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THE ROLE OF REGIONAL BLOCS IN ADVANCING AFRICAN INTEGRATION AND COLLECTIVE DIPLOMACY: ECOWAS AND SADC AS CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

Regional integration in Africa has long been regarded as a foundational pathway to sustainable development, durable peace, and collective diplomatic strength. This paper examines the role of two of Africa's most prominent regional economic communities, namely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in advancing African integration and collective diplomacy. Drawing on a qualitative research design and anchored within the theoretical frameworks of neo-functionalism and constructivism, the study analyses the institutional architectures, policy instruments, diplomatic initiatives, and integration records of both blocs. The paper argues that while ECOWAS and SADC have made notable strides in conflict mediation, economic cooperation, electoral governance, and the harmonisation of regional policies, their effectiveness is fundamentally constrained by issues of state sovereignty, political will, resource limitations, hegemonic dynamics, and overlapping institutional mandates. The study further identifies key gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding the comparative analysis of both blocs within the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. The findings reveal that collective diplomacy under these blocs remains uneven and is shaped more by the foreign policy interests of dominant member states than by a coherent supranational institutional logic. The paper recommends institutional reforms, enhanced funding mechanisms, rationalisation of REC memberships, and stronger civil society engagement to deepen integration and diplomatic coherence across both sub-regions.

Keywords: *Regional integration, Diplomacy, African Union, Neo-functionalism, Constructivism*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of African integration has been making headlines among scholars, policymakers, and diplomats over the last 60 years. The continent has been seeking a model of regional cooperation based on the principles of Pan-Africanism, collective security, and economic self-reliance since the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and its successor, the African Union (AU) in 2002. At the heart of this architecture are Regional Economic Communities (RECs) that are the components of the integration agenda of the AU (African Union Commission, 2015). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are the most institutionalised and politically engaged blocs on the continent and are potentially the most fruitful area in terms of academic research on the question of how regional organisations realise integration in practice.

ECOWAS was created in 1975 through the treaty of Lagos and initially was thought to be an economic integration project that aimed to encourage trade liberalisation and free movement of people and goods in West Africa. However, with time, it became a security and political force with significant force, and intervened militarily in Liberia (1990), Sierra Leone (1997), and most recently, sent observer missions and threatened to use force in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger following repeated democratic backslides. SADC, however, was formed out of the Frontline States coalition in the liberation struggles in the 1970s and was officially formed in 1992 under the Windhoek Treaty. Its mandate covers economic development, poverty eradication, political stability and advancement of democratic governance in Southern and Eastern Africa in fourteen member states (SADC Secretariat, 2012).

Together, these two blocks summarize the potential and the paradox of African regionalization. They have legal systems,

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institutions and diplomatic procedures that are comparable to those of regional organizations in other regions of the world. However, they are still bound by the lack of implementation, its enduring under-investment, and the tension between the needs of state sovereignty and the requirements of supranational authority. The question of how these blocs are used as a tool of integration and diplomacy is not only an academic endeavor; it is an urgent policy issue to a continent that struggles with the issue of weak states, the backsliding of democracy, poor economic development and the impending challenge of harmonizing sub-regional structures with the continental AfCFTA project.

This article contends that ECOWAS and SADC have been useful, albeit flawed, instruments of African integration and collective diplomacy. Though they have shown institutional strength and diplomatic resourcefulness in dealing with regional issue, their effectiveness in the long term can be determined by structural changes to deal with funding, democratic governance, mechanisms of compliance, and consistent integration with larger frameworks of the AUs. The paper is structured as follows: conceptual literature review of the understanding of regional integration and collective diplomacy, empirical review of current literature on ECOWAS and SADC, identification of gaps in literature, theoretical framework to be used in the analysis, methodology, findings discussion, conclusions and policy/practice recommendations.

Before proceeding any further, however, it is necessary to mention that this paper does not view either of these blocs as a failed project and rather as an evolving project, the direction of which is predetermined both by the structural limitations and by the agency decisions. The comparative lens taken in this case is not meant to say that one organisation is better than the other but is meant to make inferences out of their experiences in a manner that can be used to guide the greater project of African integration. According to the Agenda 2063 framework of the African Union, it is still an aspiration of the integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa which is determined by the citizens of the country themselves, as well as a force which is active in the international arena (African Union Commission, 2015, p. 1). The institutional means by which this aspiration should be realised are regional blocs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regional Integration

Generally, it is said that regional integration is the process whereby neighbouring states voluntarily share sovereignty on certain areas of policy to pursue common interests which cannot be effectively achieved individually by an individual state (Haas, 1958; Nye, 1971). The idea has been operationalised on different levels of analysis which are trade liberalisation and customs union to political federation and shared citizenship. One of the earliest and most influential taxonomies of integration was given by Balassa (1961), who identified five stages of progressive integration: a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, an economic union, and full economic integration. The typology is still analytically useful to assess the development of African RECs despite the fact that it was initially developed based on the European experience and is founded on assumptions regarding linear progression, which is not always true in the African setting.

Integration has had an extra normative meaning in the context of Africa, based on the philosophy of Pan-Africanism. Kwame Nkrumah, and most famously his 1963 work Africa Must Unite, provided an ideological backdrop to the process of integration as an economic pragmatic move, but more importantly as a civilisational and political endeavour to overturn the disintegration wrought by the European colonialism and to establish the real continental sovereignty. This normative aspect sets the discourse of African integration apart in contrast with that of Europe and still drives the rhetoric of the regional organisations, despite the fact that the practice is far below the dream (Asante, 2014). The Pan-Africanist vision assists in understanding the reasons why regional institutions in Africa are likely to deny the charge of failure despite the fact that the results of integration would be small, since the normative project matters as much as the technical one.

The difference between open and closed regionalism has been highlighted by scholars like Schiff and Winters (2003) who believe that integration processes that are too inward-looking may result in trade diversion, instead of trade creation. This criticism is especially relevant to ECOWAS and SADC, as neither have been able to put treaty commitments into concrete liberalisation results. Mansfield and Milner (1999) also posit that the multiplication of overlapping regional trading arrangements in Africa introduces what has been termed as a spaghetti bowl of commitments that may not lead to integration but instead stifle since they impose conflicting commitments on member states. A continental effort to resolve this fragmentation is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that came into effect in 2021 and aims to establish a single market structure that replaces and harmonises sub-regional agreements (Erasmus, 2022).

Formal and substantive integration is another aspect that should be differentiated. Formal integration is the integration through the adoption of treaties, protocols, and institutional structures, but the substantive integration is the real transformation of economic behaviour, political practice and social interaction that integration is meant to bring about. The African RECs, such as ECOWAS and SADC, have been much less successful in reaching the objective of substantive integration than formal integration, a divide which has been explained by scholars in various ways, including poor state capacity, political aversion, inadequate infrastructure and the structural asymmetries of colonial era economies (Clapham, 2001; Herbst, 2000).

Collective Diplomacy

Collective diplomacy can be defined as an action of a group of states jointly regarding foreign policy in the international system by using common institutional structures to pursue common interests (Zartman, 1993). It is different to mere

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multilateral diplomacy as it suggests a level of shared identity and institutionalised preference aggregation, rather than just being concurrently present in a common forum. In the case of the African regional blocs, collective diplomacy has been evident in the joint negotiating standpoints at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the joint coordination of the A.U. Peace and Security Council (PSC) resolutions and bloc-wide reactions to political crises both inside and outside the member states.

Kimenyi and Moyo (2011) place collective diplomacy in Africa within the context of bargaining theory, stating that small and medium-sized African states can gain an unfair advantage through membership in a block that they could not have as individual states in the international system. This understanding is supported by empirical evidence in cases like the diplomatic unity that SADC showed towards Zimbabwe in the land reform crisis of the 2000s and how ECOWAS acted as one in reacting to the Gambian political crisis of 2016 to 2017. Having no support of a regional bloc, individual member states like The Gambia or Lesotho would have little bargaining power in international politics or resistance to external interference to national matters.

Collective diplomacy, however, is also limited by what Hulse (2016) refers to as the problem of hegemony where the larger and more powerful member states like Nigeria in ECOWAS and South Africa in SADC have a tendency to dictate the diplomatic agenda in a manner that benefits them, and occasionally at the cost of smaller and more vulnerable states. The result of this dynamic is the creation of a paradox where the organisational capacity of a bloc relies on the resources and political will of the hegemon, whereas legitimacy of collective decisions is based on the actual shared preferences. Where these two demands clash, which is usually the case, collective diplomacy disintegrates into the appearance of hegemonic diplomacy masquerading as a multilateral form of diplomacy.

This analysis is also based on the concept of diplomatic coherence. Keukeleire and Delreux (2014), who mostly discuss the European Union, describe diplomatic coherence as the extent to which the external policies and policies of member-states and regional organisations support and complement each other. When it is applied to ECOWAS and SADC, a great degree of incoherence is observed, especially when the member states have bilateral diplomatic goals which collide with those of the blocs. The continued unwillingness of South Africa to implement tough sanctions against Zimbabwe, and the refusal of the Senate of Nigeria to sanction military intervention in the country in 2023, both show how national calculations can disintegrate the semblance of shared intent. True diplomatic coherence would be more than merely institutional frameworks, it would entail a level of shared identity and mutual obligation that is deep enough.

Regional Blocs, State Sovereignty and Post-Colonial Statehood

One of the most recurring and fundamental issues in the African regional integration literature is the interaction between supranationalism and state sovereignty, which is inherited. In the article by Jackson (1990), an important idea was made known as the quasi-states that are the post-colonial states of Africa that have juridical sovereignty under the international law, but lack empirical means to govern their borders. Such an arrangement has far-reaching implications on integration, since those with low empirical legitimacy tend to be most protective of their formal sovereignty, and any delegation of competences to regional institutions is seen as a challenge to their already limited political authority.

Herbst (2000) states that boundaries of the colonial states that the African countries inherited, which have little to do with ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or economic reality make the integration more complicated. States are apprehensive that further integration would rekindle the issue of legitimacy regarding borders and territorial make up that they would much rather keep in the closet. The regional bodies have, as such, been inclined to act on the principles of stringent non-interference principles that criple their ability to engage in intrusive governance. This sensitivity is echoed in the ECOWAS Protocol on Non-Aggression (1978) and in the principle of sovereign equality in the SADC Treaty (Article 4) although both organisations have over time formulated measures of intervention in instances of democratic breakdown, unconstitutional change of government or mass atrocities. One of the most important normative changes to the African regional governance during the last thirty years is the gradual transformation of non-interference to conditional non-indifference.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neo-functionalism

The leading theoretical perspective that will inform this paper is neo-functionalism that was initially theorized by Ernst Haas in his masterpiece The Uniting of Europe (1958) and later enhanced by Schmitter (1970) and other theorists of regional integration. Neo-functionalism assumes that the process of regional integration is mainly self-perpetuating based on the logic of spillover whereby initial collaboration on one functional area creates political and technical pressures to collaborate in the related areas. Haas distinguished between two key forms of spillover: functional spillover, which is motivated by technical interdependencies among the policy sectors, and political spillover, which is motivated by interest groups, political parties, and technocratic elites, who become interested in the regional project and change their allegiance to regional institutions. These dynamics, when combined, drive the expanding of the mandate of regional bodies in ways that were not initially the desires of the founding member states.

When applied to ECOWAS, neo-functionalism assists in explaining the incredible metamorphosis of an organisation that was initially set up as a trading bloc to a

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multidimensional security and political player. The awareness of ECOWAS elites and institutional actors that economic integration was not possible in the environment of civil wars, state collapse and political instability created strong forces that made the organisation work out conflict management tools. It was this logic that led to the establishment of the ECOMOG (the ECOWAS Monitoring Group), the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), all of which are spillovers of economic into political and security space. Equally, the transformation of SADC into a development coordination conference to a body that has security protocols, a standby brigade, and the ability to monitor elections reflects neo-functionalist dynamics of institutional scope expansion based on the realization that development goals cannot be attained without security and governance.

There are however significant criticisms of neo-functionalism which cannot be ignored. Rosamond (2000) states that the theory is teleologically biased in its pursuit of deeper integration, and does not sufficiently explain stagnation, regression or disintegration. The dissolution of the SADC Tribunal, the pull out by the Alliance of Sahel States of ECOWAS, and the continuous lack of implementation in both organisations, all undermine the neo-functionalist assumption that once integration is initiated, it takes an essentially irreversible progressive path. This shortcoming creates a need to have a complementary theoretical approach that is able to capture the normative and identity-based aspects of regional cooperation.

Constructivism

Constructivism, a theoretical approach as developed by Wendt (1999) in Social Theory of International Politics and implemented by Adler and Barnett (1998) in their classic book on security communities, provides a complementary approach to international politics that predicts the importance of ideas, norms, discourse, and collective identity in the development of regional cooperation. Constructivist perspective views regional integration as not just a rational reaction to economic or security compulsions but it is also a social process whereby states create common identities, prescribe proper conduct in the regional space, and establish the normative commitments that give regional institutions their power and legitimacy.

This framework is especially insightful in the context of normative development of ECOWAS. The introduction of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001 was an indication of a collectively designed norm according to which unconstitutional alteration of government is not legitimate and a source of threat on regional peace and security. This institutionalised norm influenced the reaction of the bloc to later coups by creating a collective interpretive system by which the member states interpreted political crises and justified collective action. On the same note, rhetorical promises of SADC to democratic governance and human rights, even when the said promises are kept more in breach than in observance, are indicative of constructivist norm spreading processes based on the common historical experience of liberation struggle against apartheid and colonialism. The shared identity of the liberation movements that ruled Southern Africa established an implicit political solidarity that constrained and allowed SADC to act diplomatically.

Another analysis tool is the concept of security communities proposed by Adler and Barnett (1998). They draw the line between loosely and tightly coupled security communities on the basis of the intensity of cross-border transactions, the intensity of collective identity, and the effectiveness of institutional structures to deal with interstate conflicts in a non-violent manner. Using this criterion, ECOWAS estimates a loosely coupled security community, in which war between member states is unlikely but institutional inadmissibility, and SADC, with a lower collective security intervention rate and greater adherence to the norms of sovereignty, is even more distant to a tightly coupled configuration of high mutual trust and institutional predictability. Combined, neo-functionalism and constructivism can offer a multi-dimensional approach that can define both the institutional life and the normative design of ECOWAS and SADC in the context of African integration.

METHODOLOGY

The research design that will be used in the given study is qualitative, which will be based on the analysis of secondary data that will be gathered through a wide scope of sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, treaty texts, official reports prepared by ECOWAS and SADC secretariats, publications released by the African Union Commission, and research papers produced by reputable think tanks, including the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), the African Also, the official websites of these organisations and their digital archives were used to find relevant resolutions, communiques, and summit declarations of both organisations. The sources have been selected based on the relevance criteria of directness to the research questions, publication date, and a conscious effort to focus on recent developments, specifically published in the last 10-24 years, and scholarly purpose as demonstrated by quality of the journal, institutional affiliation, and citation history. The paper relies on a large circle of African and non-African scholars to prevent parochialism in the methodology and to represent the diversity of views which defines this interdisciplinary area.

Thematic analysis was performed in a systematic way and is a rigorous qualitative approach which entails the process of identifying, organising and subjective interpretation of themes within the material obtained (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was organised around three broad conceptual domains based on the research questions: the first, the institutional structure and diplomatic capacity of both blocs; second, the empirical history of each organisation in terms of promoting economic integration and collective diplomacy; and third, the structural constraints, normative contradictions, and implementation gaps that constrain their effectiveness. ECOWAS and SADC were compared systematically at each

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thematic level to find similarities and differences that lead to theoretically and policy-relevant conclusions. The results are read throughout within the context of the neo-functionalist and constructivist paradigms presented in the theoretical section, and allow engaging in the empirical material analytically, based on a theory, as opposed to just describing institutional histories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Both ECOWAS and SADC have established detailed institutional frames that are evidence of the importance with which the founding member states took the integration project. ECOWAS has an elaborate set of organs such as the Authority of Heads of State and Government as the overall decision maker, the Council of Ministers, the ECOWAS Parliament as the advisory organ, the Community Court of Justice as the enforcement organ in human rights, and the ECOWAS Commission as the executive organ. Its security organs include the Mediation and Security Council, the Defence and Security Commission, the Council of Elders that offers good offices in conflict prevention, and the ECOWAS Standby Force, as well as the Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) which tracks the conflict indicators in the region in near real-time (ECOWAS Commission, 2018).

The institutional structure of SADC is also all-inclusive as it includes the Summit of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the Integrated Committee of Ministers, the Standing Committee of Senior Officials, the SADC Secretariat and a network of specialised technical committees in industries ranging between agriculture and energy and transport. Its security structures encompass Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (OPDSC) which works on the principle of equal rotation in the chairmanship and a dedicated forum on peace and security issues, SADC Standby Brigade (SADCBRIG) and Regional Early Warning Centre (REWC). The presence of such parallel institutions is a huge investment in regional governance capacity especially as most member states have minimal fiscal capacity.

But the presence of institutions does not necessarily equate to operational effectiveness. Both blocks have been accused of what Clapham (2001) referred to as institutional formalism, the propensity to establish elaborate treaty-based institutions without committing resources (human, financial and political) to their successful operation. An example is the ECOWAS Commission, which relies on the external donors to provide operational programmes with the European Union, United States, and the United Nations funding major security and governance related projects. This dependence on donors inhibits institutional autonomy and casts valid concerns on whether the agendas being pursued are regional ownership or donor preferences (Aning and Edu-Afful, 2016). SADC is experiencing comparable challenges and some of its programmatic operations are funded by the European Development Fund, bilateral donors and not by its member states.

Furthermore, ECOWAS has shown the most radical transformation as a group of diplomatic actors within the Africa RECs. Its action in Liberia 1990-1997 and Sierra Leone 1997-2000 using ECOMOG was the first example of a sub-regional organisation using a multilateral military force to deal with state collapses and atrocity. Although the two interventions were marked by high levels of operational challenges and controversies, such as looting and partisanship, they eventually led to stabilisation and establishment of the institutional basis of future security architecture of ECOWAS (Adebajo, 2002).

The 2016-2017 Gambia crisis is possibly the most successful recent example of collective diplomacy by ECOWAS. After incumbent President Yahya Jammeh denied the outcomes of the December 2016 presidential election that made opposition leader Adama Barrow the winner with the support of the international community watchdog, the ECOWAS had to rally a prompt and internally synchronized diplomatic reaction supported by a plausible military presence. A series of rotating shuttle diplomacy by a coalition of regional heads of state, such as the president of Mauritania, Guinea, Liberia and Senegal, was accompanied by forward deployment of Senegalese troops to the Gambian border, providing a plausible coercive environment to the diplomatic process. Jammeh finally agreed to be exiled to Equatorial Guinea and Barrow took over the presidency (Saine, 2017). This episode was a prime example of the neo-functionalist rationality of institutional spillovers: the presence of already established norms, operational capacity, and diplomatic structures provided the means of effective collective action within a constricted time.

The 2020-2023 wave of coups was the most serious credibility challenge faced by ECOWAS since ECOMOG. The reactions of the organisation to the recent coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger adhered to an overall relatively similar pattern of condemnation, membership suspension, imposing sanctions, and insisting on the restoration of constitutional order within certain deadlines of the transition. But ECOWAS ended up being unable to counteract all the illegal takeovers and the threats that it used forcefully were not implemented. ECOWAS faced a decisive opposition in the Niger case of July 2023, when, once it issued an ultimatum to the junta to withdraw, it threatened to intervene militarily, only to be confronted by the junta, supported by the Mali and Burkina Faso military governments, as well as by domestic political actors in major member states, including the Nigerian Senate, which refused to grant its approval to the The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which withdrew from ECOWAS in early 2024, is the most severe threat to the territorial integrity of the bloc since its establishment (International Crisis Group, 2024).

ECOWAS has made significant strides in certain fields in the economic sector. Millions of West Africans have been able to move thanks to the ECOWAS Biometric Travel Document and the ECOWAS passport. Tariffs have been lowered in categories of products under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS), and the Common External Tariff, which was implemented in its entirety in 2015, has

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given the sub-region a common policy towards trade. However, the volume of intra-regional trade is still consistently low, service integration has not been developed, and the digital economy frontier is not covered by the available integration tools (Bah and Aziz, 2020).

Interestingly, the diplomatic history of SADC is one of the intricate interactions between structural hegemony of South Africa and its smaller and more politically vulnerable members. South Africa, which contributes to about 60 percent of the aggregate GDP of the member states in the SADC, can not but influence the bloc diplomatic agenda. Such hegemonic relationship has resulted in both successes and failures, which alone characterize the nature of SADC, as an institution.

On the positive front, SADC was central to brokering the political settlement in Democratic Republic of Congo via the Global and Inclusive Agreement signed in Pretoria in 2002 that practically brought to an end the Second Congo War that had involved various African states and armed groups. Through the mediation of South Africa, which was carried out to a large extent under the SADC banner, and headed by the then-deputy president Jacob Zuma, a transitional governance structure was established between the DRC government, rebel groups and civil society, which ultimately led to elections in 2006. Recently, SADC has deployed the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in July 2021 to support the Mozambican government to defeat the Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado province. It was the first major operational use of the SADCBRIG and a major exercise of the ability of SADC to act collectively in terms of security (SADC Secretariat, 2022). Although there have been mixed results in the operational performance of SAMIM, the very process of deployment showed readiness to participate collectively in a complex security crisis.

A tangible economic integration success that came before AfCFTA and offered considerable learning opportunities is the SADC FTA, which had successfully liberalised 85 percent of tariffs by 2012. But asymmetric allocation of benefits has been a thorny issue. This has made South Africa more capable of entering the regional markets than smaller economies can do; due to their industrial and services capacity that enables them to achieve trade surpluses that, when they are assumed to be trade deficits, create political resentment. The freezing and reinstatement of the SADC Tribunal with a limited mandate post-Mike Campbell case remains the most symbolically important institutional failure in SADC history, which indicated to the region and the international communities that legal obligations are negotiable when politically inconvenient by the powerful members (Alter, Helfer and Madsen, 2016).

ECOWAS and SADC as part of AfCFTA and Agenda 2063

The fact that the AfCFTA came into effect in 2021 changes the strategic environment in which ECOWAS and SADC act fundamentally. The most ambitious integration project in the history of Africa, AfCFTA will unite 54 member states of the African Union into one continental market with a GDP of about 3.4 trillion and a population of 1.4 billion (Erasmus, 2022). ECOWAS and SADC are both formally recognised as building blocks to the implementation of AfCFTA and their current FTA frameworks are meant to be used as the legal and institutional underpinning to the larger continental agreement.

There is however, a lot of tension and coordination issues between the sub-regional and continental structures. The more developed industrial integration of SADC, based on the manufacturing and services capacity of South Africa, is not easy to digest with the universalist commitment of AfCFTA tariff liberalisation that cuts across the board without respect to structural asymmetry of all members of the African Union. Likewise, the CET timelines of ECOWAS have to be closely synchronized with the AfCFTA tariff proposals to prevent misunderstandings or contradictory legal commitments of member states. Makochekanwa (2020) has presented a very strong case that the interaction between RECs and AfCFTA should be regulated by a differentiated and sequenced approach that acknowledges the existence of different levels of integration across the continent and does not impose a uniform liberalisation template. The Agenda 2063 of the AU sees ECOWAS and SADC as tools to achieve continental unity by 2063, but to realise the vision, there must be clear management of the relationship between sub-regional deepening and continental widening and current institutional arrangements have failed to address this issue.

CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed how ECOWAS and SADC have contributed to African integration and collective diplomacy using the theoretical frameworks of neo-functionalism and constructivism and using a significant amount of empirical literature. The discussion shows that the two organisations have contributed immensely towards African integration throughout their institutional histories. ECOWAS has become the most operational sub-regional security player in the continent, bringing together collective diplomatic and military resources, with mixed yet tangible success, to tackle the threats to democratic governance and peace. SADC has been able to make significant strides towards economic integration as well as conflict mediation throughout Central and Southern Africa as it deploys its first operational military force in Mozambique.

However, the two blocs also have structural problems of serious concern. The conflict between supra-national institutional rationality and national prerogatives of member states is the fault line of African regional integration. The dominant member states, Nigeria in the ECOWAS and South Africa in the SADC still command disproportionate influence on the positions of the blocs in a manner that undermines the collective legitimacy and diplomatic cohesion. Funding chronically being inadequate, the lack of implementation, the fact that there have been many overlapping REC memberships and judicial authority has been retrogressively eroded by the SADC all indicates an institutionally complex but organisationally weak integration process.

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The advent of AfCFTA and the amalgamation of the AU Agenda 2063 pose both real opportunities and real challenges to ECOWAS and SADC. Provided that the blocs are able to synchronize their sub-regional policies with the continental system and deal with their internal contradictions, they can be used as effective institutional building blocks to a more integrated and diplomatically coherent Africa. They would be exposed to institutional irrelevance as the continental structure would draw political and economic interest out of the sub-regional level in case they do not reform. The stakes are high: the effectiveness of the regional governance architecture in Africa is crucial to the ability of this continent to deal with climate change, economic inequality, demographic pressure, political instability, and needs of the fast-growing younger demographic. ECOWAS and SADC are not flawless but must be parts of that structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the analysis provided in this paper, it is possible to recommend the following to be considered by the policymakers, regional institutions, member states, civil society, and the research community:

i. ECOWAS and SADC need to engage in extensive reforms to eliminate endemic underinvestment and overdependence on donors. ECOWAS Community Levy, which is currently pegged at 0.5 percent on third country imports, needs to be re-examined with the view of increasing it with more effective and transparent collection procedures. SADC needs to create a specific regional development fund, which would be capitalised by the requirements of the member states to contribute a certain amount of money according to the GDP ratio, which would decrease the reliance on the external donors to finance the most important programmes and increase the independence of the institutions.

ii. The two organisations need to enhance their legal and treaty obligations in terms of compliance and enforcement to a large extent. The renewal of the SADC Tribunal with a wide individual access mandate as initially intended and investment in the capacity of the ECOWAS Court of Justice to enforce the rules would make the rule-based nature of both organisations more credible and send a plausible signal of institutional gravitas to member states, investors and the international community. The overthrow of the SADC Tribunal served as a reminder of how easily the normative bases of a regional organisation can be undermined.

iii. The two blocs need to come up with more explicit institutional protection on hegemonic capture of collective decision making processes. Nigeria and South Africa play an invaluable role in the functioning of their respective blocs, but the processes of decision-making that guarantee the existence of genuine agreement and safeguard the diplomatic interests of less powerful member states are crucial to the legitimacy in the long term. This could be overcome by the use of weighted voting mechanisms that give some consideration to demographic, economic and sovereign equality factors as well as the formal consultation requirements of smaller states.

iv. ECOWAS and SADC must put substantial investments in less tariff-based integration. The minimal intra-regional trade recorded across this paper indicates structural failure in the productive capacity, infrastructural connectivity, regulatory harmonisation and trade facilitation that cannot be addressed solely by tariff liberalisation. Sub-regional investment programmes on transport corridors, energy interconnection, and digital infrastructure, which physically connect member state economies, should be paired with a special continental infrastructure fund, which is consistent with the need to match the infrastructure priority of the AU agenda 2063.

v. There should be more systemic and meaningful inclusion of civil society organisations, women groups, the private sector and the diaspora communities to ECOWAS and SADC decision making process. The intergovernmental nature of both blocs is mainly a limiting factor to social ownership of integration and diminishes the political constituency of regional policies. Democratic legitimacy and popular participation would be enhanced by formal consultative arrangements, such as frequent civil society forums whereby the summit processes and mechanisms of accommodating civil society recommendations in formal deliberations are accessible.

vi. ECOWAS and SADC should develop explicit strategic frameworks for engaging constructively with AfCFTA and aligning their integration trajectories with AU Agenda 2063. A joint ECOWAS-SADC technical committee on AfCFTA implementation could facilitate the harmonisation of tariff schedules, identify complementarities between sub-regional and continental liberalisation commitments, and develop a common advocacy position on the developmental safeguards that should accompany continental liberalisation. Managing the relationship between sub-regional depth and continental breadth is among the most important institutional challenges facing African regional governance in the coming decade.

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