

Introduction

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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The unprecedented speed at which change occurs in different countries and in all aspects of people's lives over the last two decades; has made it imperative to revisit the erection of any kind of barriers across countries' borders. Viewed in the context of ideological, economic, technological or developmental perspectives, there has been increasing inter-societal, or better still, inter-regional competitiveness across vast geographical spaces. This has brought about a need for capacity strengthening beyond respective nationalistic frameworks, and more significantly at the level of economic functioning in order to strengthen the competitive advantage of participating member-states (Adeniran 2012:2). Against this background, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa are described as imperative platforms for grouping individual countries together within different sub-regions for the specific objectives of attaining greater socio-economic unification.

Ostensibly, the logic underlying the institutionalization of the RECs in Africa has been to engender enhanced group competitiveness within the global economic framework; hence the wide range of regional institutions in place. While the African Union (AU) stands at the apex of African socio-economic and political cooperation, at the sub-regional level, Africa's RECs comprise various groups of neighbouring countries working together to address common developmental concerns, such as enabling free movement of persons and goods, and essentially working towards attaining political unification (World Bank 2011). While numerous RECs exist in Africa, only eight are officially recognized by the AU: the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Community of Sahel and Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern Africa Development Community

(SADC). These RECs are generally projected (and meant) to serve as imperative 'building blocks' to the target of the 'African common market' and are considered central to the realization of the goals of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

Depending on the focus and goals of participating nation-states, regional integration could entail economic, cultural, political and military (including trans-border security) unification/cooperation; which translates to 'deep integration'. If a specific regional integration project focuses on an all-encompassing framework, then 'deep integration' is advanced. As a matter of routine, deep integration obliterates the position of 'methodological nationalism', since the significance of any defined borders of the participating nation-states is demystified. Since most efforts targeted at regional unification in parts of Africa have been programmatically patterned after the European Union (EU) model, the idea of a holistic 'deep integration' has been of less concern. Rather, economic (as well as monetary) integration has been focused on, just as it exists in the subsisting EU framework. Consequently, various RECs projects in Africa have not been immune from extant challenges faced by the EU experimentation some of which show in the recent threat by the United Kingdom to pull out of the EU (through a referendum being planned for 2015) due to perceived unfair treatment by 'economically bigger participants' – Germany and France.

Within the interactive framework of various RECs in Africa, intra-regional suspicion and competition among member-states has been hindering the attainment of extant regional socio-economic goals, just as it is being reflected in the relationship of Britain with the European Union. Besides, the continued cleavage of many African countries to their former colonial masters has been antithetical to the positions of the RECs in Africa. For instance, within the West African sub-region, such cleavage has been responsible for the prioritization of national (and subsisting colonial) interests to the detriment of any (sub) regional agenda. Interestingly, within the ECOWAS configuration, eight monetary zones are currently in place. Such development has not augured well for successful implementation of relevant frameworks of various RECs within the sub-region.

The existence of overlapping institutions within various sub-regions in Africa has presented a daunting challenge to the workings of the RECs on the continent. The majority of the African countries are members of overlapping and, sometimes, contradictory RECs. For instance, in East Africa, while Kenya and Uganda are both members of EAC and COMESA, Tanzania, which is also a member of the EAC, left COMESA in 2001 to join SADC. In West Africa, while all former French colonies, such as Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo and Benin Republic belong to the ECOWAS, they simultaneously keep membership of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), though unrecognized by the AU. Such multiple and confusing membership creates unnecessary duplication and dims the light on what ought to be priority.

Various chapters in this book have therefore sought to identify and proffer solutions to related challenges confronting the workings of the RECs in parts of the

African continent. The discourses range from security to the stock exchange, identity integration, development framework, labour movement and cross-border relations. The pattern adopted in the project engages devolution of related discussions from the general to the specific; that is from larger African configuration to sub-regional case studies. Owing to the popularity of ongoing intent of the ECOWAS authorities to transmute the West African sub-region from 'ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of People', in which the goal of a borderless sub-region will be attained, most of the specific case studies in this publication emanated from the ECOWAS sub-region.

Chapter 1 identifies 'multiple regionalisms' in Africa as the primary albatross of the regional integration project of the continent. The existence of several sub-regional groupings, whose objectives and programmes, in many instances, are contradictory, has been complicating the processes of integration in the continent. Multiple memberships of different regional groupings by most African countries have made the expected impacts of various RECs ineffective in Africa. Overlapping sub-regional groupings have facilitated operational problems in governance and administration of the African integration project. On the one hand, there has been the challenge of dispersal of scarce diplomatic, economic and human resources, especially among mostly poor member states. On the other hand, multiple sub-regional groupings have engendered excessive politicization of the African integration effort. Effective regional governance for integration is hindered by ingrained disagreements among leading member-states within various sub-regional groupings. On the whole, the performance of these sub-regional groupings has been dismal and, of course, antithetical to their envisaged roles as imperative building blocks for larger African socio-economic integration (ARIA 2002). This chapter unequivocally affirms 'inter-regionalism' (that is, the institutionalization of interactions among various sub-regional groupings) as the framework that could assist in overcoming the challenges of multiple regionalism, and help in accelerating the socio-economic integration of Africa.

Chapter 2 concentrates on how Regional Development Poles (RDPs) could be engaged as potent strategies for attaining socio-economic transformation of Africa. The idea focuses on using a few large African countries, which could industrialize on their own, given their huge natural and human resources as well as their large domestic markets, in the process of transforming Africa to modernity. From the RDPs, faster economic development will diffuse to other surrounding smaller African nation-states. The diffusion will be accelerated by establishing inter-African infrastructural networks. At present, negligible fragmented markets of most African economies cannot support the establishment of capital goods industries. Unless established on regional basis, such industries would be underutilized in most African countries due to their relative small sizes. The chapter argues that effective regional integration in Africa would require various African countries to pool their markets and resources.

Chapter 3 explains the usefulness of the African Union's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in ensuring the regional unification of Africa's security apparatus. APSA is basically designed to respond holistically to peace and security concerns on the African continent through conflict prevention, management and

post-conflict peace-building. This chapter suggests that although APSA is a commendable and laudable effort by Africa to provide 'African solutions to African problems', there still subsists a number of questions regarding its sustainability and ownership. The bedrock of the architecture is daunting since various international interests have been unduly represented in the functioning of APSA and such interests have been setting the agenda for its operations.

The enabling of integration of the African continent through the platforms of harmonized sub-regional monetary and economic systems is the focus of Chapter 4. In order to achieve stronger socio-economic unification of Africa, the harmonization of varying macro-economic policies of member-states of specific RECs is deemed essential. In relation to the financial market situations, integration is adjudged as the process of unifying markets and engendering convergence of risk adjusted returns on the assets of similar maturity across the markets (Harris 2008). Besides enhancing domestic savings, and improving the probability of pricing and availability of capital for domestic utilization, integration of stock markets within the sub-regional configuration is capable of increasing the exposure of member states to increased vulnerability, which could hamper desired benefits from integration. This chapter, therefore, affirms that in extracting benefits accruable from the harmonization of the stock markets for utilization by the RECs in Africa, potent regulatory mechanisms should be advanced to mitigate the impacts of probable external shocks on member states.

Chapter 5 examines the gender dimensions of the socio-economic unification project in Africa, engaging extant cross-border trading practice in the West African sub-region as a case study. Through a qualitative research process, the author finds that a significant number of women in cross-border trading in West Africa are routinely exposed to varying degrees of insecurity posed by the informalities entailed in the trading processes. Such insecurities, which are associated with activities of law-enforcement agents and cross-border touts, have been inimical to the goal of socio-economic integration of the sub-region, and have been unproductive with regard to the realization of various programmes of the sub-regional RECs, being represented in the ECOWAS frameworks on sub-regional integration and development. The chapter advances the view that informal economic activities of women in cross-border trading in Africa should be recognized in order to have a holistic policy towards women empowerment across parts of the continent.

Chapter 6 addresses the relevance of cross-border networking process to the attainment of identity integration in Africa, using the West African sub-region as a case study. The chapter engages both historical and qualitative approaches in the process of contextualizing its objectives. Besides the economic and political focus of various REC projects in Africa, it is argued that the patterns of identity interpositions prevalent among Africans should be progressively analysed. Ongoing informal migration within the ECOWAS sub-region, for instance, has presented a formidable framework towards the realization of various integrative and developmental goals as espoused by related sub-regional frameworks. Although

colonial economic policies within the emergent West African nation-states promoted an export-based economy and movement from various hinterlands to the emerging urban settlements, they indirectly discouraged cross-border interactions, especially along the Anglophone/Francophone dichotomy. Such dichotomy was to play a significant role in the formation of national outlooks for such emergent political entities in West Africa. On the one hand, the French took over some of the political entities, imposing their cultural disposition on the citizens in the disguise of 'assimilation'. On the other, although the British presented a rather cooperative mode of relationship with their African colonies in the name of 'association', they tended to affirm a distinct political identity for the colonies through the 'Commonwealth of Nations'. These developments could be readily affirmed to be the conceptual impetus for related, contemporary identity misinterpretations among the people. Yet, though ironically, such colonial creations could not stop the people from sustaining their pre-colonial socio-economic interactive patterns in the post-colonial period. Ostensibly, it would have seemed logical for the subjects of two former British colonies to be intermingling, and for the citizens of two former French colonies to be interacting. Rather, the established pre-colonial mode of interaction has outwitted the contemporary nationalistic configuration in such cases.

The menace of child labour in Africa is the focus of Chapter 7. The chapter specifically explores the process of decision-making regarding the entrance of children into the labour market in West Africa. It observes that child labour is economically built around various production areas in agricultural and urban centres in West Africa. Various agricultural regions saw the emergence of child labourers during the boom period of the 1930s (that is, the production of coffee and cocoa). It identifies both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire as the major countries of concentration of migrant child labourers within the sub-region. Such migrant child labourers either come with their parents or on their own for work. A specific multiplier effect of this development is that courtesy of related intermingling of migrant children and the indigenous children, over time and space, cultural boundaries are becoming obliterated. As such regional integration is being enhanced.

Chapter 8 analyses how trans-border banditry could inhibit integration at the level of RECs functioning in Africa, with specific emphasis on the ECOWAS sub-region. While Africans consider regional integration a noble objective, trans-border banditry poses a huge threat to security and the integration efforts within the frameworks of various RECs in Africa.

Chapter 9 of this book examines the development model upon which the imperatives of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) were situated in Africa. The implications of such imperatives for the realization of the goals of various RECs in Africa, West Africa especially, were focused on. Drawing on the lessons from the trajectories of SAP in sub-Saharan Africa, the chapter argues that Africa should take its destiny in its hands. The intended unification of the socio-economic and political system of the African continent through the workings of various RECs

should be internally propelled. This would answer the need to have a sustainable framework to drive larger developmental project of the African continent.

Chapter 10 analyses the relationship between policing irregular migration and socio-economic integration in Africa. It affirms that within the West African sub-region, rising political and economic instability has produced specific attendant developments, particularly in terms of changing migration configurations. The quest for regional integration within the sub-region, therefore faces the problem of irregular and other forms of clandestine migration, which in most cases have economic and security implications. This chapter discusses the challenges of emerging problems of terrorism, economic and political instability in West Africa and the need to provide effective policing for the sub-region. Using secondary data, the chapter examines issues such as cross-border crimes, the borderless ECOWAS pact and its implications for internal security, human trafficking, child labour and organized criminal networks; information sharing, policing cooperation and illegal border tariffs as challenges to the regional integration plans for the West African sub-region. The chapter concludes by suggesting practical steps towards addressing these challenges in order to properly harness the gains of regional integration in the mode of the European Union.

References

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