

**PROBLEMS FACING ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES
(ECOWAS) INTEGRATION AND THE WAY FORWARD**

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ABSTRACT

This paper identified the problems facing Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and made recommendations that would enhance integration in the sub-region of West Africa. The term integration was clarified, which means the process of coming into a community by different nations for the purpose of forming a common front for development. From the discussion, it was discovered that ECOWAS had been bedeviled with innumerable problems, such as insecurity, economic problems, political problems and so on. Hence, the efforts to integrate the sub-region are still moving at millipede pace. Based on these myriad problems militating against ECOWAS integration, some recommendations were made. Among others were that, there must be commitment of the leaders of ECOWAS, appreciation of democratic principles and involvement of the people. The implication of this therefore, is that if the ECOWAS member states are dedicated in line with ECOWAS integration policy, there would be advancement of integration in the West Africa sub-region.

KEY WORDS: ECOWAS, Integration, Political Community, Development

JEL Classification: F13, F15, F42, P16

1. INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on May 28, 1975 by fifteen West African nations met in Lagos and signed the Treaty. The Treaty formally came into effect on June 23, 1975, when the required minimum seven member states had ratified it. The other nations ratified the Treaty thereafter (Ebiefie, 1983). ECOWAS was

created with the foremost objectives of promoting greater economic cooperation amongst West African States with the penultimate goal of establishing a monetary union in the region. Political and economic differences among member states have however stifled the efforts of advancing the monetary cooperation (Ackah, 2012).

Regional integration has been an evolving process over many decades now and different regions of the world have embraced it. Its evolution was very much in the form of integrating actors concerned with economic and security issues to the inclusion of other measures such as social, cultural, environmental and other development needs.

With nations in West Africa becoming independent particularly in the 1960s, there emerged a new consciousness following the experience in Europe in the implementation of marshal plan. The marshal plan also known as the European Recovery Programme, was a United States (US) programme providing aid to Western Europe following the devastation during the World War II (WWII). It could rightly be said that the idea of economic integration in West Africa developed from the awareness of global economic interdependence. This explains why Adedeji (2002) points out that Africa came into existence during the age of regional integration. After World War II the promotion of regional integration became a global phenomenon culminating in the establishment of European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, the Latin America Free Trade Association in 1960, the Central America Common Market in 1961, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and the Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFA) in 1968.

The motivation to integrate was as a result of the devastated economies of Europe, and the desire to carry out a super powerful capitalist society in Western Europe in the overall global struggle against socialism.

Taking a cue from the Europe, African (West Africa) saw the need to integrate for the general development of the region. But this has not been because of innumerable problems such as insecurity, political problem, financial problem, strong external influence, and so on, militating against the sub-region. The objective of this paper therefore is to examine these challenges facing ECOWAS and make some recommendations that would enhance integration in the sub-region. Secondary sources of data collection were employed in this paper which include textbooks, journals, official documents, internet and so on and adopted descriptive method of data analysis. For lucid understanding, this paper is divided into four sections. Section one focuses on the introduction. Section two examines the conceptual clarification of integration. Section three presents the problems militating against ECOWAS integration. While the fourth section talks about the way forward

2. Conceptual Clarification of Integration

Integration is a means in which various states within a sub-region, in a peaceful and non-coercive manner, collectively seek to resolve conflicts in either a pre-emptive or reactive response. Moreover, it is a vehicle through which member states maximize or attempt to

maximize, their national interest on a long-range basis through the creation of supra-national institutions and the evolution of sub-regional policies.

For Ernst Haas (1958:62), integration refers to a process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities to a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing national states. The end result of a process of political integration is a new political community, super-imposed over the pre-existing ones. In his neo-functional approach to explaining integration in Europe, for example, Haas postulated the concept of spill-over (functional and political) to delve into the critical question of how cooperation in certain sectors of the economy could precipitate greater economic integration and eventually lead to much more widespread political integration in Europe. For Deutsch (1957:7-9) integration is a condition in which people have attained within a territory that is manifested by a sense of community and the growth of institutions and practices strong and widespread enough among the people involved to assure for a long time dependable expectation of peaceful change. Deutsch's position is that integration is measure by flow of international transactions, the movement of people, trade and so on among the integrating nations. Lindberg (1963:3) penned that integration is a process whereby nations forgo the desire and ability to conduct foreign and key domestic politics independent of each other. Instead, they seek to make joint decision or delegate the decision making process to new central organization. He stated further that integration is the process whereby political actors in several distinct setting are persuaded to shift their expectations and political activities to a new center. According to Maiyaski (2017:24), the age-long practice of the individual survival of nations have long given way to the emergent concept of integration and cooperation among states as an option to meeting the collective development needs of the cooperative nations. He stated further that, practice has shown over time that when states take comparative advantage of each other's strength and weaknesses, it opens the space of and engenders the potentials for specialization, development of the economies of scale and indeed reduces the cost of production. In a nutshell, integration is the process of coming into a community by different nations for the purpose of forming a common front for development in all spheres of life.

3. PROBLEMS MILITATING AGAINST ECOWAS INTEGRATION

Despite the noble objectives of ECOWAS, which include; to create customs union in the region, to improve living standards of the people in member States, to promote cultural interaction among states, to promote industrial development among member states, to liberalize trade between member states, to foster co-operation in specialized fields and improve relations between members states, the union has accomplished little or nothing, rather, it has been weighed down by innumerable calamities and challenges such as economic problems, security problems, religious crises, political problems, immigration problem, financial problem, lack of diversification of national economic, allegiance to ex-while colonial master, border problem, multiplicity of superstructure and so on.

a. Economic Problem: The problem of economic growth is also affecting the sub-region. Resources are scarce, which of course are required for efficiency. Thus, it is essential to know if the production and distribution of national production made by an economy is maximally efficient. The production becomes efficient only if the production resources are utilized in such a way that any reallocation does not produce more of one good without reducing the output of any other goods. In other words, efficient distribution means that redistribution goods cannot make any one better off without making someone else worse off. Inefficiencies of production and distribution exist in all ECOWAS economies. The welfare of the people of the sub-region has been hampered in this regard. If the productive capacity grows, an economy can produce progressively more goods, which raise the standard of living. The reverse is the case in the sub-region of West Africa. The economy is either at a standstill or moving at millipede pace (en.m.wikipedia.org).

b. Security Problem: The major security problem that continues to threaten West African countries has been outbreak of internal squabbles among ethnic groups or between regions or ethnic groups and the central government on grounds of the latter's policies. A region or a group's disagreement with government has often resulted in a feeling of being cheated in terms of budget allocations and distribution of amenities unequally among regions. The limited income at government's disposal to allot to regions as well as governments' prebendalism which Joseph (1987) describes as the sense of entitlement that many public officials and private citizens claim as the revenues of the Nigerian government, has been a great challenge.

c. Religious Problems: Religion has been a constant source of discontent among the indigenes who feel that foreign doctrine and norms in their community should be resisted. The followers of the two dominant religions of West Africa, Christianity and Islam, have often clashed in their communities over doctrines and lifestyles. The coastal region of some West African countries is chiefly Christianity and the people have richer arable land, schools, and industries. This southern region historically has attracted itinerant families. Usually, daily labourers and cattle herders from the north, who are chiefly Muslims, looking for work, often have clashes occurring in several countries in West Africa which hardly get abated.

d. Political Problem: On the political challenge, West Africa countries have been having the most unstable political arrangements in Africa. From 1960 and even till date, those governments had not been interested in keeping the systems which had allowed for multiple political parties to coexist and compete for their share of the electorate system. The healthy competition that multiple parties bring into politics as they try to persuade the electorate to vote them into power opens up, otherwise closed political systems to scrutiny, as it forces the parties to lay out clearer manifestoes. In the contrary, abuses like imprisonments, disappearances, house detentions, forced exiles and even death had become rampant in the sub-region (Bamfo, 2013:14). Again, the member governments are not under control as joint decisions taken are

deliberately floated by some member states without sanctions. Very often, when given the choice between political survival and long term interest in collective regional development, the former tends to prevail for leaders in the region. New governments in the ECOWAS region frequently do not feel bound by regional commitment made by their predecessors (Chambers et al, 2012), claiming that “newly elected leaders are eager to establish their own identity and differentiate themselves from their predecessors. This often results in abandoned positions previously established. This is exacerbated by frequent cabinet reshuffles and inadequate national strategies. The political instability that is persistent in the sub-region is as a result of bad government, high illiteracy, high level of poverty, mismanagement of resources, elections rigging, corruption and lack of rule of law. All these have devastating effect on the entire sub-region.

e. Immigration Problem: Immigration problem is a big challenge to migration in the West African sub-region militating against the enforcement of the ECOWAS protocol on entry, resident and settlement. Thus, the treaty signed in Lagos on 28th May, 1975, creating the ECOWAS, covered wide areas of activities. Article 27 of the treaty affirms a long-term objective to establish a community citizenship that could be acquired automatically by all nations of member states. In 1992, the revised Treaty of ECOWAS, among others, affirmed the right of citizens of the community to entry, resident and settlement and enjoined member states to recognize these rights in their respective territories. Free movement of persons seems to be respected by the states who signed the treaty, but regularization of documentation for settlement purposes is still a nightmare. Harassment along border post is on the increase, discrimination against migrants is a reality in most countries where indigenes feel threatened by the prosperity of the new arrivals who usually had invested in whatever endeavour they engage (Yaro, 2015). The illegal movement of human beings, goods and services within the West Africa territories constitute serious problems, thereby negating socio-economic integration in the sub-region.

f. Financial Problem: Financially, the objectives of the ECOWAS can only be achieved when the financial base of the community is solid. However, some member states are not able to honour their financial obligations to the community. This is one problem that has bedeviled the community over the years, especially when it comes to the running of the affairs of the community. According to Salamatu Hussain Suleiman, commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security for ECOWAS, said ECOWAS is facing severe “financial difficulties” and can no longer fight terrorism and other threats in the sub-region. According to the ECOWAS commissioner, member states have continually failed to honour the payment of their mandatory community levies. This is hugely affecting the operation of the commission in the wake of increasing reports of insecurity, terrorism and piracy challenges among others. This has forced the commission to reprioritize their scheduled activities in maintaining peace and security in West Africa. Ordinarily, each country is supposed to pay 0.05 percent of the imports as levy to the ECOWAS commission. Unfortunately, the community levy is not being respected as much

as it should, and that funding gap has affected in no small measure the operation of the commission (Salamatu, 2016: starrfmonlin.com).

g. Strong External Influence: Many of the member states of ECOWAS were former colonies of some colonial powers. Countries such as Britain, France and Portugal had one colony or two that now belong to the ECOWAS group. They are tagged Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries. There is palpable rift caused by the differing ideological and cultural perspectives of the English, the French and the Portuguese who influenced administration in their colonies respectively. These different administrative perspectives have been the primary basis for trade and cultural exchanges among the countries of West Africa, as well as between West African countries and their former metropolitan masters. Great Britain, Portugal and France, to varying degrees, have kept trade, diplomatic and cultural ties with their former colonies, which have restricted those countries from committing themselves fully to ECOWAS (Bamfo, 2013). These member states are still controlled, to a large extent, by their colonial masters. This strong tie, especially the francophone countries directly or indirectly affects integration in the sub-region of West Africa.

h. Border Problems: The issues of extortion at the border by the personnel of the agencies concerned, is an established stumbling block to achieving the desired ends of abolishing the trade obstacles from within the international trading relationship from within the ECOWAS community. The un-professional ethics, corrupt attitude of personnel, customs, immigration, the coastal guards, the police, the other personnel that are manning the border hinders the aims and objectives of the ECOWAS community, and has become a source of concern, and continue to constitute a problem to effective integration of the West African community. It results in apathy to these businessmen and traders alike. Business men and traders that transact businesses on the Lagos-Cotonou-Accra-Abidja axis, complain bitterly about the high rate of extortion and intimidation at these routes (Abubakar, 2004). This has affected trade cohesion in the sub-region, closure of some border countries have hampered trade amongst the member states.

i. Multiplicity of Organizations: The multiplicity of organizations in ECOWAS member states with the same objective has affected the general objective of ECOWAS of integrating the sub-region. Several ECOWAS members are currently part of the West African monetary union (also known by its French language acronym “Union Monetaire Ouest-Afriaine” UEMOA), a regional economic and monetary union which shares a common currency – the CFA franc and common custom. The francophone countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo with Guinea Bissau (Lusophone) comprise UEMOA. The currency (CFA Franc) they all use is pegged to the euro.

The West African states could not generate effective political institutions to regulate social relationships based on economic and political order, and therefore were not able to replace their traditional social force with “occupational class and skilled grouping” in their

process of modernization. Public institutional structures remained highly fragile and utterly disorganized in the face of enormous pressure from varied and fast expanding social force. The inability of West African states, national political development to accommodate great qualities of “consensus, legitimacy, effective, and stability” created grave deficiencies in enthroning effective and stable government throughout the sub-region. This in turn created condition for wide spread “mistrust among their citizens, in national and public loyalties in organization skill and capacity building (Huntington 1968).

4. THE WAY FORWARD

i. Appreciation of democratic principles

In order for the development of democratic values and structures within the sub-region, ECOWAS must encourage its member states to abide by democratic principles adopted at the regional level as well as those existing in the individual member states. The inability of ECOWAS to achieve this will certainly affect the smooth functioning of regional institution and eventually hamper integrative process in the sub-region. However, Gambari noted that “it would be unusual, although not inconceivable, for a government that is not itself a product of the democratic process to allow democratic election for members of community parliament. The logic would therefore seem to suggest a certain degree of symmetry between the democratic basis of the major organs of the AEC and the principle organs which constitute the governments of the member states” (Gambari; 1992:7). It therefore follows that democratic practices at the national level will be a solid foundation on which to build the sub-regional democratic institution and society.

ii. Prompt payment of levy

ECOWAS cannot survive without financial resources for implementation of projects. In the light of this, member states should ensure prompt payment of their dues and levies so as to enable the institution to have more financial resources in order to prosecute her policy implementation agenda. The substantive regimes of the Levy Account have alleviated the problem of contribution from member states. However some countries are yet to hand over control of their levy account to the ECOWAS Community. It is recommended that all such countries be appealed to immediately handover such account to ECOWAS. Apart from this, there is need for the leaders of the organization to source for other avenues of funding its programme of activities.

iii. Involvement of the people

There is need to involve the ordinary West Africans people in the ECOWAS process by drawing attention to the fact that the organization’s key event daily passed virtually unnoticed. Hence, Abbas Bundu, one time Executive Secretary of the ECOWAS asserted that West African integration was essentially ‘elitist’! The main argument often presented to justify this position is that ECOWAS adopted an elitist and technocratic approach without the involvement

of large sections of the population. He further observed that ECOWAS integration process did not take cognizance of the necessary social and cultural contact among the citizenry. It also ignored their experiences and perceptions. The need for mass awareness and incorporation of the general citizenry as civil society or gender entities in the integration scheme cannot therefore be over emphasized. In addition, in close liaison with the above citizens participation should further be enhanced by providing for the direct election of ECOWAS parliamentarians in all member states. This will afford the citizens to take cognizance of ECOWAS activities.

iv. The need to speed up the use of single currency -ECO

The ECO is the proposed name for the common currency that the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) plans to introduce in the framework of ECOWAS. After its introduction, the goal is to merge the new currency with the West African CFA Franc (used by most French speaking members of ECOWAS since 1945) at a later date. This will create a common currency for many West African countries. For the ECO to be implemented, convergence criteria, set out by the West African Monetary Institution (WAMI), must be met. Member states should as a matter of urgency put machinery in place to ensure take-off of the new currency in the sub-region, as it has suffered a setback of several postponements of take-off.

If the ECO is implemented, countries across the region will be able to move and spend money across different countries without worrying about exchange rate cost. The single currency if properly implemented will improve trade by allowing specific countries to specialize at what they are good at, and exchange it for other goods that other countries in the bloc produce more efficiently. The single currency will also help to address the region's monetary problems like the difficulty in converting some of its currencies and the lack of independence of central banks. The overall interest of the single currency is to promote proper integration within the member states.

v. Free movement of persons and goods within the sub-region

This has remained one of the most outstanding challenges facing the coalition, especially with the multiple check points dotted all over the sub-region. Whereas ordinary citizens with voter identity card can move easily across borders, those with passports and other formal documents often encounter major difficulties in the borders. To facilitate effective integration of West Africa, it is imperative that free movement of goods and persons must be properly ensured. A deliberate programme of re-orientation for all operatives and officers operating internal checkpoints and border posts must be vigorously pursued and in line with the strategic policy framework of the coalition. It is interesting to note that quite a number of operatives in border posts are not fully conversant with overall strategic policy framework of the ECOWAS. Consequently, it would be difficult for such person to fit into the challenging task of promoting ECOWAS integration. This again, vehemently underscores the need for a

huge programme of reorientation to be periodically undertaken by the ECOWAS in collaboration with the academia, professional in the private sector and other stake holders.

vi. Liberalization of trade

The ECOWAS Trade liberalization scheme (ETLS) is particularly aims to encourage entrepreneurial development in the region. Intra-region trade would boost economic activity, enhance West African competitiveness on the global market and improve GDP of the ECOWAS member states, thus better welfare for citizens of the sub-region. If this scheme is vigorously pursued and implemented it would enhance integration in the West African sub-region. With all intents and purposes, it should be practically pursued within the sub-region of West Africa.

vii. Commitment of member states

Member States should be committed to the services of ECOWAS so as to realize the lofty objectives of the community. The president of the ECOWAS commission, Jean-Claude Kassi Brou on November 2, 2018 in Abuja restated the commitment of the commission to strengthening regional customs union and infrastructural upgrade that can sustain the renewed integration efforts within the community. He held that the major idea of establishing ECOWAS is to foster an economic union in order to raise the living standards of citizens, while maintaining and enhancing the economic stability of the region. The 15 Member States should work hard in order to enhance integration in West African sub-region.

viii. The need to strengthen conflict mechanism

It has been noted that there is one crisis or the other across the sub-region. This has slowed down the pace of development and peaceful co-existence. To curb this menace, the ECOWAS should strengthen the conflict mechanism to encourage early peaceful settlement of crises without resorting to open warfare. Furthermore, Member States should prepare to abide with court rulings. In October 1999, ECOWAS decided to establish a court of Justice. The court will address complaints from Member States and institutions of ECOWAS as well as issues relating to defaulting nations. Abiding with the decisions/ rulings of the court would enhance integration in West African sub-region. In addition, in resolving crises in the sub-region, ECOWAS should have a common (standing) force that would be relied upon in time of emergency. This standing force should be equipped with modern gadgets.

If all these recommendations are put in place by the leaders of ECOWAS, integration in the sub-region of West Africa would surely be enhanced.

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