ECOWAS AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION:

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Introduction

For almost two decades after independence, in West Africa, economic cooperation between the Anglophone territories and their Francophone neighbors remained difficult to achieve. This situation led some of the leaders to moot the idea of an Economic Community of West African States in 1975. Prior to this time, most African States preferred to be tied to the apron strings of their former colonial masters by way of subordinate association.

This paper assesses the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the challenges of regional integration among the member states of the organization since its formation in 1975.In the sections that follow, the paper conceptualizes integration before presenting the ECOWAS in historical perspective. It then assesses the development and level of trade relations in ECOWAS and later examine the challenges of integration in the West African sub-region. Finally, the paper makes some concluding remarks.

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Integration: Theoretical and Conceptual Discourse

Integration, even though it can be seen as a way of looking at the merger of two or more state to form a new or larger state or union in order to achieve certain objectives, has been subjected to various theoretical and conceptual analysis.

Karl Deutsh, a founding father of modern integration theory, sees integration as the attainment within a territory of a sense of community and of institutions and practices that are strong enough and wide spread enough to assume for a long term dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population.[1] This emphasis on peaceful change or reorientations of attitudes is reflected in a slightly different ways by Ernst Haas, who defines integration as the tendency towards the voluntary creation of larger political units, each of which self consciously avoid the use of force in the relations between participatory states, units and groups. Joseph Nye assert that regional political organization has made modest contribution to the creation of peace in the international system. This means that regional integration has been seen as a means of promoting peaceful cooperation and reducing conflict between states in various parts of the world.

However, it is seen that this laudable intentions ignores the expansive logic of integration. The argument that peace can be secured by a merger of the existing states into a single empire or nation has been made during or smoothly after every major European conflict since the 17th century. Unfortunately, most schemes of this nature bears little relation to the historical realities of integration plans. This is because universal or regional federations were themselves a reaction to the cohesive and distinctly non-pacific effort which have marked the birth of nations in the past.[2]

Functionalism and Federalism are major theories that have contributed to the theoretical development of the theory of integration .while the functionalist saw it as the development of international organizations, the possibility of performing human welfare task without advocating the end of nationalism, the federalist assume the primacy of politics as a means of tacking the problem of social and economic diversities and a strategy for super national community building. Both angles have their advantages and disadvantages and so provided some satisfaction through limited explanation for the presence of integrative endeavors.

From functionalism came the idea that certain welfare oriented task might be delegated by state to an international organization and that international decision making is an incremental process whereby participant in one international learn from the success in one field to apply the same technique in another.

Federalism has come from the conception of division of decision making power between centre and supra national and local or national institutions and the balance between them. The Federal model therefore remains an ideal type or paradigm against which to measure progress in the scope and levels of decision making in a putative supra-national community. However, the theory of integration has some basic and fundamental assumptions.

Assumptions of Integration Theory

The concept of integration fundamentally connotes a condition on which hitherto separate units have attained a relationship of mutual independence and jointly produce system properties which they would separately lack. It is seen as process by which the actors concern begin voluntarily to give up certain sovereign power and evolved new techniques for solving common problems and resolving mutual conflict. Despite the lack of consensus on definition, there is agreement that integration consists of a merger of separate institution and committee usually within a specific geographical region into a larger unit.

There are two major approaches to the issue. They are:

(i) The Transactionalist approach.

(ii) The Neo-Functionalist approach.

Transactionalism emphasize the role of transactions between people as both an indicator of their attitudes towards each other as the sources of interdependent within the country. Neo-functionalism stresses the way in which super national institutions that have binding decision making process emerged from a convergence of self interest on the part of various significant groups.[3]

However, it is important to state that there is always a problem distinguishing between what is economic, political and social issues in integration. The evident discontinuity between economic and political integration has led to the suggestion that the concept be broken down into economic, political and social components such that each should be measured by the most appropriate indicators and practical evidences. How does this apply to the ECOWAS as a sub-regional body?

The Formation of Ecowas

It is an acknowledged fact that negotiations for the Community effectively began in 1962 with the Monrovia Meeting convened by the late President of Liberia, William Tolbert. But that process came to a halt after 1966 due to the wave of military coup d'états which swept the region.[4] Of equal acknowledgement was the fact that both Nigeria and Togo played key role in the last major negotiations which led to the formation of the ECOWAS.[5] Particularly for Nigeria, a number of factors have been identified as responsible for the country's dominant role in the formation of the ECOWAS. First factor was the recognition of Biafra by Ivory Coast during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). It was realized that cordial relations with neighboring states was fundamental to Nigeria's national security "if they are not to serve as platforms for the promotion of political instability."[6]

The second factor was Nigeria's emergence as a regional power, in part due to the enormous revenue accruing to the country from the sale of crude oil. It was oil revenue which enabled the country to successfully prosecute the civil war and assist some of the most economically disadvantaged West African countries. Nigeria was out to offer financial assistance to those countries which became very assertive of their independence. For instance, Benin got N1.8 million for the construction of a twenty-four kilometer highway that linked Porto Novo,(Benin) and Idi-Iroko (Nigeria); one of the main political parts in Guinea, *Jannessee de al Revolution Democratique Africaine* received N50,000 and Mali, also, received N80,000 for drought relief.[7]

Third, and very crucial for regional and continental interest, was the commitment by Nigerian political leaders to make the country the industrial center for Africa.[8] Establishing an economic community in the West African sub-region was perceived as part of the overall politico-economic restructuring needful to enhance cooperation, integration and collective self-reliance critical to redressing the problems of regional underdevelopment. Hence the realization that "regional free trade", that is, free trade relations among developing countries, to which the whole of West Africa belong, was "a healthy stimulus to balanced economic growth and development.' Therefore, an economic union was felt to be a precondition for the expansion of mutual trade relations within the sub-region to accelerate the integration process.

Towards this end, by April 1972, the Heads of Government of Nigeria and Togo met to give concrete expression to the issue of economic cooperation in the sub-region. At the end of their deliberation, a communiqué was adopted which called for a meeting of the Council of Ministers to prepare an agenda for a summit of West African Heads of state. On December 15, 1973, the meeting was held in Lome, Togo, with fifteen West African states in attendance and "agreed that the ultimate objective of regional integration is a common market." [9]

Initially, and this was not unexpected, colonial ties between some of the West African countries and their former colonial powers posed serious obstacle to the set objective of the Community. Typically, "the Francophone West African States hitherto apprehensive of the disintegration of cultural ties inherited from metropolitan France and of Nigeria's domination had come to perceive benefits which could accrue to them from the proposed community."[10]

It was the demand for reforms by some former French West African states such as Mauritania and the eventual weakening of the Organization Commune Africaine Et Malgache (OCAM), that removed the impediment "to full integration through West Africa."[11] Eventually, at the summit of West African Heads of State or pleni-potentiaries in Lagos on May 28, 1975, the draft treaty proposed by the Council of Ministers was accepted as the basis for the establishment of the economic community of West African States.[12]

Development in Trade Relations and the Level of Integration amongst Ecowas Member States.

Since its establishment in 1975, the ECOWAS had been characterized by weak or lack of protocol implementation among its Member States, mainly because of stagnation in economic growth and development due to world economic recession and internal mismanagement, in the 1980s.

Before the formal acceptance and establishment of the ECOWAS Treaty in 1975, "the substantive implementation of the Treaty" was assumed "to have commenced in May 1973," following the fourth summit meeting.[13] The provision of the Treaty obliged Member States to refrain from imposing new customs duties or taxes and from increasing existing ones. This marked the first stage of the three stages envisaged in trade liberalization process.

The initial decision in trade liberalization divided both products and countries into two groups.[14] Member States classified as industrially more developed, notably Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Senegal, were required to eliminate their tariff barriers over the period 1981-1986; while other Member States were not required to eliminate their tariffs until 1988. With regards to products, "priority industrial products" were to be liberalized in accordance with an accelerated schedule (four years for the industrially more developed states, six years period for the others). Other products were to be liberalized over a six-year period for the industrially more developed states and eight years for the others.[15]

Still, at the formative stage, the decision on trade liberalization also required all member states to eliminate their non-tariff barriers within a four year period from May 28, 1981. The subsequent amplificatory Council decision on May 1982,[16] however contained the significant reservation that foreign exchange restrictions on current transactions shall only be eliminated after the problems of currency convertibility have been resolved.[17]

At the May 1980 Meetings,[18] the scheme for compensation for revenue was agreed upon. It provided for the payment through the ECOWAS Fund for compensation for revenue losses emanating from the process of trade liberalization (strictly tariff liberalization). The compensation was to be paid out of funds contributed by Member States "in proportion to their shares of intra-community exports of manufactures." The industrially less developed states were to receive full compensation for their revenue losses in additional sum, for an initial five-year period. The additional 'restrictive' aspect was to be financed initially by restricting the compensation paid to the industrially more developed member stats to 80 per cent of their assessed revenue losses.[19]

The foregoing provisions and measures as contained in the ECOWAS Treaty on trade liberalization were aimed at fostering unfettered trade relations geared towards promoting the dynamics of integration process in the sub-region. "Regional economic integration among developing countries is concerned with the creation of economic structures to which both the less developed and more developed member states can lay claim on."[20] Therefore, trade relations among ECOWAS Member States and its impact on the integration process cannot be divorced from its calculation of the cost and benefit of integration.

Thus, it is against this background of the objective formation of the ECOWAS to promote rapid economic development and the inherent problems of actualizing the provisions of trade liberalization and the slow pace of the integration process that the study examines the regional body.

Ecowas and the Challenges of Integration

Using political, social and economic indices, there had been problematic issues in the integration process among the ECOWAS Member States since its establishment in 1975. The ECOWAS is acknowledged as one of the largest regional integration arrangements among developing countries; thus, coupled with the fact that most of the West African countries are classified as "among the least developed countries and have different colonial backgrounds (British, French and Portuguese)."[21] Initially, the different colonial backgrounds, particularly the differing policies of both British and French powers constituted an impediment to the smooth take-off of ECOWAS.

After overcoming that hurdle, the suspicion between the Anglo-phone and Franco-phone countries within ECOWAS would not evaporate easily, especially against the apprehension of Nigeria's hegemony. There is no doubt that trade relations genuinely practiced among ECOWAS Member states would engender regional integration but this would not happen where there is suspicion and lack of commitment between governments and citizens alike and, worse still, a low level of infrastructure.

The implementation of the trade liberalization provisions in the ECOWAS Treaty has been very strictly uncommitted on the part of Member States and thus, the volume of trade among the countries has been grossly low and invariably slows down the integration process. This is due largely to numerous barriers placed on free movement of person (laborers, traders alike) across the sub-region. So long as the ECOWAS Member States continue to pay-dipservice to trade liberalization, but instead practice conservative and protectionist policies at the domestic level, trade relations will be far from being cordial and integration process slow. Trade relations among the Member States of ECOWAS remains grossly low, far less than 15 per cent.[22] Therefore, there is need to dismantle existing identifiable barriers to intra-regional trade as a basis for accelerating or, at least give momentum to effective sub-regional integration in ECOWAS member states. To eventually transform the West African sub-region from "ECOWAS of States" into "ECOWAS of People" by 2020, [23] will be unrealizable if the major challenges, i.e. the numerous barriers are not removed, or at least significantly reduced.

Prospecting for Effective Integration in Ecowas Member States

The assumption that a strong trade liberalization would foster trade relations and this in turn would accelerate the integration process among the ECOWAS Member States remains an ongoing debate. The debate is based on whether trade relations has led to positive or negative impact on the integration process, or even integration consolidation.

The ECOWAS Treaty, signed on May 28, 1975, defined in clear terms that "its mission is to promote cooperation and integration in the West African sub-region." The mechanisms at achieving the mission include the removal of customs duties and taxes; establishment of a common external tariff; harmonization of economic and financial policies; and creation of a single monetary zone in the sub-region.[24] As Alaba noted, strict commitment to the various protocol to facilitate the achievement of the ECOWAS economic blueprint has been very slow and implementation targets have not been met.[25]

Although ECOWAS set out very ambitious trade liberalization as provided for in the Treaty, however, the community has been faced with enormous problems bordering on many barriers to closer cooperation. For example, the direction of trade of most of the member states of ECOWAS remains overwhelmingly outward directed.[26] This would partly explain the slow integration process because of the dismally low intra-ECOWAS trade relations.

It has been observed that the trade policies pursued by countries have much to do with increasing regional integration. Babatunde examined the impact of trade policy and regional integration on export performance in ECOWAS sub-region. He concluded that unilateral trade barrier reductions and participation in preferential trade agreements can enhance export performance,[27] which would mean a positive outcome for integration.

Austria examined the policies embarked upon by the Philipines in response to the increasing economic integration and interdependence of states and regions, with particular focus on the country's multi-track approach to trade and investment liberalization.

The Philippine's experience underscores the importance of domestic policies that foster domestic efficiency and competitiveness before participating effectively in regional integration and face global competition.[28] Arguably, some studies, had examined the role of trade liberalization, regional integration as it concerned firm performance in Africa's manufacturing sector. Part of the evidence from their study showed that unilateral tariff reductions have enhanced regional trade and hence regional integration.

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Conclusion

ECOWAS as a viable mechanism towards the promotion of regional economic integration is far from being fully realized. The failure or success of any regional integration arrangement had been explained in the context of interaction among certain factors. Of the two main schools of thought on integration theory, the cybernetic as enunciated by Karl Deutsch, and the neo-functional propounded by Ernst Hass, the latter has made the greatest contribution to the study of most developing schemes.

Therefore, greater trade relations, and more liberalization may lead to accelerated integration process, notwithstanding the arguments with regards to trade and development policies, and the mixed outcomes of specific impacts from diverse studies. ECOWAS Member States must adopt and be committed to trading systems that are open, transparent, far removed from mutual suspicion and ready to negotiate as a trading bloc. Only this attitude would fast track the much cherished integration process to attain a state of integration consolidation.

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