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The Challenges Bedeviling Regional Integration in Africa, and the Possible Pathways.

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***Abstract**:* Regional integration in Africa is quite an important initiative aimed at enhancing socio-economic development and numerous other benefits for the continent, reconciling the resources and ideas of the continent's member states. The constitutive act of the African Union commissioned the formation of different Regional Economic communities (RECs) to complement the region's regional integration efforts. The African Economic Community (AEC) thus established the various African regional blocs to serve as foundational blocks for realizing total integration in Africa. When successful, the RECs will enhance the harmonization of states' economies, and facilitate intra and inter-REC economic integration, and free movement of persons, goods and services, and ideas. However, the process of regional integration in Africa has over the years been bedeviled by various factors, limiting the full attainment of integration among African countries. As a result of these challenges, both internal and external, the efforts of the various RECs to engineer grassroots integration within the regional blocs have been crippled. Therefore, the RECs need a reignited effort to address the challenges posing as stumbling blocks to intra-regional smooth integration, to subsequently pave the way for an absolute integration to be realized.

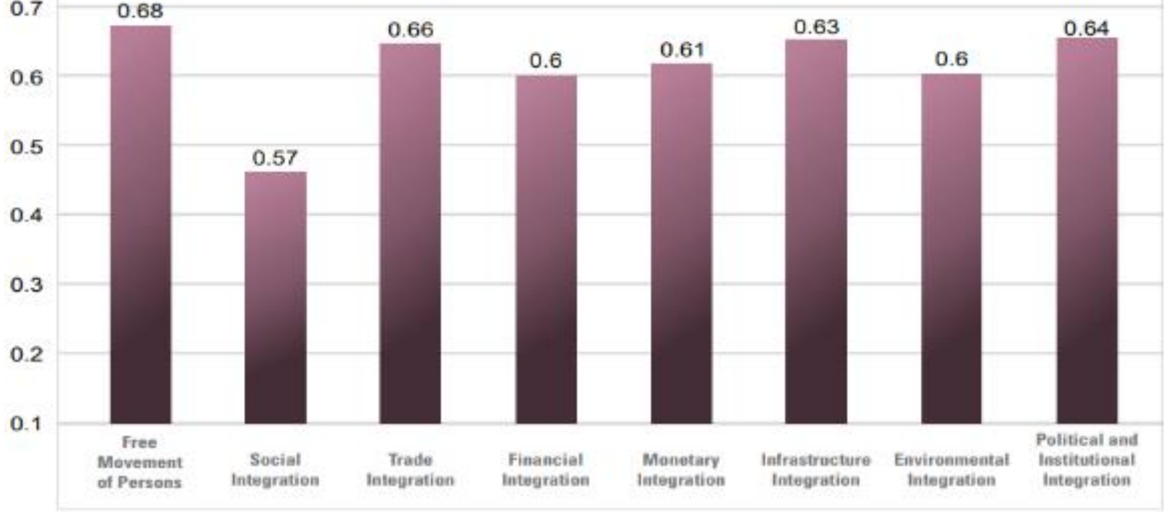
Keywords: Regional Integration, Challenges, Africa, Possible Pathways.

Introduction

African regional integration is one of the brainchildren of the Pan-African ideology. The ideology was mainly geared towards promoting the African identity and ensuring socio-economic growth within the continent of Africa. The ideology that sprang from the disgruntlement of slaves and the activities of anti-slavery movements later metamorphosed into bigger thinking geared towards the continent's welfare among the comity of nations. However, the history of regional integration in Africa is traceable to the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which set the need for the continent to come together to address issues of independence, self-integrity, international reputation, and so on. In later years, the establishment of the different Regional Economic Communities (RECs) by the African Economic Community (AEC) at the Abuja treaty of 1991 served as a good pedestal for the support of regional integration within the continent of Africa by ensuring effective integration within the various RECs. It is also prudent to know that when the OAU changed to the African Union (AU) in 2001, article 3 (c) of the Constitutive Act stressed the need for accelerated political and socio-economic integration within the continent (Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d., p. 6). Despite the numerous efforts exerted by the AU to ensure a smooth regional integration in Africa, several challenges have been bedeviling the regional integration process. Therefore, this paper shall highlight some challenges and proffer possible pathways to enhancing better regional integration in Africa.

According to the African Regional Integration Index, there has been significant improvement in Africa's regional integration. There is a rise in all aspects of Africa's integration by considering the different dimensions of regional integration (African Union, 2021).

In 2019, the overall regional integration mean score for Africa was 0.327, while in 2021 the overall score rose to 0.62 on a scale of 0 to 1. This is remarkably a great achievement in the overall regional integration process. And on trade integration, Africa had an overall score of 0.383 in 2019, and a mean score of 0.66 in 2021(African Union, 2021).



Continental Score by Dimension

Source: African Union, 2021.

Low Intra-African Trade

One of the most troubling challenges to regional integration is the issue of inter and intra-African trade. The significantly low volume of trade that exists among African countries posed a great challenge to regional integration. In many cases, some neighboring African countries are involved in the production of similar products, making the demand for such products from each other very low. By extension, the low production rate by individual countries is fleshed out by the limited capacity to produce finished products, as most of the countries can only offer to export raw materials (Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d., p. 6). For example, the Gambia re-export of goods manufactured elsewhere constitutes 80% of its export strength within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is due to the low production rate in The Gambia. The country's main exports to neighboring countries like Senegal and Guinea are unprocessed fish, peanuts, and cotton. These are also common products in Senegal, rendering the possible trade between these countries low. Furthermore, some countries also have limited products to export to other countries within Africa. This can be seen in the case of Angola where petroleum accounts for over 90 percent of its exports within Africa, and in the Seychelles where fish export amounts to 98 percent of the country's export to African countries (Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d., p. 6). The above factors cause the loss of trade appetite among African countries, due to the preference of trade partners with extensive trading options over the low scale trade options in African countries.

Intra-regional trade within the RECs is still low, as indicated in the African Regional Integration Index (ARII). While the East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) are the high performers with scores of 85, 84, and 79 percent respectively; the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Community of Sahel Saharan States (CEN-SAD), and the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) are the lowest performers with scores of 51, 50, and 49 percent respectively (African Union, 2021, p. 21). However, even the high-performing regions in trade integration encounter serious problems with individual countries' performance, with few countries performing well while others remain at a low level.

Furthermore, it has also been argued that the dominant reliance on imports and exports as sources of income by many African countries has posed a great threat to such countries in the quest for regional integration in which trade liberalization may lead to losing huge income for such countries, as many African countries depend largely on primary production and rely on imports and exports to support their GDPs (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, p. 370). For instance, Ghana's imports and exports revenue on its GDP constitute 28.52% and 29.91% respectively (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2023a); while Niger's imports and exports revenue on its GDP constitutes 27.3% and 10.28% respectively (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2023b). The above and many more examples of African countries relying on imports and exports create the fear of losing huge income through trade liberalization in regional integration.

It would be therefore prudent for the challenge of intra-African trade to be remedied by boosting the production level of individual countries. As trade is one of the most fundamental pillars of regional integration, this cannot happen in the absence of countries being involved in diverse productivity. Countries' capacities to produce products that would meet the demands of other African countries should be in place. Essentially, if all the countries could only produce and offer similar raw materials to their fellow countries, the need for such products may not be as attractive as the need for finished products. Therefore, it will be important for African countries to strengthen their industrial capacities for an effective intra-African trade to take place. Additionally, the liberalization and harmonization of trade policies among African RECs and African countries by removing trade barriers would foster smooth trade integration (African Union, 2020, p. 26).

Weak Free Movement of People Within the RECs

Intra-regional and inter-regional free movements of persons and goods are another great challenge to regional integration within Africa. While the free movement of persons and goods remains very central in regional integration, it is one of the biggest challenges faced by businesspersons and other individuals within the continent. Some of the RECs, like in the case of ECOWAS, allow the free movement of persons and goods is one of the primary issues in its establishing agreement. The free movement of people and goods within an economic community is quite relevant in ensuring that effective trade takes place. Politically the securing of boundaries may be eminent, however, it requires minimal restrictions at the borders for businesses to expand and enjoy the flow of goods and services. This remains a big challenge to regional integration in Africa as countries still hold dearly to the existence of borders with strict scrutiny for people and goods coming from neighboring countries. This challenge is accompanied by stiff visa processes and unnecessary residence permits for members of the same economic regions (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012, pp. 8–9). High visa restrictions or processes within the continent have kept African countries farther apart from each other than these African countries are to other parts of the world. What a situational irony!

According to the African Regional Integration Index (ARII), the implementation of free movement of people within the RECs is still in slow progress, with ECOWAS, EAC, and COMESA leading in intra-regional free movement with scores of 100%, 96%, and 67% respectively as per the dimension and indicators used by the ARII. The remaining RECs performed significantly lower than the above three, with the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) scoring 62%, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) 58%, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) scored 56%, and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) scored 53% (African Union, 2021, p. 20). Therefore, for there to be an effective free trade area as projected in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) treaty, the free movement of persons plays a central role in that. This can be strengthened in the RECs and between RECs through means of removing travel restrictions on persons and goods and limiting the documentation process and procedures for people belonging to the same regions (African Union, 2020, p. 26).

To address the challenge of free movement of persons within the different RECs, and by extension within the continent, all the different RECs should adopt and recognize the members within their communities as people of that regional community, and thus see them as part of the region rather than the identification of people as belonging to individual countries. A solution to this could be the adoption of a common passport within the RECs that will be sufficient to identify people within the RECs and accord them due entitlements. This gives the European Union a great strength. However, I must be quick to say that the adoption of a common passport without good implementation of its purpose of allowing free movement would be as good as not having it at all. Therefore, the effectiveness in achieving any aspect of regional integration, including the free movement of persons, lies in the implementation.

Overlapping Membership in Regional Organizations

Overlapping membership is another great hindrance to regional integration in Africa. The African continent consists of eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), recognized by the African Union, and several other economic groupings. Although these RECs are all expected to serve as enabling communities to the African Economic Community (AEC), which unavoidably constitute their similar characteristics, the different RECs have some peculiar differences among them. Some of these differences include their primary goals, scope of integration, schedules, and specificities in terms of targets. This makes the task of individual RECs very daunting and requires meticulosity or absolute dedication from members. However, the persistence of member countries of RECs belonging to different economic groupings is very predominant in Africa (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012; Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d.). This aspect of multitasking by member countries in the different RECs is perceived to increase the chances of countries benefiting from the different groupings they become members of. For instance, the Benin Republic is a member of ECOWAS, CFA, and CEN-SAD. This overlapping affects all the countries in ECOWAS, except for Cape Verde and Liberia all ECOWAS members are either members of the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) or UEMOA, Thus, making it a member of economic groupings that have different goals and benchmarks. Furthermore, Tanzania is a member of the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), while Kenya and Uganda also part of the East African Community are members of COMESA. These three economic groupings have the same trade objectives (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012, pp. 9–10).

Importantly, African countries should be more particular about the contributions they make towards achieving the goals of the main regional economic groupings they belong to, rather than dividing their attention among many groups. I believe the effectiveness of regional integration within the various RECs depends on the amount of time and concentration given by the participating members. The expectation that joining different RECs widens the chances of countries to benefit numerously from diverse issues has been proven ineffective, as in most cases overlapping membership renders countries ineffective due to divided attention and resource contribution. Thus, it will be highly necessary and ideal for African countries to stick to achieving the goals of one regional grouping. This is quite possible, especially in cases where the goals of the various RECs are similar, like in the case of SADC, EAC, and COMESA.

Africa's Infrastructure Deficit

Infrastructure connectivity is another big challenge to regional integration in Africa. Infrastructural development serves as the main conjunction in intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity. Good infrastructure builds the linking joints among the settlements and people within a region and between regions. Therefore, it is very central to ensuring effective regional integration by facilitating easy and free movement of persons and goods. It is sometimes important to factor in the amount of time and comfort it takes to transport goods between a production center to its consumer destination within the continent. This remains a big challenge as many African countries are still battling with internal infrastructural issues, which are supposed to be the foundation stone for regional infrastructural development to be ensured. Such internal infrastructures in many countries in West Africa, particularly, are inadequate and not designed to link to other member states (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, p. 370). The major infrastructural challenges include the transport, communication, and energy sectors of the continent. This includes poor roads and limited railway connectivity within the continent. Poor infrastructure in Africa has seriously affected the internal connectivity of most countries, as the limited available road connectivity is not linking relevant production centers in the continent. Africa also accounts for the lowest telephone density with the most expensive communication charges (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012; Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d.). The continent continues to be confronted with low skills and capital that will steer its communication infrastructural systems, coupled with financially weak and small trading communities with very expensive transport costs within the continent (Hartzenberg, 2011, p. 4). Referring to the transport complications within Africa, it has been argued that traveling from certain African countries requires transiting through Europe before heading to one's destination in Africa, with stiff and time-consuming visa processes. Similarly, the shipping costs among African countries are significantly higher than the shipping costs between African countries and other parts of the world. For example, while the shipping cost of a car being shipped from Tokyo to Abidjan only costs $1,500, shipping the same car from Addis Ababa to Abidjan was estimated to cost $5,000 (Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d., p. 6). Such transport complications, high costs, and disconnections in Africa have severely contributed to the slow regional integration process.

Essentially, physical infrastructure such as road, rail, air, maritime, and telecommunication are important pillars that can ensure the easy facilitation and protection of free trade and the free movement of persons and goods. With good infrastructure in place, the RECs would be able to achieve a lot of things together (African Union, 2020, p. 27), such as reliability in trade dealings as well as the timely delivery of perishable and non-perishable goods. The boosting of infrastructural development in Africa would enhance smooth regional integration.

Achieving countries' infrastructural development would make the connectivity among countries within the same REC much easier. As countries come together to integrate, they should create extensive road networks, railways, and an integrated communication system that will meet the needs for free movement of persons and goods. There should also be proper placement of infrastructural developments within the continent, to ensure that such infrastructure can contribute to the boosting of economic growth. Hence, to achieve infrastructural development in Africa, countries should adjust their annual investments in infrastructure.

Influences of External Actors

According to Hartzenberg, Africa's geopolitics has been greatly influenced by European colonizers, whose colonial effects affected the formation of small nation-states all over the continent. This external actor led to the creation of intangible borders with small markets and disjointed economies (Hartzenberg, 2011, p. 4). Since independence, the relationship between Africa and the developed countries has had a great impact on Africa's regional integration process. The establishment of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) by Europe to trade unilaterally with African countries also has a great bearing on trade among African countries (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012, p. 11). The presence of individual developed countries in Africa dealing in a different kind of trade with African countries has shifted the attention of many African countries from trading among themselves. Although the objectives of the EPA are set based on mutual benefits, this has mostly put African countries at a great disadvantage. While the activities of the EPA have helped in strengthening European companies, it has been unable to boost intra-African trade. Furthermore, the existence of the Economic Partnership Agreement tends to favor European countries over the African countries and the African RECs, because the latter cannot negotiate for the welfare of its people. Perhaps this is due to low intra and inter-REC trade engagements. Ultimately, the dominating external actors in African trade slows the process of regional integration in Africa, as the benefits of trade partnerships with external actors do not create room for African companies to innovate initiatives that will boost productivity within the continent. The continent is largely involved in the production of raw materials, without mechanisms for industrial development to refine the raw materials in Africa, thus the continent is not at an advantage to use EPAs and other benefits to grease their integration with other African countries, rather such partnerships continue to attach African countries to different external actors (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012, p. 11). Unfortunately, due to the persisting presence of external actors in African internal trade, many African countries tend to confide more in trading with external actors than countries within Africa, leading to a slow process of African regional integration.

Additionally, the dominance of foreign-owned companies in Africa is another factor that slows Africa's regional integration. There are many foreign companies in Africa operating and accumulating a lot of benefits which they send back to their home countries. This reduces most African countries to the level of resource accumulation centers for foreign companies, except a few countries like Nigeria where some national companies are now taking center stage. As this trend continues, less benefits of integration are realized, as the larger chunk of the profits, gains, and dividends of such companies go into the coffers of external non-members of the regions (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, p. 363).

It is thus high time for African countries to realize how the influence of external actors has been slowing the integration process of the continent. This can be done in the form of establishing common trading policies for third-party countries, and to ensure that the collaborations and partnerships enshrined in the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) yield the required mutual benefits for both African countries and external actors. African countries should also be ready and willing to value trade partnerships with their fellow Africans, as this will promote collaborative economic growth within the continent, as opposed to partnering with external parties who benefit from the lion's share. Hence, Africa's regional integration requires the establishment of common internal tariffs and free trade, the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, and ultimately the establishment of common external trade policies. When the above are well implemented, this will gradually eliminate the influence of external actors in African regional integration.

Limited Diversification in Africa

Another great challenge that bedevils regional integration in Africa is the limited diversification of African economies. Most of the economies in Africa are small standalone and underdeveloped, accompanied by low diversity in terms of market operations. Most African countries rely on the production of raw materials which are exported to Europe and other parts of the world at a reasonably cheap cost, while importing the finished products of such commodities from external markets is usually very expensive. The raw materials exported by African countries include minerals, oil, coffee, timber, cocoa, etc. which are later refined, packaged, and imported by African countries. Low agricultural diversity has also hindered the production level of many African countries. While the continent is best known for its viable land suitable for many forms of agriculture, it is less than 10 percent of the arable land in Africa that is cultivated. Additionally, countries that enjoy the bounties of mineral resources have also failed to diversify their mining strengths to be able to tap such resources, making them highly vulnerable to share-based mining by foreign companies. Consequently, the limited diversity in industries and manufacturing strengths of African countries have contributed to the limited attraction among African countries, leading to low regional integration (Kimenyi & Kuhlmann, 2012, p. 11).

To ameliorate the menace of limited diversification in Africa, it will be necessary for African countries to consider investing in the creation of industries to process the continent's mineral and agricultural products. This is important as it will enhance the high demand of African products by African countries, and the supply of finished products to external markets to boost economic growth. The more countries embark on diverse productivity and exportation of finished products among members, the more chances it creates for such products to be affordably available. Also, the proper coordination of industries within the region will be fully enhanced, as raw materials produced from the regions can be industrially processed for the benefit of members (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, p. 363). It is also important to note that a boost in industrialization would improve the production level of African countries which will foster smooth regional integration.

Conflict of Law or Regional Agreements in Africa

This is another disturbing challenge to regional integration in Africa that has been overlooked by many people. There are many disjoints between regional agreements and national policies regarding the promotion of the free movement of people and other important trade policies. This is so because African countries involved in regional integration hold dearly to their sovereignty and lag in implementing the mandate of a regional agreement. This is reflected in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where one of the founding principles is to ensure the free movement of persons and goods. Though ECOWAS has come up with the use of a common passport and identity cards for its members, countries still hold to their internal securities and restrictions for people from other countries. Businesses also suffer a series of non-tariff barriers in the form of encountering an unimaginable number of checkpoints along trading routes between countries. Furthermore, the policies adopted from the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) geared towards trade liberalization, deregulations, and privatization among countries have also proved to be unfriendly and unfavorable for African regional integration, as the implementation of the SAPs is more emphasized at national levels than at a regional perspective in Africa. Additionally, conflict of law between the enabling instruments in the different RECs and the African Economic Community (AEC) has also been marked as a major challenge to regional integration in Africa. It is important to note that RECs exist as a matter of law and legal frameworks guiding their day-to-day operations. Thus, as the AEC is the founding treaty legalizing the existence of the different RECs, there would exist some gaps and conflicts of laws where the implementations in the RECs are not in tandem with the founding treaty of the AEC. This can also be observed between the regional community law and the various national laws in individual member countries (C. Tamasang, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

In some instances, the implementation of regional laws faces big obstacles from member countries. This is either due to valuing national laws over regional laws or fear of losing national legal sovereignty to the regional courts. After agreeing to the establishment of regional courts, charged with the responsibility to try cases such as violations of human rights and inter-state disputes, some countries still defy the rulings of the regional courts, rendering them unimportant and weak in their functions. According to Mapuva, the SADC regional court faced such belittling when Zimbabwe disregarded the court's ruling on its human rights violation, and subsequently quit the regional tribunal (Mapuva, 2014, p. 32). The lack of total power of the regional courts over the national laws of the member states is also a great setback to the effective implementation of decisions reached by regional courts.

However, to solve the challenge of conflict of law or regional agreements, the African Union should ensure that the provisions in the Structural Adjustment Programs are suited to reflect the interests of Africa as well. The AU should harmonize the regional trade policies to SAPs and monitor that such policies are not to the disadvantage of Africans, to ensure that the SAPs do not contradict the goals of regional integration in Africa. Thus, it would be highly necessary for any foreign or international policy, especially the SAPs, to deal with Africa as a region and not individual countries. At the level of legal frameworks between the RECs and AEC, as well as between the RECs and individual countries, the establishing treaties should exactly provide for the mandate of the RECs. Countries should also be convinced as to why they should surrender a degree of their sovereignty to be part of integration, to reduce the stiffness of countries disregarding the community law in support of their national laws.

The effect of conflicts and civil wars

Since independence Africa has been confronted with a series of political and civil unrest throughout the continent, the lack of peace and tranquility in the continent has in one way or another put regional integration efforts on its knees. Many countries in Africa such as Liberia, Sierra Leonne, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and others are seen as conflict hotspots that interrupted the internal peace of their respective RECs. Neighboring countries fear that the opening of borders would simply lead to the erosion of such conflicts into their national territories. According to some sources, almost all African countries have either endured severe conflict or are seriously left in circumstances of discomfort due to wars happening in neighboring countries. As a result of such conflicts stemming from fights over resources, power, and other opportunities, many people fall victim by either fleeing as refugees or being killed. Such conflicts and situations of unrest undoubtedly put the entire process of national and regional development at a halt, and the process of regional integration is not an exception (Olubomehin & Kawonishe, n.d., p. 8). Due to the high political instability in West Africa, domestic and foreign investors have been threatened from investing in many places in the region, limiting the expansion of trade that could have subsequently led to great economic benefits for individual governments as well as the region at large (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, p. 370).

Hence, for smooth regional integration to be ensured in Africa, inter-state or civil war conflicts as well as territorial conflicts should be holistically addressed. I believe solving such conflict and unrest requires addressing major social issues like inequality, unequal distribution of resources, governance, structural reforms, etc. to ensure the creation of a balanced society for all. Effective collective security measures should also be adopted by the continent to avert insurgencies and ensure political stability in the region.

The heterogeneousness of Africa's Economies

The continent of Africa consists of countries with various economic strengths. Some of the countries have great export strengths, and mineral resources, with high Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while many of the countries merely depend on taxation, grant aid, and tourism. These disparities in the different economies in Africa have raised the suspicion that regional integration would be, but merely dependency by weak economies on the stronger ones. Smaller African economies have very low production and export strengths; hence they have little to offer in a regional trade integration. Similarly, the regional economic powers mostly prefer trading with countries that have good production rates and great export strengths.

The heterogeneity of states' economies in the different regional blocs has amounted to fear of the polarization of regional integration by the rich countries over the weaker ones in terms of resource distribution and reallocation of opportunities and regional institutions and industries (Agbonkhese & Adekola, 2014, pp. 369–370).

In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) the heterogeneity of countries in the areas of population, economy, and market size is verse. For example, Sierra Leone has a population of 8.61 million and a GDP of $3.97 billion; The Gambia has a population of 2.71 million with a GDP of $2.27 billion; Niger has a population of 26.21 million with a GDP of $13.97 billion; while Nigeria has a population of 218.54 million with $477.39 billion (World Bank Group, 2022). In many instances, the function of regional integration among variably different economies has been seen as a major stumbling block to the smooth achievement of regional integration in Africa. The small economies of some countries, for example, Guinea-Bissau's GDP of $7 billion which is smaller than the Abia state of Nigeria, the 13th largest state in Nigeria with a GDP of $8.7 billion, making integration policies between such economies difficult to attain (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2020, p. 92). Comparatively, there is a huge margin of economic strength among the various countries in ECOWAS, with Nigeria as the economic superpower. Consequently, the absence of economic similarity among the ECOWAS members has greatly impeded the region's process towards achieving economic integration. Since its establishment in 1975, ECOWAS has been striving to achieve economic integration and subsequently create a common market that will allow the free flow of goods and services, labor, and capital within the region. Still, this goal has been seriously confronted by the heterogeneity of the regional economies among many other things.

In the SADC region, South Africa has the biggest economy, constituting 70 percent of the region's GDP, and the country accounts for 60 percent of the trade within the region (Mapuva, 2014, p. 31). This has naturally placed South Africa as more equal among its equals. The country has the power to decide on matters that affect every other member of the region. Thus, South Africa influences the decisions and policies to be implemented for the welfare of the region. Despite great efforts put in place to achieve an environment that will lead to the attainment of collective economic developments in all the member states, the region continues to battle with major issues hindering economic development and delaying the process for smooth regional integration. This is primarily due to the various nature of the regional economies. Other than South Africa, many of the SADC countries are confronted with low Gross National Product and weak Gross Domestic Products, low savings investment strengths, etc. This created a huge constraint for the member countries to work together towards an effective integration (Mapuva, 2014, p. 31). Ultimately, South Africa prefers to trade with the EU or other external partners, where production and exportation are relatively high, over the member countries where the level of production is low (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 879).

The laxity of Regional Powers

The position and role of regional powers in the process of regional integration cannot be overemphasized. Crucially, regional powers play an important hegemonic role in providing their regions with much-needed leadership roles within and outside the regions. Though there are no direct nominations for regional powers, there are some qualities ranging from exemplary political stability, economic strengths, willingness to take charge of the affairs of a group, etc. The above qualities have naturally placed some African countries, like Nigeria in ECOWAS, and South Africa in SADC as natural regional powers. The status of regional powers can also be determined using the country among the different member states that have bigger populations, economic development, and market size (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 879). Essentially, economic strengths and market size are key components for a country to assume the position of regional power, as they constitute the pedestal on which regional integration is hosted. Similarly, population is an instrument that can be used to determine the market size of a country. In the selling of a product to a country, the targeted and estimated population are important factors that attract businesses. Thus, the population of Nigeria among ECOWAS members, for example, is undoubtedly big, as it constitutes 218.54 million of the total ECOWAS population of 424.34 million (World Bank Group, 2022); more than half of the ECOWAS population are Nigerians.

Despite the presence of various regional powers in the African continent to provide leadership roles to their respective regions in terms of influencing productive policy implementation, providing economic assistance to weaker nations, as well as serving as a medium through which trade with external parties would be easily facilitated and coordinated for the holistic gains of the region; there have been serious lapses in the provision of such leadership role by the regional powers in the various RECs. Such lapses occur both in the position of regional powers to facilitate intra-regional trade processes and in the coordination of trade and other relations between their regions and external factors.

The role of regional powers in ECOWAS (Nigeria) has also faced great challenges from the former colonial influence of France on some of the French-speaking member states. The presence of the Communaute economique de I`Afrique de I`ouest (CEAO) and the persistence of the former French colonies to maintain the CFA franc, was seen as a great challenge to the position of Nigeria among the member states (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2020, p. 87). It has been argued that the slow process and unnecessary delays in the process of adopting a common currency in ECOWAS have been bedeviled due to a lack of hegemonic influence. This is manifested in the percentage of intra-regional imports and exports by Nigeria, within the ECOWAS bloc; with 0.78% of the total intra-regional imports, and 8.32% of the total intra-regional exports within the bloc. Compared to The Gambia, a smaller economy within the ECOWAS bloc, constitutes 12.82% of the bloc's intra-imports and 56.28% of exports among members (Ikechi et al., 2022, p. 34). The above low intra-trade commitment by Nigeria is evidence of its laxity as a regional hegemon and could impede the entire process of regional integration.

Thus, the position of regional powers in Africa has been lax in many aspects, as they fail to provide sufficient leadership roles (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 879), especially in areas that are considered the crux of regional integration. Such areas include trade integration and the free movement of people. African regional powers like South Africa prefer to maintain and nurture its trading ties with the European Union, by following a unilateral trade policy, over trading with its SADC members. This coupled with many other factors such as the fragmentation of SADC members as individual negotiators in the Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union militate against the process of harmonizing external trade policies within SADC (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 880).

Consequently, while the importance of regional powers in setting the right footing for regional integration in Africa cannot be overemphasized, the interest of such powers to spearhead the affairs of their regions has not yet obtained the required momentum (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 881).

Thus, as the Regional Economic Communities of Africa are determined to pursue regional integration as a means of realizing economic and political gains, it is prudent for the countries with greater economic strengths and international influence on trade to fully participate in regional integration by providing the needed leadership role in their regions. This calls for the absolute benevolence of such powers (KRAPOHL et al., 2014, p. 881) in the regulation of economic developments among members to ensure that all members fully benefit from regional integration. Regional powers should also see intra-regional trade as worthy and put more effort into boosting imports and exports among members. Moreover, as many of the member countries of the regional blocs in Africa have weak economies, the regional powers can render support to such countries by promoting the production and processing of raw materials into finished products.

Conclusion

The challenges bedeviling Africa's regional integration are numerous and diverse. This has made it quite very complicated for a smooth regional integration to take effect in Africa. While most of the challenges are internal, among the African countries, the external influence on the continent also contributes a great deal to the delay and slow process of regional integration. Although countries have agreed to the integration treaties and signed the enabling instruments of the various RECs, they are still either unwilling to surrender their required sovereignty or they are being puppets to foreign ideologies and dominations. Remember a law that is not implemented is nothing but merely a paper legality, and it is as good as a non-existing law. However, despite all the stumbling blocks barring the smooth flow of regional integration in Africa, this does not amount to failure in the integration process. It is still a work in progress, and there is room for change, improvements, adjustments, restructuring, and renewal of commitment by the different African countries. Essentially, if the orientation of African countries regarding regional integration changes positively, the objectives and goals will be optimizable and achieved.

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