has largely met expectations in defending human rights in the sub-region, especially when citizens have brought cases before it (Alter et al., 2013). The Court has issued several rulings against member states in citizens' favour on human rights issues. According to Nwaogu (2022), the Court has become increasingly active, demonstrating boldness in its human rights adjudications. For instance, in June 2019, the Court found the Republic of Senegal guilty of violating the human rights of one Sunday Charles Ugwuaba in relation to

the sub-region's free movement of goods and persons (ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, 2019). Similarly, in February 2018, the Court delivered a landmark judgment finding that the Government of The Gambia had violated the rights of four Gambian journalists. The Court's judgment averred that some Gambian laws still criminalise free speech and must be repealed immediately, as they, in the Court's view, contravene ECOWAS' revised treaty (ECOWAS CCJ, 2018). A further example showing the Court's supranationality and, for that matter, its recognition was in 2017 when the Court, in a ruling on a case brought against Nigeria, ordered Abuja to pay N88 billion or \$244 million in compensation to victims of its civil war, which took place four decades ago (Opejobi, 2017).

As noted above, court rulings are binding on ECOWAS member states and, as such, they must comply. However, since recognition, as defined above, is largely a willingness to accept the body's 'dictates', this must be demonstrated to show the recognition of the ECOWAS Court. Let's consider first the case won against the Nigerian state. The government accepted the ruling of the Court and subsequently agreed to pay the compensation the court ordered to be paid to the victims (*Premium Times*, 2017, para. 1). The Gambia, on the other hand, in response to the ruling on its human rights violations, waged a campaign to curb the Court's powers. Member states and non-state actors in the sub-region and beyond, however, rejected the call (Alter et al., 2013, p. 762), indicating a much broader recognition of the Court.

However, concerns remain about member states' timely enforcement of court rulings, especially when those rulings run counter to their interests. Nigeria is no exception (Adigun, 2019). The Court has described this as one of its significant challenges: although only the Court can suspend its rulings, the power to punish disregard of any of the organisation's obligations lies with the AHSG under Article 77 of the ECOWAS revised treaty (ECOWAS, 1993). Nevertheless, member states' reluctance does not undermine the Court's functioning and recognition for two main reasons: first, member states' participation in its legal proceedings attests to recognition. Secondly, regardless of any delay in enforcing a judgment, the state involved remains liable and is considered guilty of the offence, both within the sub-region and beyond. Accordingly, it must eventually comply, given states' prior acceptance of the binding effect of the court's rulings and every democratic state's desire to project an image of being law-abiding.

ECOWAS' Actorness (External Recognition)

Beyond sub-regional recognition, entities such as the African Union (AU) provide external recognition. The AU is the continent's premier intergovernmental body, with all African states as members. The AU's mandate, like ECOWAS's, also covers economic and security integration. The continent's RECs derive their mandates from the AU's mandate. According to the AU, RECs are deeply integrated with the AU's work and are considered its building blocks (Herpolsheimer, 2023). This implies that the AU aligns with ECOWAS, and ECOWAS coordinates with the AU. The AU's reference to RECs includes ECOWAS because, in 2006, the AU decided to suspend recognition of new RECs in Africa, except for eight, one of which is ECOWAS (Herpolsheimer, 2023). Collaboration between ECOWAS and the AU requires not only recognition of the AU as an entity, but also of its member states, since the latter constitute the former. Nevertheless, challenges remain in effective coordination between the two entities as their policies and programs often clash (Bereketeab, 2024).

Beyond the AU, the UN also recognises ECOWAS under its own charter, which recognises the activities of regional entities, albeit subject to the conditions set out in Article 52(1) of the UN Charter (Yalem, 1962). Article 53(1) permits the Security Council to utilise regional organisations where necessary to enforce the Council's duties, but only under the UN's expressed authority (Simm et al., 2024). In light of this, the UN engages with ECOWAS through nearly all of its major departments and agencies. Most importantly, the United Nations General Assembly granted ECOWAS observer status on 2nd December 2004 through Resolution 59/51.

ECOWAS's recognition by the UN is evident in its presence at the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations General Assembly, 2004), enabling it to articulate its stance on international issues that reflect its interests. Crucially, the UN also has representatives in West Africa through institutions and personnel that collaborate with ECOWAS. One example is the United Nations' Office for West Africa (UNOWA), now the United Nations' Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). The UN West African office serves as a vehicle for ECOWAS to engage more closely with the UN (United Nations, 2024), which further manifests ECOWAS' recognition.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Financial Capacity)

Applying the paper's definition of capacity, ECOWAS has, to a significant extent, the financial capacity to run its administrative organs. ECOWAS has put in place mechanisms that enable it to meet its internal financial needs almost entirely. The most recent of them is the imposition of levies on imports from member states, introduced in the 1993 revised treaty (ECOWAS, 1993). ECOWAS thus resorted to autonomous revenue-generating mechanisms unrelated to national budgets (Closa & Casini, 2016, p. 396). For instance, between 75 and 80 per cent of all ECOWAS region-wide institutional and program expenses come from proceeds from the community levy as of 2025. (Oppong, 2025, para. 4).

This funding arrangement highlights a key aspect of ECOWAS's financial capacity, which is critical to strengthening its institutional autonomy over member states. In other words, it enables various administrative structures to develop policies and programmes free from outside influence. While this is true, financial capacity does not automatically translate into institutional autonomy, as autonomy also depends on the extent to which member states are willing to cede some of their political preferences. That said, ECOWAS's demonstration of financial capacity through

member-state-backed internal funding makes it arguably the most effective sub-regional grouping in Africa and, indeed, a capable actor and a model for the AU. For instance, a levy similar to ECOWAS's, imposed by the AU, is facing challenges, which Apiko and Aggad attributed to the AU's lack of a continental free trade zone like the one in West Africa (Apiko & Aggad, 2017).

ECOWAS' Actorness (Military capacity)

Building on the preceding section, ECOWAS must also demonstrate the financial capacity to fund peacekeeping missions in its volatile sub-region to show its full capacity. Before analysing this, it is vital to note that ECOWAS has a legitimate mechanism for coercive military intervention in member states. Before 1993, when the revised treaty and subsequent supporting protocols clarified ECOWAS' mandate on interventions (as explained below), the 1981 Defence Protocol of ECOWAS allowed a member state under external attack to request ECOWAS assistance. The protocol also permitted binding collective military intervention in response to such a request, once agreed by ECOWAS's decision-making structures (ECOWAS, 1981). The 1999 protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, and Peacekeeping elaborates on ECOWAS's more explicit collective security mandate. The protocol permits intervention in member states on grounds such as attempts to reverse military coups (ECOWAS, 1999). These provisions mean ECOWAS has a legitimate institutional framework to exercise coercive authority in the sub-region for peace and security. Crucially, this illustrates an important dimension of ECOWAS's military capacity as an international actor.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS's success in this regard cannot be compared with its ability to handle internal administrative costs. Indeed, while internal financing has improved over the years, the organisation's ability to sustain a military intervention has not. For instance, ECOWAS's sole military intervention in Guinea-Bissau faced significant financial challenges, and, more recently, its delayed intervention in Mali was also attributed to resource and logistical constraints (Chukwuka & Ikenga, 2025) and, by implication, limited capacity. ECOWAS' financial challenge stems from its reliance on Nigeria, the subregional hegemonic power. Although Nigeria is willing and often attempts to shoulder ECOWAS' financial burdens, it is constrained by its growing domestic responsibilities and receives little support from other member states. Reflecting on this shortfall in capacity, Iwilade and Agbo confirm the sub-region's heavy reliance on Nigeria, asserting, '...ECOWAS has not yet developed full capacities that enable it to respond effectively to conflict situations in the region...[It] depends on the willingness of its regional hegemon (Nigeria) to bear the political, military, and financial costs...' (Iwilade & Agbo, 2012, p. 364).

ECOWAS's capacity challenge stems from the sub-region's economic situation. According to Napoleon Bamfo, 'The unendingly dire financial circumstance ECOWAS members face has affected the capacity of those member states to support the organisation to carry out its security and peacekeeping functions...' (Bamfo, 2013, p. 17). For instance, the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) faces problems such as inadequate equipment and poor member-state commitment to contributing troops, as member states are preoccupied with addressing domestic socio-economic challenges, resulting in limited military capacity. Under these circumstances, ECOWAS's non-combatant approaches to resolving conflict have been helpful. These non-combatant approaches, elaborated in the next section, reflect ECOWAS's diplomatic capacity.

ECOWAS' Actorness (Diplomatic Capacity)

Apart from the coercive means at ECOWAS' disposal - in any case, a measure of last resort and now a manifestation of ECOWAS' limited capacity - its responses to subregional security and political challenges focus more on diplomatic approaches. As indicated earlier, ECOWAS is bound by the UN's principle of peaceful resolution of disputes before resorting to force in dealing with crises. In many cases, its diplomatic approaches have been effective. Over the years, ECOWAS has demonstrated its diplomatic capacity. One way ECOWAS has done this is by engaging the Council of the Wise, which represents a traditional African approach to dispute settlement. The council comprises a team of eminent West African citizens—one from each member state—to support the organisation's diplomatic efforts behind the scenes (Van Wyk, 2020). Beyond the Council of the Wise, political leaders of member states also engaged diplomatically on ECOWAS's behalf. Some examples include the Ivory Coast, where, in 2007, an ECOWAS delegation or mediation team led by former Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré oversaw a peace agreement, among other efforts (Caparini, 2015; Elowson & MacDermott, 2010).

Synthesis: ECOWAS's Actorness Profile

Table 2 draws together the preceding analysis across the three criteria and the executive, legislative, judicial, and diplomatic domains examined above. It shows that ECOWAS's actorness is uneven rather than uniform: strongest in judicial and executive autonomy, external recognition, and financial capacity, but comparatively limited in legislative autonomy and military capacity.

Table 2. Summary of ECOWAS's Actorness Across Autonomy, Recognition, and Capacity

Criterion	Domain	Key Evidence	Assessment
Autonomy	Executive	Commission (est. 2007) formulates policy proposals independently of the AHSG; Art. 19(5) empowers it to guide member-state policy orientation	Strong
	Legislative	Powers “progressively enhanced” from advisory; currently binding only on treaty review and human rights matters	Limited
	Judicial	Court acts “independently of the Member States” (Art. 15(3)); binding rulings; direct citizen access since 2005	Strong
Recognition	Executive	Zero-tolerance coup policy enforced; Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso suspended and sanctioned for unconstitutional takeovers	Moderate
	Legislative	Member states staff Parliament via national legislatures; advisory input sought regularly, some of it mandatory	Moderate
	Judicial	Nigeria complied with the \$244m Biafra compensation ruling; The Gambia’s bid to curb the Court’s powers was rejected by other states	Strong
	External (AU/UN)	AU “building-block” status since 2006; UN General Assembly observer status since 2004; UNOWAS liaison office	Strong
Capacity	Financial	75–80% of ECOWAS’s institutional and programme budget self-funded via the community import levy (as of 2025)	Strong
	Military	Delayed Mali intervention and Guinea-Bissau funding shortfalls attributed to resource and logistical constraints; heavy reliance on Nigeria	Limited
	Diplomatic	Council of the Wise and mediation efforts (e.g. the 2007 Côte d’Ivoire peace agreement) demonstrate sustained diplomatic engagement	Moderate

Sources: Compiled by authors from the findings above

Overall, this profile supports the paper’s central argument that ECOWAS has accumulated substantial autonomy and recognition. However, capacity, especially military capacity, remains a major constraint to ECOWAS’ supranational actorness.

Limitations of the research

The first limitation is the exclusive reliance on documentary and secondary sources, without interviews with ECOWAS Commission officials and member-state representatives. This made it impossible to obtain firsthand information on ECOWAS’s decision-making processes and its exercise of institutional autonomy in relation to member states’ responses. This leaves room for future research to expand the methodology and provide deeper insight into ECOWAS’s institutional and political actorness.

The second is an inherent methodological challenge in measuring indicators such as capacity and recognition, as they are multidimensional and hard to reduce to a single measurable indicator. The analysis thus relied on a qualitative assessment of ECOWAS institutional structures related to policy implementation, diplomatic engagement, and member-state responses. Although this approach helps capture the extent and context-specific nature of ECOWAS actorness, it requires interpretive judgement. Therefore, Future studies could address this limitation by developing more systematic indicators or a composite index for assessing the capacity and recognition dimensions of regional actorness.

Conclusion

This paper examined the extent to which ECOWAS can be regarded as a supranational actor in West African governance. It did so by developing a simplified analytical framework based on three interrelated criteria: autonomy, recognition, and capacity and applied it to ECOWAS. It showed that the organisation possesses a moderate degree of supranational actorness.

The analysis shows that ECOWAS has established significant institutional autonomy through its executive, legislative, and judicial structures. The 1993 Revised Treaty and subsequent protocols strengthened the organisation’s institutional framework by granting its organs greater authority in policy formulation, decision-making, and dispute resolution. Although Parliament continues to exercise mainly advisory functions, and the Authority of Heads of State and Government remains the ultimate decision-making body, these supranational institutions show that member states have collectively delegated important responsibilities to ECOWAS beyond the purely intergovernmental model.

The study also demonstrates substantial evidence of recognition, both internally and externally. Within the sub-region, member states have generally accepted ECOWAS’s authority by implementing its policies on democratic governance, regional security, economic integration, and human rights protection. Even where disagreements or implementation delays have occurred, they reflect compliance challenges rather than a rejection of ECOWAS’s legitimacy. Beyond West Africa, recognition by institutions such as the AU and the UN further reinforces ECOWAS’s status as a legitimate regional actor with an established role in continental and global governance.

On capacity, ECOWAS has shown that autonomy and recognition alone cannot determine actorness. Accordingly, ECOWAS has demonstrated considerable administrative and financial capacity, particularly in staffing its institutions and financing most of its activities through internally generated resources. The organisation has also developed significant diplomatic capacity through mediation, preventive diplomacy, and conflict management mechanisms. However, financial limitations, logistical challenges, and heavy reliance on Nigeria as the sub-region's principal contributor constrain its military capacity. These constraints prevent ECOWAS from exercising fully independent coercive power, thereby limiting the extent of its supranational actorness.

This article contributes to the broader debates regarding actorness and regional organisational autonomy. Rather, actorness occurs along a continuum and is shaped by the authority entrusted to institutions, the extent to which member states and external actors recognise that authority, and institutions' capacity to implement their decisions. The ECOWAS case further shows that supranational authority does not automatically require member states to surrender sovereignty. In other words, sovereignty can be delegated selectively and conditionally, depending on the policy area under consideration. This implies that regional organisations can exercise consequential authority without evolving into federal-type bodies, with their autonomy contingent on the interface between the entity's institutional design, political acceptance, and executorial capacity.

These findings largely confirm and importantly extend earlier work on ECOWAS's actorness. They do so by showing that determinants of organisational actorness extend beyond supranational authority to include how institutional capacity, political commitment, and recognition translate authority into effective action. Consequently, the research question is answered, as the findings demonstrate that the gap between ECOWAS's enormous authority in some domains and its uneven effectiveness in others points to variation in the entity's capacity to mobilise and operationalise that authority across different policy contexts.

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All data used are publicly available

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Ethical Approval

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AI usage

The authors performed data processing and analysis and only used AI for editing and language improvement.

Author Contribution

The first author wrote the introduction, methodology and theory sections of the paper, as well as the ECOWAS capacity section. The second author wrote the ECOWAS autonomy section, and the third author wrote the ECOWAS recognition and conclusion sections. All three authors edited the paper in turns.

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Figures

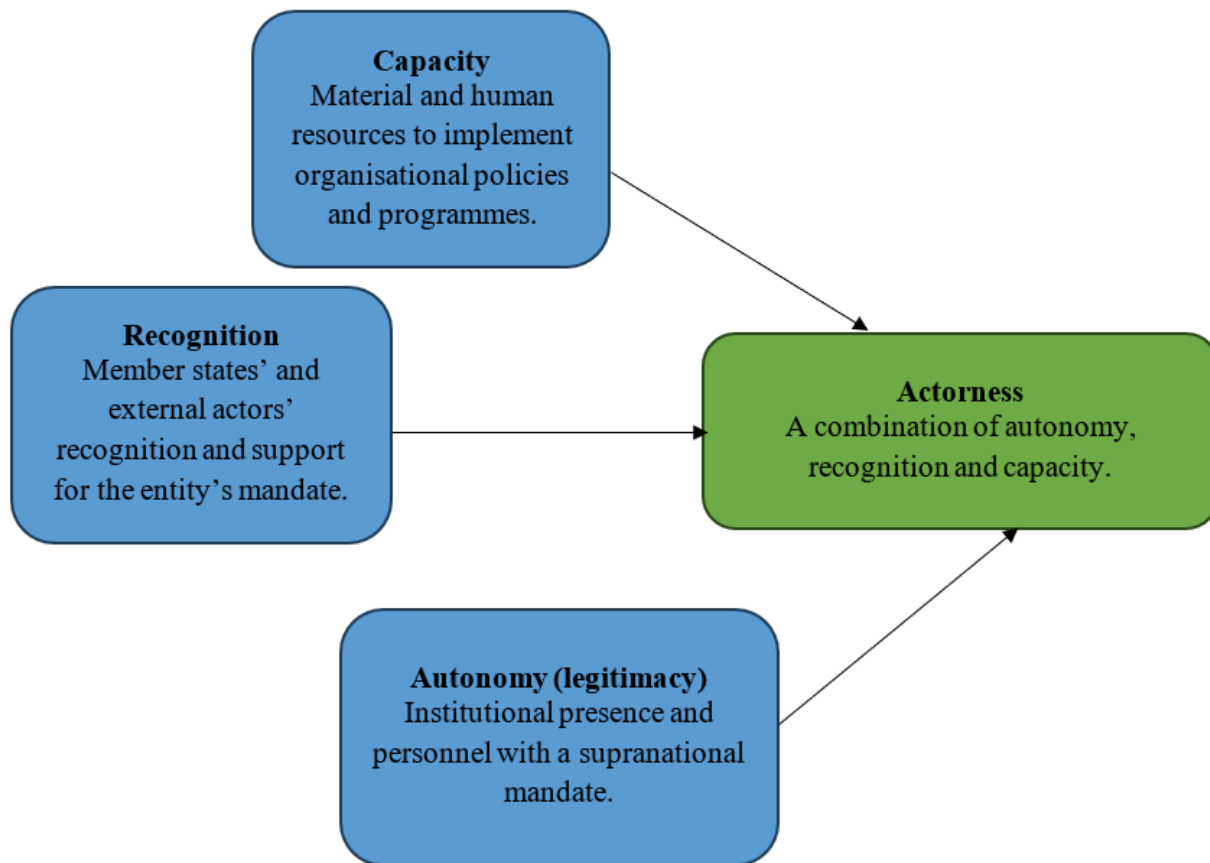


Figure 1

Simplified Actorness criteria and definitions

Source: Authors' summary of adopted actorness criteria.