Cross-directorate approaches to longer-term disaster risk reduction

Discussion paper written as part of the FOREWARN Initiative
Penultimate draft
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Executive Summary

Introduction

The types of humanitarian crisis drivers, their dimensions and dynamics are growing, in some instances, exponentially. This theme has frequently been explored in reports, survey reviews and meetings that have been part of the ECOWAS-King’s College, London’s collaborative effort, FOREWARN. In reflecting on this theme, there has been general agreement that the complexities driving future humanitarian crises will mean that a far greater range of disciplines and expertise will be required to prevent, or at least mitigate crisis impacts. Reducing longer-term disaster risks will, in other words, demand far greater inter-disciplinary collaboration. With this in mind, the ECOWAS Commission and King’s College, London have agreed to explore ways to strengthen such collaboration, with the ultimate objective on ways to promote longer-term disaster risk reduction.

Purpose

The discussion paper that follows is intended to focus principally on the Commission’s interest in promoting cross-directorate collaboration and the perceived benefits of such an approach. The analysis, the implications of which may be tested during a meeting of the FOREWARN Steering Committee during autumn 2014, includes a series of interviews with representatives of the main directorates that comprise that Committee.

The discussion paper structure

The paper that follows has five sections –

Section #1: The nature of bureaucratic behaviour

This section provides an overview of organisational factors that hamper effective inter-departmental collaboration, including uncertainty control, complexity limitation, siloed expertise and information control.

Section #2: Organisational behaviour in a 21st century context

In developing an organisational capacity responsive to rapid change and complexity, organisational structure, per se, is less an issue than are the dynamics of organisations. From that perspective, an effective organisation will have at least six key characteristics, all essential for cross-directorate dynamics. These include leadership, defined shared objectives and approaches to foster speculation about longer-term organisational objectives.

Section #3: Preliminary reflections on cross-directorate dynamics in the Commission

The extent to which the ECOWAS Commission might be seen as fit for the future was a theme explored during the OSAT (Organisational Self-Assessment Tool) exercise between October 2012 and March 2013 in Abuja. Seven points emerged from OSAT findings and the subsequent exercise:

- ECOWAS Commission is highly compartmentalised and principally focussed on short term issues;
- addressing complex issues required frameworks and methodologies that were more cross-sectoral and coordinated than existed at present;
- the Commission provided transactional rather than transformative leadership, negatively affecting cross-directorate collaboration;
- both integrated planning and review processes remain ‘illusive’ within the Commission;
- basic difficulties that all directorates faced when it came to information exchange was a lack of adequate staff and resources;
- the importance of feeding the expertise of other institutions, e.g., the private sector, into cross-sectoral deliberations was deemed important but underexplored;
- accountability was seen as far more important than innovation within the Commission.
Section #4: Preliminary reflections from members of the FOREWARN Steering Committee

Based upon interviews with representatives of directorates involved in the FOREWARN project during July and August 2014, there appeared to be mixed attitudes about the extent to which cross-directorate dialogue, as presently configured, was able to handle longer-term disaster risk challenges. Key findings suggest that:

• despite limited recognition that greater cross-directorate engagement could be important, it does not reflect prevailing opinion;
• there is limited interest in sectorally different types of expertise within the Commission to deal with longer-term threats;
• immediate pressures leave little time for greater speculation about future threats and ways to address them;
• transformational priorities are also limited by lack of adequate human resources and funding support;
• concern about creating tensions over directorates’ respective roles further limits cross-directorate exchanges;
• there is little encouragement for cross-directorate collaboration from the leadership within the Commission, itself;
• despite the attitudes expressed above, respondents were generally aware of the potential benefits of cross-directorate collaboration;
• a tension exists between those who feel that the institution needs greater institutional change before introducing cross-directorate collaboration and those who feel that one should begin the process now with discrete initiatives.

Section #5: From concept to practice

While some of the constraints that affect cross-directorate collaboration are inherent in all organisations and others peculiar to the ECOWAS Commission, itself, there are nevertheless ways that can enhance cross-directorate collaboration, based in no small part upon proven approaches suggested in Sections #2 and #5.

As a starting point, the Commission’s FOREWARN Steering Committee might wish in the first instance to invite experts from the region as well as those readily available from international organisations to consider the sorts of threats that might dramatically impact upon the region over the coming decade. From there it, too, might wish to consider the sorts of multidimensional knowledge and specialisations that would be necessary to address such threats. That sort of preliminary knowledge base might well lead the Steering Committee’s directorates to ask, ‘How could we together develop a strategy to identify and meet such threats?’.
Cross-directorate collaboration to deal with ever more complex and multi-sectoral challenges is an issue which the ECOWAS Commission’s FOREWARN Steering Committee felt should be assessed. This concern was particularly focused on managing ways to reduce the impacts of existing and continuing crisis drivers and those that in the foreseeable future are ever more plausible. The Steering Committee felt that in order to ensure that the Commission can provide maximum support to its member states and to use the broad array of the Commission’s competencies most effectively, an analysis should be undertaken concerning the Commission’s present approaches to cross-directorate collaboration and attitudes in the Commission about its utility.

New types of crises as well as their interactive nature will be a challenge for conventional organisations in a variety of ways. The extent to which they have the ability to anticipate and adapt to new and more complex phenomena is but one consideration. Another is the extent to which the very structure of organisations tends to isolate rather than integrate information needed to deal with complexity; and, in this same vein are the difficulties that many organisations encounter when it comes to dealing with holistic and integrated strategies. So many of these issues relate to the very nature of bureaucratic behaviour, which in turn are reflected in the ways that different organisational components relate to each other.

Hence, the accumulative effects of ever more complex crisis drivers, the interaction between technological and natural hazards – particularly with the growth of industrialisation in many parts of the region – the increased propensity for impacts to be cross-border and global, e.g., pandemics, all point to new, highly complex and interactive risks. And, from an ECOWAS perspective, it is evident that these longer-term disaster risks will have characteristics that in various ways will demand mitigation measures that are cross-sectoral, cross-disciplinary and socio-economically and geo-politically linked. In that sense, preparing for the ever-widening spectrum of future risks has to begin now.

There are many reasons for promoting inter-departmental, or, cross-directorate collaboration. There is that moment of crisis, for example, where an immediate exchange of information is essential for the pursuit of a specific objective, including immediate human survival. For the purposes of this paper, however, the assumption is that cross-directorate collaboration will refer to a permanent process where a range of directorates meet regularly within a formal structure to bring together an integrated approach for enhancing the disaster risk reduction (DRR) objectives – short and longer-term – of the organisation.

This discussion paper is divided into five sections. Section #1: The nature of bureaucratic behaviour describes the barriers that all too often hamper effective cross-departmental collaboration, while Section #2: Organisational behaviour in a 21st century context suggests measures that have been taken to overcome such constraints. Section #3: Preliminary reflections on cross-sectoral dynamics in the Commission considers how such dynamics relate principally to the findings of the Organisational Self-Assessment Tool survey undertaken in ECOWAS in 2013, and Section #4: Preliminary reflections from members of the FOREWARN Steering Committee notes the attitudes of the Steering Committee’s directorates towards cross-directorate collaboration. The final section, Section #5: From concept to practice, provides a section of questions that should be considered to determine potential benefits of cross-directorate collaboration for the Commission’s FOREWARN Steering Committee and potential steps that could be taken toward improved cross-directorate collaboration for longer-term DRR.

The report has two annexes: Annex I notes those who from ECOWAS and outside ECOWAS have made contributions to this discussion paper, and Annex II provides a selected bibliography.
As one looks to the changing nature of crisis threats and opportunities to address them, the capability of organisations to have the anticipatory and adaptive capacities to deal with them becomes a matter of considerable importance. Unfortunately, as supported by an extensive range of analyses on organisational behaviour, there is a consistent view that the very nature of organisations all too often poses barriers that constrain anticipatory and adaptive skills.

The well-known German sociologist, Max Weber, argued that bureaucracy constitutes the most efficient and rational way in which human activity can be organized, and that systematic processes and organized hierarchies were necessary to maintain order, maximize efficiency and eliminate favouritism. Most organizations are designed to deal with various types of complex problems on a continuous basis. Yet if one looks at some of the characteristics of the organization and its processes, the ability to reconfigure approaches and ‘products’ to meet changes in an ever more complex operating environment are all too limited. In making this assertion, one at the same time needs to recognise that such broad assumptions fail to take into account different types of organisations – sizes and functions. To what extent, for example, do conclusions about organisational behaviour in the private sector apply to the public sector; and, to what extent are there distinctions which have to be made between public sector organisations that are national and those that are international?

While not ignoring the importance of such distinctions in general, for the purposes of this analysis there are organisational behaviour patterns, and thus challenges, that are deemed to be universal. In other words, there are institutional commonalities that appear to be replicated to lesser or greater extents in private or public bodies. These commonalities include reliance on a range of different types of expertise to fulfil objectives, hierarchical structures and processes for decision-making, standard operating procedures and repertoires to ensure predictable outcomes. The consequences of this aspect of organisational behaviour is supported not only by an extensive literature on organisational behaviour, but also by the views expressed by experts and practitioners.

Hence, for most organisations – be they public or private – the challenge that they face in being consistently and demonstrably anticipatory and adaptive can be encapsulated in four broad factors that determine organizational perspectives; and, in light of these four, a further six that determine an organisation’s processes.

The organisation’s perspectives – the way in which it views and seeks to achieve tasks – in one way or another are determined by four considerations: [i] goal definition; [ii] personnel; [iii] uncertainty control; and [iv] complexity. Each of these also directly and indirectly explains the challenges that face those who recognise the ever-increasing importance of cross-sectoral collaboration and for the purposes of this paper, cross-directoral behaviour. Each suggests why there are intentional and unintentional barriers that all too often make the prospects for cross-directorate collaboration more one of competition:

- **goal definition.** Organisations are designed to achieve a particular set of goals. Yet, no matter how clear the formal goals may be all organizations have unofficial objectives that may or may not overlap with their official responsibilities. These unofficial objectives can be viewed as the organisation’s concern with its own ‘health’ – its survival and growth. The link between formal agendas and unofficial objectives is two-fold. Firstly an organization proceeds from the assumption that its health is a basic requisite to fulfil its formal goals. Secondly, as a collection of individuals, organizations are seen as means to satisfy the needs and security of individuals. The result in reflected in various protective measures by employees, for example, over-compliance with rules, rigid formalism, limited exchange of information among organizational subdivisions, or, in this case, directorates;

- **personnel.** Organisational perspective determines and is determined by its personnel. To
deal with complex problems on a continuous basis, an organization employs a variety of specialists. Specialists are brought into the organization to handle a wide range of matters, from clerical and administrative to programme formulation and policy supervision. The specialist often views the organization’s goals from the perspective of the tasks he or she has been assigned. Paradoxically an organization is prone to employ the specialists that it requires based on a criterion of need determined by specialists within the organization. Hence, to some extent, specialists not only determine the perspective of an organization, but also reinforce that perspective through employment practices;

- **uncertainty control.** It would be impossible for an organization to produce its product if it could not control the variables that affect its end-result. Controlling the effect of unwanted or random variables is therefore a major preoccupation of all organizations; all organizations seek to avoid uncertainty. Both day-to-day operations as well as an organisation’s future planning are geared towards eliminating or isolating factors that would disrupt the normal flow of problem-solving and production. Organizations seemingly cannot operate in a realm of ambiguity, because their prime functions include ensuring predictability, continuity and systemisation in terms of their processes as well as outputs. To the extent that they deal with ambiguity, organisations focus on those issues that they can extract as definable and tangible from ambiguous situations. There, too, is the issue of prioritisation. Attention to issues of accountability – a major priority in most organisations – limits the amount of attention an organisation will be willing to expend on issues that are uncertain. The propensity to eliminate uncertainty also explains in part why in so many organizations, planning departments are regarded as institutional backwaters – effective long-range planning runs in the face of uncertainty control. In other words, the former is perceived as introducing factors that threaten established procedures, e.g., standard operating procedures (SOPs), for dealing with complex problems;

- **complexity.** By definition an organization is designed to deal with complex problems on a continuous basis. It achieves this function by ‘factoring,’ or decomposing complexity into manageable component parts, each component part to be handled by specialists. Specialists define and respond to a problem based on their expertise and, in theory, their individual solutions are coordinated by a supervisory rung higher up the organisational ladder. However, for components within the organization as a whole, it would be inefficient and impossible to treat each problem introduced into the organization as brand new or one that would have to be reassessed at each organizational stage. Therefore, the solution for dealing with complexity on a continuous basis necessitates standard operating procedures which provide consistent types of responses to a wide range of different issues.

Of crucial concern for those affected by organizational outputs – particularly in this case those who might be affected by a growing number of crisis threats – will be the ways that organizations deal with information. There are at least six determinants that influence the ways that organisations handle new and potentially important – though seemingly aberrant – information: [i] entry points; [ii] screening; [iii] factoring; [iv] communication flows; [v] structuring solutions; and [vi] standard operating procedures, repertoires and programmes:

- **entry points.** All too often, information enters organisations in unpredictable and inconsistent ways. It might be miscued, or, reflect an overload of information not relevant to the issue at hand. Information, too, might be inadvertently misdirected, not directly relevant to the department in which it sits. Finally, information can also suffer from having its implications prejudged;

- **screening.** Organisations are designed to recognise matters either relevant or irrelevant to achieving their prescribed tasks. The penetration of information into an organisation so often depends on the degree to which that information is tangible, specific, manageable and perceived to be relevant by a particular department within that organisation. If that information does not fit into prescribed categories or is deemed to ambiguous, it may well be ‘screened out’;

- **factoring.** As noted earlier, a basic principle of organisational behaviour is to deal with complexity by breaking problems down into manageable parts. While, from the perspective of organisational behaviour factoring is logical, it
is not without its hazards. Specialist attention may lead to parts of a problem falling outside the net of any particular specialist;

- **communication flows.** The analogue between communications flows and steering a large ship has relevance. By the time the communications flows have handled all the hazards of information overload and peek inputs, the relevance of the information may well have been passed;

- **structuring the solution.** Organisational style, acceptable performance criteria and cost calculations all circumscribe the behaviour of organisations, and tend to standardise the ways in which organisations structure solutions. All too often prudence reflects the organisational style of many institutions – not an issue of individual courage, but more a matter of what the organisation feels will be regarded as acceptable;

- **standard operating procedures, programmes and repertoires.** SOPs are measures to deal with problems in a standardised way to ensure that the organisation is able to manage complex problems on a continuous and often simultaneous basis. SOPs are designed to eliminate uncertainty, provide criteria of acceptable performance and reflect the overall style of the organisation.
Section #2: Organisational behaviour in a 21st century context

‘In truly agile cultures, employees are able to flourish. In these agencies, leaders favour collaboration and gaining consensus, creativity is cultivated, new ideas and innovative behaviour is (sic) promoted.’ And, while this reflection may seem at best aspirational, and more realistically improbable, a growing number of those in the public as well as private sectors are recognising that 20th century organisations are really not suited for the complexities and uncertainties that mark the 21st century. In the words of what had hitherto been one of the most ‘stove-piped’ institutions in the world, namely, the US National Intelligence Agency,

In the past, the intelligence community was siloed into discrete disciplines (eg, signals intelligence, human intelligence, geo-spatial intelligence). Silos led to competition and duplication. Although the agency-centric operating model worked well during the Cold War, it cannot succeed in the current environment, which changes rapidly. We need a mission-focused operating model that is flexible enough to respond to a dynamic environment.

Removing stove-pipes and building cross-sectoral harmony is not easy, nor is removing all aspects of departmental specialisations and expertise the intended goal. However, in a world of disaster risks which are increasingly uncertain and complex, there appear to have been some consistent approaches for dealing with stove-piping in a wide range of organisations. These approaches, however, begin with the overall objectives of the organisation and the fitness of the organisation for the future. In that latter context, an organisation fit for the future will foster creativity, flexibility, information absorption capacity and planning and policy-making authority to anticipate and respond to the inter-relationship between change and vulnerability.

In developing an organisational capacity responsive to rapid change and complexity, organisational structure, per se, is less an issue than are the dynamics of organisations. From that perspective, an effective organisation of the future will have to reflect at least six essential characteristics, all which in one way or another are essential for cross-directorate dynamics.

[i] **leadership.** The call for leadership is one of those seemingly endless mantras that are invoked whenever organisations come under scrutiny. Yet in discussions incorporated in this paper with representatives from governmental, inter-governmental and private sector organisations, the issue of leadership was often noted when it came to explaining why inter-departmental and cross agency collaboration does or does not work. It was regarded as ‘the bottom line,’ and while not dependent upon top-down command and control structures, leadership that was not associated with any single department was regarded as the factor that made inter-departmental collaboration work. That leadership does, however, have to come with incentives that recognise more integrated approaches for dealing with designated tasks, e.g., the completion of a project where all participants are duly acknowledged;

[ii] **project-oriented dynamics.** Cross-directorate collaboration works best when focusing upon a specific objective or set of objectives. Even calls by respected organisational leaders for inter-departmental collaboration have diminished effects if not targeted upon a proposed output or outputs. Expertise, in other words, can escape silos if organised around objectives that clearly transcend any single department. In that sense, organisations have instituted cross-sectoral groups and sub-groups to focus on essential components of the objective consistently. The crucial factors are the dynamics of sub-groups that sustain the momentum of the interchange of expertise until all dimensions of the objective are achieved. In other words, cross-sectoral dynamics must be sustained at all levels of the activity formulation and completion;

[iii] **long-term objectives as outputs.** All too often in modern organisations, the longer-term strategic planning function is regarded as secondary to what are perceived as more implementation-oriented functions. This is particularly the case when the organisation’s
ethos is focused on short-term problem solving. Clearly for an organisation that prides itself on being effectively anticipatory and adaptive, strategic planning with requisite objectives and benchmarks is vital. Of more immediate relevance to this discussion, however, is that a focus on longer-term strategic planning is a well-recognised example of how it as a longer-term output can breakdown silos. Three reasons explain the importance of such a focus on futures. In the first place, longer-term strategic planning should link the overarching objectives of the organisation with what should be seen as a common set of interests. Secondly, strategic planning tends to replace immediate departmental protectionism with a less self-interested, more futures-oriented perspective. Thirdly, while longer-term strategic planning is normally regarded as less threatening for individual departments, it does begin to generate a habit of collaboration, which has been seen as transferable to more immediate concerns;

speculation as a cross-sectoral raison d’être. One of the factors that constrain collaboration is that very often participants and their respective departments fail to see any overriding benefit in their involvement in more integrated approaches for achieving objectives. While not universally the case, there is a growing interest in promoting speculative activities as an approach to demonstrating hitherto unrecognised benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration. In that context, one senior US official commenting on his accomplishments and failures as US Under-Secretary for Science and Technology at the Department of Homeland Security, noted that ‘it’s easy to look back and say we could have done this or that, but the fact is we weren’t thinking that way’. Speculating on plausible alternatives, on new ways of defining and achieving objectives, can be regarded as a means to foster inter-departmental collaboration. It is a value – ‘a space’ – that can enhance the rationale for exchange of ideas and information, which in turn promotes greater cross-sectoral exchanges;

inter-disciplinary checklists. Linked to the issue of leadership and project-oriented dynamics is that of ‘sign-off,’ or a checklist of requirements that need to be met to complete a specific assignment. One way that managers have been able to break down silos and promote greater inter-departmental collaboration is to insist that a completed assignment must reflect the expertise of all departments that could justifiably assume an interest in that assignment. The key to the inter-disciplinary checklist approach is that each department is deemed to be accountable not only for its own inputs into the assignment, but for the overall project. Critics have complained that this approach slows down project completion and imposes unrealistic demands on those who do not have the same types and levels of expertise. It, too, can be argued that the proposed checklist merely adds additional bureaucracy to inter-disciplinary approaches. The alternative case put forward is that the improved quality of final projects frequently justify the delay, and that the concern about expertise gaps forces dialogue, information exchange and collaboration. The check-list, though paradoxically bureaucratic, nevertheless is a tangible reflection of management priorities to subordinates;

interdepartmental linkages and language. It is most likely that every organisation that provides some form of technical assistance has experienced the gulf between its technical experts and its policy makers and decision-makers. It might be amusing when management – at headquarters or at field level – is teased for not understanding the implications of the ‘techies’ language’. Those small groups of experts that only understand each other are important, but at the same time the conceptual and linguistic distance between them and others in the organisation can prove a serious constraint on inter-departmental collaboration.

Every effort at inter-disciplinary analysis faces the hardship of bringing to bear the full weight of relevant perspectives without over-simplifying or diluting the contribution of each individual discipline. A very useful mechanism for fostering inter-disciplinary perspectives is through what the corporate sector calls ‘the art of systematic speculation’. In other words, scenario development – to be discussed in Section #5 – very often provides that communications breakthrough that enables different types and levels of expertise to understand each other.
The extent to which the ECOWAS Commission might be seen as fit for the future was a theme that was explored during the Organisational Self-Assessment Tool (OSAT) exercise conducted between October 2012 and March 2013 in Abuja. In that context, the relationship between the Commission’s ability to anticipate and adapt to longer-term DRR and the Commission’s cross-sectoral dynamics was a significant theme. With that in mind, there were several issues that are worth noting here:

[i] **highly compartmentalised.** In 2009, recognising that the Commission was overly ‘silod’, it undertook measures that would reduce such constraints to collaboration. Four years later, however, OSAT results suggested that the ECOWAS Commission remained highly compartmentalised and focused on short-term and medium-term strategising, e.g., from 1 to 5 years;

[ii] **filling the policy gaps.** When confronting complex issues such as climate change, integrated environmental management and increasing urban poverty, it was felt that the Commission required policy approaches that were not only more focused on longer-term timeframes and more cross-border perspectives, but also more cross-sectorally interactive. With regard to cross-sectoral interaction, it was felt that greater attention required ‘the expertise and coordination of multiple directorates...’

[iii] **strategic leadership.** The March 2013 OSAT workshop concluded that the Commission was strongest when it came to transactional leadership rather than transformative leadership. While the former is important to maintain consistent focus on cross-directorate interaction, the latter is essential to define the objectives and process for greater cross-directorate interaction;

[iv] **poor integrated planning and review processes.** Both integrated planning and review processes remain ‘illusory,’ according to the findings of the OSAT review workshop. This is due not only to the issue of strategic leadership and low human resource capacity, but also to the intensely hierarchical and formal decision-making structure of the Commission;

[v] **low human resource capacity.** When discussing the challenges faced by the Early Warning Directorate in seeking to provide more detailed thematic analysis to other directorates, it was recognised that low human resource capacity placed severe constraints on the Early Warning System to provide the required flows of information. Yet, as this issue was analysed further, it was also agreed that one of the basic difficulties that all directorates faced when it came to information exchange was a similar lack of adequate staff to deal with information inputs and outputs in a consistent and systematic manner;

[vi] **online collaborative networks.** Though the most immediate challenge for sharing information about longer-term DRR was centred on the issue of cross-directorate collaboration, the importance of feeding the expertise of institutions, e.g., the private sector, into cross-sectoral deliberations was deemed important but underexplored. Hence, the view of participants in the OSAT workshop was that ‘collaborations should also seek to use the growing role of non-traditional actors’ by sharing information through online collaborative networks;

[vii] **accountability versus innovation.** The organisational emphasis on ensuring accountability also is linked to a tendency to resist innovation. Once again, according to the OSAT analysis, directors knew of examples where risk taking and the presentation of new ideas had been punished by senior management.6
In order to further explore the challenges facing cross-directorate collaboration, interviews were sought with representatives from the FOREWARN Steering Committee, one of the few regular fora for such cross-directorate interaction at the ECOWAS Commission.7

Based upon the input received from Steering Committee members in mid- and late-2014, there appeared to be mixed attitudes about the extent to which cross-directorate collaboration was a useful tool to handle longer-term disaster risk challenges that would eventually confront ECOWAS and, hence, the Commission. The questions posed focused on nine questions, intended to assess the extent to which the sorts of longer-term threats, which were perceived as plausible required more cross-disciplinary solutions. The assumption underpinning the nine questions was that, if greater cross-disciplinary perspectives were needed to anticipate the consequences of longer-term crisis threats and appropriate solutions, then enhanced cross-directorate collaboration would be a step in the right direction.

The following section provides a summary of the responses to each of the nine questions, as well as analysis on the potential implications of these responses.

Summary of Responses to the Cross-Directorate Questionnaire

Question 1: In a 2025 perspective, what do you feel will be the major factors that may create serious humanitarian crises?

Responses focused principally upon an extension of existing risks, and generally reflected risks for which their individual directorates were responsible. That said, there were risks that some respondents said that emanated from outside West Africa such as the threat of drugs, terrorism and ‘other countries’ conflicts. In addition, concern was expressed about social unrest, including electoral violence, and the prospect of major pandemics emanating both from within the region and outside it.

The immediate pressures of individual directorate responsibilities would seem to leave little time for respondents to be more speculative about future threats and ways to address them. The most consistent theme in their speculative considerations was that future threats would not be new but would reflect more intensified versions of the present.

Question 2: How and in what ways do you see your specific area of expertise impacting upon reducing or eliminating such serious threats?

Most respondents believed that the sorts of issues, which they had identified as 2025 threats, could be handled within their own areas of expertise and in their respective directorates. There was recognition that additional expertise might be required, but these were principally to deal with sectorally-specific directorate responsibilities.

Question 3: Is this sort of expertise reflected in the type of work that your directorate undertakes?

In light of the first two questions, it was not surprising that there was a consistent belief that the expertise required to meet 2025 threats were seen as available in their respective directorates. Nevertheless, responses also reflected the fact that their respective directorates were understaffed and under-resourced, and when it came to such issues as ‘resilience’, supplementary expertise from outside individual directorates would be needed.

Question 4: In light of the sorts of future humanitarian crises you feel may occur over the next decade, what other sorts of expertise will be required to deal with them? And, are such expertise available in the ECOWAS Commission; and, if so, in what directorates?

Except in two instances, there generally was no expression of interest to seek sectorally different types of expertise to address possible 2025
threats. It is worth noting that in those instances when additional expertise was deemed necessary to deal with an issue, only two suggested that such expertise might be found within the ECOWAS Commission.

There were few recommendations that emerged that suggested the need for different types of disciplines or different sorts of sectors to deal with future crises. On the other hand, references were made to the need for greater expertise in the fields of advocacy, strategic planning and coordination of activities and socio-economic development within individual sectors. There, too, were calls for greater emphasis on ‘resilience building’ and means to deal with the impact of climate change on specific sectoral concerns such as agriculture and water. A proposal that encompassed the issue of cross-directorate collaboration in general was the call for a far more fundamental restructuring of ECOWAS procedures, enabling the Commission to provide a structure that fostered rather than constrained cross-directorate interaction.

Clear structural disincentives emerged as a theme that explained in various ways the lack of effort to search for expertise from different Commission directorates. Beyond the perceived limitations of resources and staff were concerns that cross-directorate dialogues would result in even slower decision-making processes. It, too, would create tensions within directorates as individual roles and responsibilities would become ever more uncertain. In addition to these issues was the suggestion that such issues were further compounded by having also to deal with the lack of effective collaboration across member states, and that this was an additional burden that constrained cooperation within the Commission.

**Question 5: Based on the previous question, how and in what ways do you engage with other directorates to benefit from their expertise [i] in general and [ii] when it comes to dealing with longer-term disaster risk reduction?**

Mixed responses emerged from this question. One respondent noted areas of greater collaboration across directorates that were concerned with humanitarian affairs, macroeconomic policy, trade and infrastructure. Others on the other hand suggested that there were relatively few times when such collaboration took place, one noting that it occurred occasionally at committee levels. Once again, only one respondent noted the importance of collaboration for longer-term DRR, and in so doing noted its importance for ‘resilience building’. Another respondent felt that there were situations in which longer-term programmes were ‘conceptualised’ across directorates, but these lacked the ‘task forces’ required for implementation and monitoring.

There appears to be relatively consistent agreement that the benefits to be gained from the expertise of those in other directorates are limited, and there was no one who felt that cross-directorate exchanges should at this stage be part of a formal process as things now stand. That is not to say that some did not recognise the potential utility of this sort of exchange in the future, particularly when it came to anticipating longer-term DRR, but that there was little enthusiasm for it in the immediate term, once again for reasons that were noted in responses to previous questions.

**Question 6: If you do engage with other directorates for such purposes, is such cross-directorate collaboration actively encouraged in ECOWAS, and in what ways is such encouragement manifested?**

Isolated instances suggest that collaboration across different components of the wider ECOWAS system are encouraged, but that these have rarely been at the directorate level within the Commission. Some responses suggested that a question of insufficient resources also explained why cross-directorate collaboration is not actively encouraged; and, one respondent rather categorically stated, ‘No,’ in response to the issue of whether cross-directorate collaboration was encouraged.

The responses to this question underscore a fundamental point, namely, there is seemingly little encouragement for cross-directorate collaboration within the Commission, itself. Though difficult to disentangle the multiplicity of motives that could explain this, one reason might lie in the very ways that the Commission, too, has evolved, e.g., with seemingly self-contained blocks of responsibilities given to the Commission, with little focus placed on how such ‘semi-autonomous’ blocks might inter-relate. In other words, the reason could reflect a history of the Commission’s incremental development.
Question 7: If such cross-directorate collaboration is not encouraged, what are the reasons that have led you to that conclusion, and what do you feel are the consequences?

The last component of the question generated a spectrum of responses from one extreme, ‘future threats will become more pervasive and worse’, to ‘some delays will appear in implementation’.

The overall attitude would seem to suggest that such forms are not a priority for the Commission and those that manage it. One respondent, however, noted that ‘the benefit of cross-directorate principle is well known’, but that implementation is low due to a lack of consistent and systematic communications and overstretched individual departments.

Question 8: To what extent do you feel that greater collaboration with other directorates would benefit your own work in general, and more specifically for promoting greater disaster risk reduction?

Inherent in the answers to #8 is a paradox: given all the seeming reluctance in previous answers for promoting cross-directorate collaboration, there is a consistent recognition that cross-directorate expertise is important for improving the objectives of individual directorates. Some suggest that such collaboration should lead to ‘joint programmes’; others note the ways that cross-directorate collaboration will enhance overall projects, e.g. ‘resilience’.

It is clear that respondents were generally interested in the potential benefits of cross-directorate collaboration, but felt that to do so many hurdles would have to be overcome – within their own directorates and for the institution as a whole. Perhaps there was a recognition that the concept in principle makes sense, but the road to get there was not immediately realistic.

Question 9: How would you suggest that greater cross-directorate collaboration be fostered? Are there specific operational activities that you feel should be considered to foster greater collaboration?

Two broad themes emerged when interviewees were asked to suggest ways that cross-directorate collaboration could be fostered. The first had to do with a general observation that ‘there was no general institutional structure to enhance dialogue. We’re still foot dragging on a more basic institutional issue – who is held responsible for what?’ The second involved more specific recommendations such as ‘mapping cross-cutting, common areas and consciously work on these’ and ‘develop coordination platforms’ for specific projects.

There is a tension between those who feel that the institution needs to resolve fundamental structural problems before it can proceed with any success to have meaningful cross-directorate dialogues, and those who feel that in principle one could even under the present circumstances experiment with discrete initiatives, promoting joint-programming guided by the principle of accountability. With regard to the former, it is interesting to note that the Commission is working with a London-based consultancy firm ‘to review’ the organisation’s present structure. At the same time, with such potentially integrating themes that may emerge, for example, from preparations for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, there might at the same time be interest in experimenting with ways to deal with more complex issues.

Key findings from the questionnaire

In reviewing the overall results of these interviews and placing them as well in the context of the OSAT exercise, there are several broad themes that emerge out of this initial analysis. On the more positive side it is evident that at least in principle, there is an appreciation that cross-directorate collaboration has positive benefits when it comes to the sorts of complex longer-term risks that appear increasingly inevitable. That said, there seems to be an inclination to see such longer-term risks as mere extensions of the present, with little appreciation for the need to understand more complicated, interactive threats and ways to mitigate them. The reasons for that could well be that the present poses sufficient challenges for the Commission and member states, leaving little capacity to consider further complications to those challenges.

However, the reality might lie somewhere in between, namely, there are no perceived incentives for those in the Commission to think about the ‘what might be’s’. It is evident that interviewees were far more focused on the transactional and far less on the transformational. And, yet there were consistent references to developing future plans and strategies, which was a clear indication that respondents were willing to move beyond what
might be perceived as the day-to-day concerns if the requisite capacity was available. From interviewees’ responses, there are core institutional problems that also affect the lack of priority given to cross-directorate collaboration. Structurally, the Commission is intensely hierarchical, and there appears to be an inclination to protect individual directorate's expertise from the involvement of other directorates, for fear of adding confusion to decision-making and threatening the perceived value-added of respective directorates. There, too, is the persistent complaint that the lack of adequate resources and staff mitigates against collaboration. The irony that underpins that complaint is that lack of resources and staff could possibly be addressed in some ways by sharing expertise and information.

It is interesting to note that the individual directorates are not inherently against collaboration. There are many examples of directorates collaborating with a variety of ECOWAS systems outside the Commission, and certainly with other intergovernmental and governmental organisations. It is, however, within the Commission where stove-piping appears so evident. Of course, the Commission is by no means alone in that regard. It is a concern that, too varying degrees, is inherent in organisational behaviour and dynamics. Yet, that perspective may have been adequate in times past, looking towards the future organisations will ultimately be held accountable for perpetuating stultifying solutions to ever more complex problems.
While some of the constraints that affect cross-directorate collaboration are inherent in all organisations and others peculiar to the ECOWAS Commission, itself, there are nevertheless ways that can enhance cross-directorate collaboration, based in no small part upon proven approaches suggested in Section #2, above. Nevertheless, a starting point for determining ways to promote more effective cross-directorate collaboration for the Commission should begin by building upon the perceived needs of the Commission. With that in mind, there are a series of questions, based upon some of the characteristics noted in Section #2 and responses in Section #4, that ought to be considered as starting points for ways to strengthen cross-directorate collaboration:

[i] How and in what ways might leadership within the Commission promote effective cross-directorate collaboration without intensifying bureaucratic behaviour?

[ii] Are there specific objectives or sets of objectives that could sustain the momentum of an interchange of ideas across directorates?

[iii] Longer-term objectives normally offer a less bureaucratically threatening platform for pursuing cross-directorate objectives; and, with that in mind, what might such objectives be for the Commission and its directorates?

[iv] In what ways could the Commission foster speculation as a shared activity amongst key directorates?

[v] To what extent would separate directorates within the Commission be willing to have a collaboration ‘check-list’ to identify areas of collaboration?

[vi] In what ways might a more systematic approach to speculation close language gaps, e.g. technical terminology, and promote subject linkages across directorates?

Potential steps towards improved cross-directorate collaboration for longer-term DRR

As a starting point, the Commission’s FOREWARN Steering Committee might wish in the first instance to invite experts from the region as well as those readily available from international organisations to consider the sorts of threats that might dramatically impact upon the region over the coming decade. From there it, too, might wish to consider the sorts of multidimensional knowledge and specialisations that would be necessary to address such threats. That sort of preliminary knowledge base might well lead the Steering Committee’s directorates to ask, ‘How could we together develop a strategy to identify and meet such threats?’.

- Cross-directorate agreement on enhanced collaboration. With the active support of the Commission’s leadership, draft and agree on broad-based statement of objectives, defining collaboration issues and stating specific objectives, including joint planning methodologies and measures for information exchange;

- Workshop on speculative risk reduction analysis in a West African context. Identification of plausible threats/risks that need to be considered as part of the Commission’s contribution to assisting member-states prepare for the future. In and of itself, this sort of initiative could be one of key projects that would require a cross-directorate approach;

- Simulation exercise series. A combination of scenario/simulation exercise intended to assess ways to develop a strategic policy framework for a highly complex, disaster risk related issue;

- Cross-directorate longer-term DRR project. Agreement on single project or set of projects needed to enhance the Commission’s cross-directorial involvement in longer-term disaster risk reduction, which will serve as the basis of the cross-directorate approach to project implementation.
Annex I: List of ECOWAS officials and external experts consulted

ECOWAS Interviews and questionnaire responses

- Directorate of Agriculture
- Directorate of Education, Culture, Science & Technology
- Directorate of Environment
- Directorate of Early Warning
- Directorate of Humanitarian and Social Affairs
- Directorate of Strategic Planning

Relevant consultations

- Rolf Alter – Director, Public Governance and Territorial Development, OECD
- Mark Bowden – UN Deputy SRSG in Afghanistan and former Director of Policy at UN OCHA
- Will Day – Sustainability Advisor, PWC, and Chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission until March 2011 and was a board member of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) until October 2012
- Jim Drummond – former official UK Cabinet Office, DFID Africa Director
- Nigel Fisher – UN Representative for the Middle East, and previously a wide range of appointments including UN Deputy Special Representative for Haiti
- David Freud – UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Work and Pensions and Minister for Welfare Reform
- Michael Green – Executive Director, Social Progress Imperative
- Karin von Hippel – Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, US Department of State and co-author of Study Four: Changes in Humanitarian Financing and Implications for the United Nations
- David King – former UK Government Chief Scientist and now responsible for UK government’s position on climate change
- Victor Meyer – Global Head, Corporate Security and Business Continuity Deutsche Bank
- Jeremy Oppenheimer – Director at McKinsey & Co, presently on sabbatical as project director for New Climate Economy project
- Patience Wheatcroft – former non-Executive Director of Barclays Bank and presently on the board of the British Museum
Annex II: Abridged bibliography


Harford, Tim *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*, Little Brown, 2011


Xenikou, Athena and Adrian Furnham, *Group Dynamics and Organisational Culture: Effective Working Groups and Organizations*, Palgrave (Ebook), 2012
Endnotes


3 See: Annex I for discussions with experts that were built into this analysis. Experts representing the public sector who have provided views for this paper include those from the UK government’s Cabinet Office, the Department for International Development and the Office of the Government’s Chief Scientific Advisor, the US government’s Department of State and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as well as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN’s Mine Action Group. In addition views were provided by representatives from non-governmental organisations, principally from Save the Children – US and UK and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation. Private sector inputs into this analysis included McKinsey & Co, Deutsche Bank, Fiat Corporation, Zurich Insurance and a member of the World Economic Forum.


6 E. Check, ‘Homeland science wants quick fixes,’ *Nature*, vol. 423, 8 May 2003, p. 106.


8 The OSAT is a survey-based tool, designed by the Humanitarian Futures Programme, and intended to help an organisation systematically think about its capacity to deal with the humanitarian challenges and opportunities of the future. The OSAT, implemented in collaboration with the ECOWAS Commission in three stages from October 2012 to April 2013, with 46 questionnaires distributed, resulted in a return rate of 70%. Draft findings were presented to Directorate representatives and to the Vice President of the ECOWAS Commission in April 2013. For a detailed analysis of the OSAT findings and agreed conclusions and recommendations, see; HFP, *Fit for the Future: Report on Organisational Self-Assessment of the ECOWAS Commission*, humanitarianfutures.org.


10 ibid #9, *HPF Fit for the Future*, p. 15.
In an attempt to enhance cross-sectoral collaboration within the ECOWAS Commission, the FOREWARN Initiative established a Steering Committee with the purpose of guiding and approving its activities. This Steering Committee consists of representatives from 8 directorates, and DRR is an essential cross-cutting theme. The directorates involved are Humanitarian & Social Affairs, External Relations, Early Warning, Political Affairs, Environment, Science & Technology, Private Sector, and Gender.

In reviewing this discussion paper, one reviewer who knows the Commission well, commented that ‘this [reflects] an interesting tension, and one that I think comes out a lot at ECOWAS (probably in all bureaucratic institutions): I wonder, from a research perspective, if… earlier questions were interpreted [by respondents] in such a way as to be read ‘How does cross-directorate work/drawing on cross sector expertise factor into how you deliver on your responsibilities as Director?’ Staff at ECOWAS tend to view their jobs in terms of what they are going to be held accountable for by senior management. Therefore, it is entirely possible that they would both 1) agree that something, like cross-directorate collaboration, is good for ECOWAS and should be improved and 2) downplay the idea that their office specifically or them as a director specifically needs to be doing more to achieve this.’

It is worth noting that the issues of failing to exchange information and to make decisions in institutional isolation are themes that have emerged independently in HFP’s [July 2014].

Scenario planning has been on the upsurge over the past decade, with one scholar noting that 77 largest companies of the world are using scenario planning as an essential means for thinking more strategically about the future. See: Angela Wilkinson and Ronald Kupers, ‘Living in the Future’, Harvard Business Review, May 2013.