



ECOWAS COMMISSION
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Policy Brief:

ECOWAS Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan





388 million people

Estimated population of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. (ECOWAS, 2022)



2.75%

average annual population growth rate of the ECOWAS region. (ECOWAS, 2022)



90%

of the workforce in West Africa is in the informal economy, often in rural areas with limited access to social protection.

(International Training Centre of the ILO, 2024)



70.4 million people

(16%) were estimated to be undernourished in Western Africa in 2023.

(FAO et al., 2024)



12/15

12 of the 15 ECOWAS Member States have developed a comprehensive social protection policy. The remaining 3 countries have strategies and legal frameworks on social protection. (International Training Centre of the ILO, 2024)



10 million

Migration involving ECOWAS countries almost completely consists of migration between regional Member States. Out of the 10 million international migrants moving to or from ECOWAS countries in 2020, more than 6 million moved within ECOWAS.

(International Organization for Migration, 2024)



270 million people

(61.4%) were moderately or severely food insecure in Western Africa in 2023. (FAO et al., 2024)



15.8%

average social protection coverage (excluding health care) in the ECOWAS region, with large variations among Member States.

(International Labour Organization, 2024)



~16%

average percent of individuals above retirement age in the ECOWAS region who receive a pension.

(International Labour Organization, 2024)



1.3% of gross domestic product (GDP)

average government expenditure on social protection (excluding health care) in the ECOWAS region. (International Labour Organization, 2024)

INTRODUCTION

The majority of countries in West Africa have experienced steady economic growth during the past two decades. Yet, the region continues to face high levels of poverty and food insecurity, with about 32 percent of the population living on less than 2.15 USD a day in 2023, amounting to 141.32 million people living in extreme poverty in the region (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity reportedly stood at 61.4 percent in 2023 (FAO et al., 2024).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) holds a fundamental responsibility to ensure the holistic well-being of citizens across its Member States. The ECOWAS Vision 2050 sets a clear direction aimed at significantly improving the living standard of people through deliberate and inclusive policies and programmes that aim to guarantee a prosperous future for West Africa, shaping the region's socioeconomic trajectory. Within this framework of regional economic integration, social protection systems and schemes serve as vital instruments for inclusive socioeconomic development in the ECOWAS region, contributing to a wide range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



“Social protection is a key driver in the achievement of the ECOWAS Vision 2050”

— Prof. Fatou Sow Sarr, ECOWAS Commissioner for Human Development and Social Affairs, at the meeting of ECOWAS Ministers in charge of Social Protection on the Social Protection Framework and Operational plan in November 2023 in Banjul, The Gambia

Social protection is a fundamental human right articulated in Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is a fundamental instrument in the realization of goals to end hunger and poverty. Consequently, the development of inclusive social protection systems has become a key priority for countries across the ECOWAS region. In this context, the ECOWAS Commission has actively engaged its Member States in the development of a comprehensive Social Protection Framework, accompanied by a costed Operational Plan. This framework provides comprehensive guidelines and principles to assist ECOWAS Member States in designing and implementing inclusive and effective social protection systems.

A pivotal milestone in efforts to intensify social protection investments in the region was achieved in November 2023 in Banjul, The Gambia, when experts and ministers in charge of social protection validated the Framework and Operational Plan. Subsequently, in July 2024, another landmark achievement occurred with the adoption and endorsement of the Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan by the ECOWAS Council of Ministers during its Ninety-second Ordinary Session in Abuja, Nigeria. This endorsement formally established the document as a legal instrument for all ECOWAS Member States.

This policy brief is intended to inform Member States and social protection stakeholders in the ECOWAS region of the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework, detailing its vision, goals, structure and contents to engage stakeholders effectively. It aims to mobilize Member States, development partners, civil society organizations and the private sector towards a unified agenda to accelerate progress towards achieving the social protection-related SDGs targets and goals.

REGIONAL DEFINITION

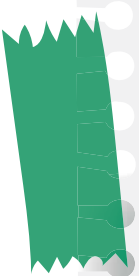
While Member States define social protection based on national contexts and priorities, the ECOWAS Commission aligns itself to the continental definition of the African Union, as stipulated in the African Union’s Protocol of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security, which also takes a life-cycle approach, stating in Article 1: “**Social Protection refers to public and private or to mixed public and private measures designed to protect individuals**

against life-cycle crises that curtail their capacity to meet their needs, and includes all forms of social security, and strategies and programmes aimed at supporting and ensuring a minimum standard of livelihood and access to essential social services and care for all people” (African Union, 2022).

To ensure the standardization of approaches, the ECOWAS Commission recommends the adoption of this definition with room for Member States to contextualize as appropriate to individual countries.

TAKING STOCK: SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE ECOWAS REGION

The ECOWAS region faces multiple challenges, including the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising food insecurity and malnutrition, fuel crises and inflation. Violence and conflicts have also expanded to several neighbouring states, generating profound political challenges (Radil and Walther, 2024). These factors have hindered national efforts to increase fiscal space for investments in social protection.



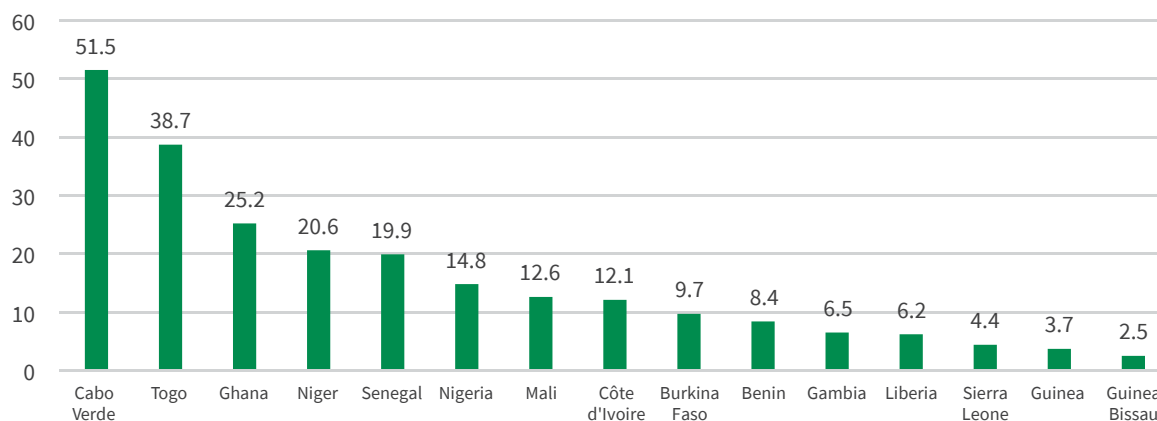
“West Africa continues to be confronted with some of the world's most multifaceted challenges. Acute and prolonged crises are worsening, and needs are rising. Millions of people are being driven to the edge of survival due to a convergence of factors, including conflict and violence, extreme poverty, weak governance, chronically high food insecurity and malnutrition, and the impact of climate change.”

— Memorandum on the Humanitarian Update in West Africa, 2022

Climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and poses a serious threat to sustainable development prospects. Evidence indicates that climatic change accounts for approximately 40 percent of the variability in cultivated land productivity in West Africa (ECOWAS, 2022). This is particularly concerning given that poverty in the ECOWAS region is predominantly concentrated in rural areas, where livelihoods rely heavily on natural resources and weather patterns (Perin et al., 2022).

Social protection coverage remains low in the ECOWAS region, with just 15.8 percent of the population covered by at least one social protection benefit on average (International Labour Organization, 2024). Social security systems in place in the region cover only a minor segment of the population, in great part linked to the fact that around 90 percent of the workforce in West Africa are in the rural informal economy and largely lack legal entitlements to social security (Perin et al., 2022). Limited and irregular income also make it difficult for these informal workers to contribute to social insurance schemes on a regular basis (International Labour Organization and FAO, 2021).

Figure 1. Population (%) covered by at least one social protection benefit in ECOWAS (excluding health)

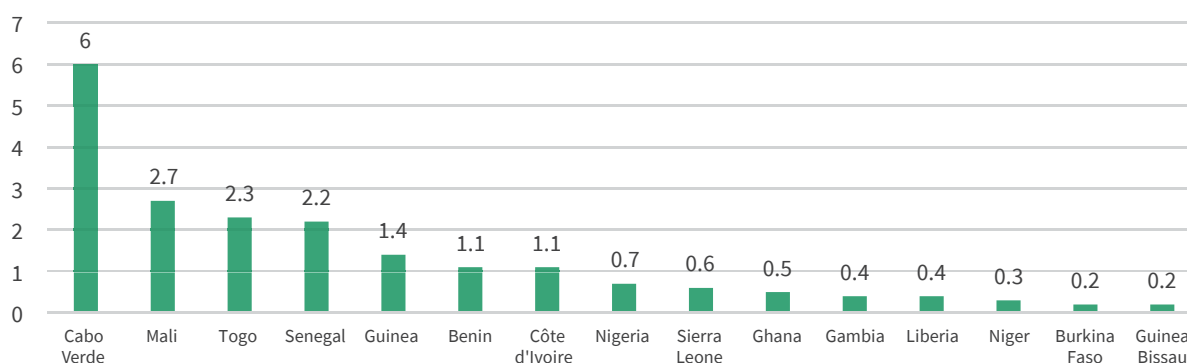


Source: Adapted from International Labour Organization. 2024. World social protection report 2024-26: Universal social protection for climate action and a just transition. Geneva, ILO. <https://doi.org/10.54394/ZMDK5543>

Note: This figure shows the proportion of the population covered by at least one social protection cash benefit (SDG Indicator 1.3.1).

Social protection financing is also low in the region, with average government expenditure on social protection standing at below 2 percent of GDP (International Labour Organization, 2024). Limited domestic investments and overreliance on official development assistance for the financing of social protection schemes limits Member States’ ability to expand social protection schemes to meet the rising needs of citizens. Similar limitations are reported in relation to other social services in the region – including limited access to health care, education, water and sanitation – impacting the social welfare of the people. Inadequate governance and institutional frameworks contribute to fragmentation and duplication of efforts as well as limited capacities to ensure comprehensive data, evidence and accountability of social protection systems.

Figure 2. General government actual expenditures on social protection in ECOWAS, excluding health care (% of GDP)



Source: Adapted from International Labour Organization. 2024. World social protection report 2024-26: Universal social protection for climate action and a just transition. Geneva, ILO. <https://doi.org/10.54394/ZMDK5543>

Note: This figure shows the total expenditure on social protection (excluding health care). However, for Côte d'Ivoire, only data for social protection expenditure (including health care) is available.

The Social Protection Framework aims to address some of the pressing challenges in establishing inclusive and sustainable social protection systems in the region, as summarized in Table 1.



 CHALLENGES	 KEY PRIORITIES
Limited coverage and scope of social insurance	Create inclusive national social protection floors
Insufficient development of social assistance schemes	Vertically and horizontally expand social protection programmes
Limited access to health care programmes and schemes	Progressively increase social protection coverage to the informal sector
Institutional framework characterized by a lack of coordination of social protection interventions	Promote an understanding of the nuances of the humanitarian–peace–development nexus
Insufficient development of programmes on resilience to climate shocks and humanitarian issues	Manage climate change-related risks through social protection measures
Inadequate funding of social protection programmes	Expand the fiscal space for social protection
Weakness of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms	Provide realistic guidance on the governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of social protection systems

Table 1. Challenges addressed by the Social Protection Framework in establishing inclusive and sustainable social protection systems in the region
 Note: the table shows key identified challenges and the corresponding strategic objectives, set out in the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework to address them

“The interconnectedness of social protection, food security and sustainable development cannot be emphasized enough. It is an investment in the future, a cornerstone of resilience and a catalyst for progress. I commend the Department of Human Development and Social Affairs of the ECOWAS Commission for this important instrument and for this historic achievement. We look forward, along with other United Nations agencies and development partners, to supporting its full implementation.”

— Bintia Stephen-Tchicaya, FAO Representative ad interim in Liberia and Social Protection Programme Lead for Africa, at the 2023 Experts Meeting on the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework in Banjul, The Gambia

ECOWAS SOCIAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

The Social Protection Framework is aligned to global and regional legal frameworks and instruments and specifically leverages the approaches outlined in the African Union Agenda 2063 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security. Member States are to ensure that the framework applies to all citizens and non-citizens to provide protection against various life-cycle risks.

The Social Protection Framework builds on a number of ECOWAS policies and instruments, including:

- ECOWAS Protocol A/P.1/5/79 relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, 1979
- ECOWAS Protocol A/P.3/5/82 relating to the definition of Community Citizen, 1982
- ECOWAS Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance, 2001
- ECOWAS Gender Policy, 2004
- ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration, 2008
- ECOWAS Labour and Employment Policy, 2009
- ECOWAS Child Policy, 2019–2023
- ECOWAS General Convention on Social Security, 2012
- ECOWAS Regional Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour, especially the Worst Forms, 2012
- ECOWAS Support Procedures and Standards for the Protection and Reintegration of Vulnerable Children on the Move and Young Migrants, 2016
- ECOWAS Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Child Protection Systems to Prevent and to Respond to Violence, Abuse and Exploitation against Children in West Africa, 2017
- ECOWAS Decent Work Regional Programme (EDWRP) 2021–2026
- ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on the Elimination of Child Labour and Forced Labour (2021–2030)



Vision

The vision of the Social Protection Framework is to develop inclusive social protection systems in the region, to contribute to a more integrated regional community, and to enable the community to fulfil its aspirations for socioeconomic development.



Mission

The mission of the Social Protection Framework is to promote the implementation of robust social protection systems based on key principles and guidelines among Member States across the ECOWAS region.



The objective of the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan is to enhance the integration between the humanitarian and social protection sectors, so that communities are supported to effectively respond to shocks and to build their resilience. It is an important resource for all actors committed to strengthening the linkage between social protection and the humanitarian, development and peace nexus.”

— Sintiki Tarfa Ugbe, Director, Humanitarian & Social Affairs, ECOWAS Commission



Objectives

The overarching objective is to provide ECOWAS Member States with insights on the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection interventions. The framework takes due cognizance of existing national policies, programmes and legislative environments, with each country making adjustments for relevance in their individual contexts:

1. Assist the ECOWAS Commission and Member States in enhancing their understanding of concepts, theories, emerging issues and trends in social protection while guiding them to develop and strengthen their capacities for inclusive national social protection systems.
2. Increase the coverage and adequacy of social protection to the informal economy and vulnerable groups (including women, children, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities) and extend social protection to workers in the informal sector.
3. Improve policies and identify strategies to reduce the impacts of crises and build resilience, particularly within the informal economy.
4. Improve fiscal space and increase financing for inclusive social protection.
5. Strengthen the capacities of Member States to build resilience against the impacts of climate change and other shocks.
6. Understand and strengthen the linkages between social protection and the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.
7. Strengthen social protection systems: governance; coordination; and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL).

To ensure synergy and facilitate the seamless implementation of the Social Protection Framework, the roles and responsibilities for all relevant stakeholders – including the ECOWAS Commission, Member States, the African Union Commission, development partners, the private sector and civil society organizations — are clearly outlined within the framework.



Guiding Principles

- i. Promote good governance and strengthen coordination among institutions responsible for the delivery of social protection for higher levels of accountability and transparency.
- ii. Protect the rights of individuals to human dignity and the special rights of children to survival, development and protection. Protect the rights of other vulnerable groups.
- iii. Develop legislation, policies and programmes that improve the standard of life of individuals and address the needs of vulnerable groups, including but not limited to children, persons with disabilities, women and older persons.
- iv. Ensure that social protection is based on human rights, follows a life-cycle approach, addresses vulnerability and inequality and is inclusive, leaving no one behind.
- v. Ensure continual progress in the realization of the rights, obligations and commitments of ECOWAS Member States to social protection.
- vi. Adhere to the principle of non-discrimination, ensuring that every individual can enjoy the rights recognized and guaranteed in the framework.
- vii. Develop an integrated and comprehensive social protection system.

SOCIAL PROTECTION FRAMEWORK OPERATIONAL PLAN

The Social Protection Framework Operational Plan serves as a road map of concrete actions for Member States in extending and strengthening their social protection policies and programmes. It provides ECOWAS Member States with insights on the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection interventions. The Operational Plan includes seven objectives, 50-plus strategy-specific activities and indicators, annual targets over a five-year period, and identification of lead and partnering institutions for each activity.



“Social protection is central to the attainment of a fully integrated and prosperous ECOWAS region.”

— Abimbola Oyelohunnu, Programme Officer, Social Development, ECOWAS Commission

CONCLUSION

The ECOWAS Commission and ECOWAS Member States unanimously recognize the importance of social protection in reducing poverty, vulnerability and inequality in the region. To achieve this, the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan represent a common framework of shared commitment and responsibility and a mechanism of mutual accountability that unites the ECOWAS Commission and Member States. The adoption is a demonstration of Member States’ commitment to adopt cross-border cooperation and a regional approach to the advancement of the social protection agenda in the region.

The principles outlined in the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework should be adopted across Member States, with support from the ECOWAS Commission and partners, to achieve the following outcomes:

1. inclusive national social protection floors
2. expanded contributory social insurance mechanisms
3. enhanced protection for climate-related risks
4. timely and effective humanitarian responses

The ECOWAS Commission and Member States invite all partners and stakeholders to leverage this framework to promote the universalism of social protection. The ECOWAS Commission and Member States, in the context of the Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan, welcome the opportunity to work with all partners in the areas of their comparative advantage to accelerate progress in developing inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems, thereby advancing efforts towards ending hunger and poverty in the region.

The framework includes further recommendations, guidance, data and tools. Visit the ECOWAS website to download the framework.



Experts and Ministerial Meetings on the ECOWAS Social Protection Framework and Operational Plan.

Réunions des experts et des ministres sur le cadre et le plan opérationnel de la protection sociale de la CEDEAO

21st - 24th November, 2023
Sir Dawda K. Nyama International Conference Centre, Banjul-The Gambia



Meeting of ECOWAS Ministers in charge of social protection, November 24, 2023, in Banjul, The Gambia

From left to right: Mr. Touré Lucine (Representative of the Minister in charge of social protection - Ivory Coast), Mr. Mamadou Moustapha Fall (Representative of the Minister in charge of Social Protection - Senegal), Ms. Bintia Stephen Tchicaya - (Senior Policy Officer, FAO Sub-Regional Office for West Africa and Head of the Social Protection Program for Africa), Prof. Fatou Sow Sarr (ECOWAS Commissioner in charge of Human Development and Social Affairs), H.E. Ambassador Miatta Lily FRENCH (Representative ECOWAS Resident in The Gambia), H.E. Muhammad B.S. Jallow - Vice-President of The Gambia, H.E. Leboucher Freire De Andrade, Minister in responsible for social protection – Cabo Verde, Ms. Mariavittoria Ballotta, UNICEF Representative in The Gambia, H.E. Seide Cadi - Minister in charge of social protection – Guinea Bissau.

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