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Dynamics between Regional Integration and Informal Cross Border Trade and Its Applicability: The Case of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea

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Abstract

Collective self-reliance, inward-looking regionalism, and delinking from the dominant relationships that prevailed in the international economic system in the form of regional economic integration and cooperation were the solution identified by the Pan-African leaders as a potential strategy for restructuring the fragmented African region into a more coherent and viable economic space. This article interrogates the applicability and understanding of Regional Integration within the ECCAS Region while determining the influence Informal Cross Border Trade has had on economic integration in this sub region. The study uses economic integration theories to analyze the implementation of regional economic integration and its effectiveness. The article applies a qualitative research method with a cross sectional design to study a multilevel issue involved in regional integration. It aimed to explain and predict phenomena based on empirical data obtained through interviews using close structured and unstructured interview guide. The study revealed that despite efforts to institutionalize regional integration in the ECCAS region, structural challenges remain a significant impediment to intra-regional trade. Informal cross-border traders consolidate what has come to be regarded as the "invisible" integration of Africa's economies through their involvement in a range of goods and services, resulting in transnational networks, culture and kinship. These can only be effective if African countries adopt a self-reliant and inward-looking economic integration strategy.

Keywords

Regional Economic Integration, ICBT, Free Movement of Goods, Persons and Services, Non-Tariff Barriers

1. Introduction

Modern borders in Africa were not created by Africans but by colonialists, not to develop Africa but to extract from it. To develop, African countries must remove the barriers that have defined them in the past and hindered their development. Collective self-reliance, inward-looking regionalism, and delinking from the dominant relationships that prevailed in the international economic system are potential strategies for restructuring the fragmented African region into a more coherent and viable economic space. The primary rationale adopted from the traditional idea of economic integration theory is that African states are not economically large enough to construct an economy. Therefore, Africa must transform its weak production structures and fragmented markets by embracing economic integration.

The process has been sporadic despite the acclaimed benefits of African economic integration. Due to the lack of political will, ineffective implementation of regional integration policies and insecurities within regional blocs, regional integration has, at least outwardly, been based on the promotion of regional integration schemes based on monetary cooperation or economic union. However, effective integration remains irregular (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, Conceicao, & Anyanwu, 2014).

ECA (2016) assesses the effectiveness of Regional integration schemes in Africa, stating that among the eight Regional Economic Blocs in Africa, only the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) have a Free Trade Area. EAC and ECOWAS have achieved the status of a Customs Union. Only the EAC is a Single Market. Only four of ECCAS's 11 members have ratified the Free Movement Protocol and have a Monetary Union. The Free Movement Protocol has been ratified by all ECOWAS countries, with member states requiring no visas to travel across borders. In reality, however, some Ghanaians pay a bribe to enter Togo and Benin by land, leading Ghanaian Member of Parliament Dzifa Gomashie to say that our differences in language (French and English) lead us to terrorize each other at the borders.

Furthermore, despite having a Free Trade Area and an Economic and Monetary Union, intra-African trade between Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon is still poor. According to the OEC, trade (exports) between Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon in 2018 was $26.3 million, and $13.5 million between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. Over the last 23 years, exports between the two countries have increased by 28.7% annually from $78.9 million in 1995. Likewise, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea have decreased at an annual rate of 2.58% from $24.6 million in 1995 to $ 13.5 million in 2018 (Department for International Trade, 2023). Yet yearly trade between China and Equatorial Guinea is $1.01 billion, and Cameroon is $664 million.

Most African countries owe their survival to the semi-official, often illegal flows of trade, capital and services across borders. This article interrogates the applicability of the understanding of Regional Integration within the ECCAS Region while determining the influence of Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) on African economic integration. According to ECA (2010) and Gor (2012), ICBT accounts for half of the intra-African trade and predates the independence of all African countries. ICBT traders consolidate the "invisible" integration of Africa's economies through their transnational networks, culture and kinship system. Cultural and social ties are also strengthened through common languages, which enhance social networks and reinforce trade ties and regional integration. Sixty per cent of Sub-Saharan African regional trade is informal (Njikam et al., 2011). Since trading is not done in a vacuum but in the movement of people across borders, ICBT is regarded as the most significant type of economic integration.

ICBT is viewed as furthering the integration of Africa's people at a time when formal integration efforts are still fraught with many constraints. Despite its proliferation, prominence and importance to the organisation of regional markets, regional integration, economic development, and poverty alleviation, ICBT remains a significantly under acknowledged and under-researched area in Africa's regional trade activities

1.1. Theories of Economic Integration

The theories of economic integration are divided into two stages. The first stage includes the traditional theories of economic integration, which explain the possible benefits of integration and are often referred to as static analysis, propagated by Jacob Viner (1950). The second stage includes the new economic integration theory, which developed in changed economic conditions and a trade environment referred to as the dynamic analysis of economic integration, propounded by Bela Balassa.

1.2. Viner's Custom Union Theory

Viner (1950), the proponent of the Customs Union Theory in his classical book, *The Custom Unions Issue*, makes an essential distinction between trade creation and trade diversion. Considered a traditional economic theory, it argues that gains accrued from customs unions are significantly influenced by achieving a balance in trade creating and trade diverting (Robson, 1968: p. 27).

Viner advocates his theory by employing the assumption of the static theory of comparative advantage, suggesting a situation in which the input factors of production, the technical knowledge, tastes and the forms of economic organisation are all treated as constant or as autonomous variables (Robson, 1968: p. 27). Viner advocates that with the creation of a customs union, the relative prices of goods in the domestic market of the member states will be altered by the elimination of tariff barriers on imports from other nations.

The approach relates custom unions to the losses (trade diversion) and gains (trade creation) obtained by forming a preferential trade agreement. Trade creation is the possible expansion of a country's total imports on entering into a bilateral or multilateral preferential trade arrangement, leading to an improvement in economic welfare as high-cost domestic output is replaced by the lower-cost output produced abroad (DeRosa & Gilbert, 2005).

Trade diversion, on the other hand, occurs in cases where high-cost imports from one or several preferential trading partners supersede lower-cost imports from an external state which is not part of the regional bloc, thereby leading to a decrease in the economic well-being of importing countries (DeRosa & Gilbert, 2005). Therefore, if trade creation effects outweigh trade diversion effects, the preferential trade arrangement is said to be trade creating on a net basis, and the arrangement leads to a significant increase in the income of the economically integrated member states (DeRosa & Gilbert 2005). The creation of a customs union, therefore, will raise welfare as long as trade creation is greater than trade diversion.

Viner (1950: p. 135) holds that a customs union is only a partial, uncertain, and otherwise imperfect means of doing what a worldwide non-discriminatory reduction of trade barriers can do more fully, more certainly, and equitably. Lipsey & Kravis (1987: p. 357) further argues that the customs union is historically concerned with the welfare gains and losses, which succeed in establishing a customs union.

The research revealed that the liberalisation of terms of trade between these two countries had created gains through specialisation. Cameroon relies on Equatorial Guinea for quality assorted drinks, and Equatorial Guinea depends on Cameroon for agricultural produce. Despite this, many beneficial regional integration tenets are not effectively implemented.

Meade (1955) says customs unions are more likely to bring economic welfare when the economies of partner countries are competitive or similar. Lipsey (1960: p. 466), through his equilibrium analysis, explains that custom unions with competitive economies are more likely to raise real income than custom unions with complementary economies.

If a Regional Integration Agreement (RIA) creates trade on a net basis, that is, when trade creation is greater than trade diversion, then the RIA is considered a positive contribution to member states' welfare in terms of traditional economic surpluses. However, the emergence of such economic entities could also promote trade diversions and become a source of economic inefficiency. That is, if the most competitive producers of a particular product suddenly found themselves excluded from the regional market due to the customs union.

Viner (1950) stresses that the consumers of member countries bear the welfare costs derived from trade diversion and not the exporters of other countries. This trade diversion effect is damaging because it introduces new obstacles to goods entering the union. Enhanced political and socio-economic development occurs only when trade creation is promoted by abolishing obstructions to free trade between member states. If trade flow is diverted from efficient non-member states to less efficient member states to encourage greater cooperation between member states, there will be a decrease in welfare (Ruiz, 1999).

The relevance of Viner's theory of trade creation and trade diversion has been questioned in relation to developing countries. Axline (1977: p. 86) argues that one of the most striking outcomes of integration in the developing world is their dependence on external producers, and integration aims to restrict foreign investment, limit the transfer of technology with external sources and expand the regional markets while cutting back the region's trade reliance on non-member states.

However, since Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea rely on Western capital, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is essential for stimulating local investment and providing technological and managerial knowledge. This is problematic to the whole notion of economic integration. Ruiz (1999) argues that economic integration in these regions was more likely to result in trade diversion than in trade creation.

The traditional theory of customs unions focused only on the welfare effects of creating the union. It did not explain why countries are interested in joining a Free Trade Area. Highlighting this omission, Cooper and Masell (1965: p. 743) split the welfare effects into two key components: tariff reduction and trade diversion. The sole source of consumer welfare gains is tariff reduction due to forming a customs union. It explains both trade creation and consumption effects.

They also advocated the quasi-efficient tariff system of giving compensation payments to countries whose production was lost to industrial specialisation. They said that not all trade creation is beneficial or harmful. Dosser et al. (1971), on the other hand, explains that trade diversion and trade creation are misleading terms in the context of developing countries. Custom unions maximise development, not trade creation, and minimise the cost of development, not trade diversion.

Massalha (2022) in highlighting the shortcomings of Viner's theory stipulates that it considered only the trade creation and trade diversion effects, which to Cline (1978) are traditional static gains. There are more gains to regional integration which include; labor opportunity effect, economies of scale effect, and foreign exchange saving effect. Since the static analysis of trade creation and trade diversion has been proven inadequate to explain economic integration since it cannot fully assess the impact of integration on welfare, it, therefore, adopts Bella Balassa's dynamic effect analysis, which introduces a new instrument to analyse the effects of economic integration on welfare.

1.3. The Dynamic Effect Analysis

Balassa (1962) was one of the first researchers to advocate the dynamic effect of regional integration. This school of thought has been labelled by recent studies (Sheer, 1981; De Melo & Panagariya 1993; Fernandez, 1997; Lawrence, 1997; Faneli, 2007: p. 54) as the "new regionalism" while the static effects of Viner are classified the "old regionalism." Balassa (1962: p. 117) defines the main dynamic effects of integration to be large-scale economies, technological change, as well as the impact of integration on market structure and competition, productivity growth, risk and uncertainty, and investment activity.

In reality, the dynamic effect of economic integration is anything that affects the rate of medium- and long-term economic growth of the members in the regional bloc. Panusheff (2003: p. 37) further explains that short-term effects are related to initial changes in the behaviour of actors. In contrast, long-term restructuring effects are related to improving the condition of companies' functioning, efficiency and competition. Hosny (2013: p. 139) corroborated that increased competition, investment flows, economies of scale, technology transfer, and improved productivity represent these dynamic effects.

In explaining the terms of growth, the dynamic theory of integration implies that the larger the market, the better the chances of economic growth. Smaller economies are handicapped due to the limited sizes of their domestic market. So merging economies and reaping the dynamic gains of integration is an alternative. The ends underlying integration are thus a faster rate of growth, greater equality of opportunity, greater equality of income and greater freedom of choice.

Balassa (1962) further hypothesise that economic integration will allow the exploitation of economies of scale internal to the firm, which had not been previously available due to the limited size of the market. Such gains, therefore, would not have been possible if the integrated economies had not been large enough to exploit all sources of economies before integration. The effect of integration on the market structure is based on the degree of competition after removing discriminatory tariffs among member states. The disappearance of this monopoly position will therefore contribute to more efficient use of resources and will produce incentives for improvements in the production method.

2. Methodology

The study covers the two major border outlets between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, Campo and Kye-Ossi, located on the Cameroonian side and adopts a qualitative research method with a grounded theory approach. The article applies a qualitative research method with a cross-sectional design to study multilevel issues involved in regional integration. It aims to explain and predict phenomena based on empirical data obtained through interviews using close structured (open-ended questions) and an unstructured interview guide. Data was obtained from in-depth interviews, observations and existing literature.

Key informants were interviewed in Cameroon. Seven in Kye-Ossi: the Divisional Officer, the Commissioner of Immigration, the Commissioner of Customs, representatives of the Ministry of Commerce and the local Council, Chief of Kye-Ossi, Chief of Mefoup and Chief of Kono Fonossi. Six in Campo: Divisional Officer, Commissioner of Immigration, Commissioner of Customs, representative of the Ministry of Commerce and the Mayor. Others included, representatives of the Ministry of Commerce, the Department of Customs and the local Council. Men and women who trade across the Cameroon-Equatorial Guinea border, from both countries, specifically through the Kye-Ossi and Campo borders, were also interviewed.

Men and women traders were considered separately and then by country. The researcher then used a purposive and snowball sampling technique based on the grounded theory approach. A triangulation approach was adopted in data processing, analysis and interpretation of results. Due to the significant number of open-ended questions, data analysis comprised a well-demarcated phase, content analysis and pre-coding.

2.1. Regional Integration and Its Applicability within the ECCAS Region

Border officials in charge of ensuring the implementation of regional integration policies understood the concept differently. The representative of the Department of External Relations at the Ministry of Trade in Yaounde defined Regional Integration as:

> a policy which permits states within the same sub-region to exercise synergy and develop their relations in different domains (political and economic)…a platform that integrates the different political entities and allows states to carry out trade relations without obstacles.

According to the representative of the Ministry of Commerce in Campo,

> regional integration is a commercial understanding between member countries of an economic bloc to negotiate how trade activities will be carried out. …This trade involves elements like the free movement of people, goods, and services across the borders of the countries concerned. …It also consists of implementing Non-Tariff Barriers on goods traded across borders.

According to the Divisional Officer of Kye-Ossi, "it is a trade partnership between two or more countries where terms and conditions on trading are specified."

According to the Commissioner of Immigration of Kye-Ossi,

> regional integration is made up of countries of a sub-region that perform trade activities together…there are no restrictions in terms of movements between the countries concerned. For example, Equatorial Guineans come to Cameroon with a simple stamp on their permits or passports, while Cameroonians go to Equatorial Guinea by presenting just their identification papers.

The Director of Customs at Kye-Ossi further explained that

> …regional integration is the process by which two or more countries join efforts to create an economic platform for their well-being…through trade. The process of regional integration usually takes different stages from the Preferential Trade Area (PTA), the Free Trade Area (FTA), the Customs Union (CU), the Common Market, an Economic Union and a Political Union.

Based on the different opinions of the officials interviewed, regional integration comprises economic integration, which is the facilitation of trade relations and conditions between the different countries within the sub-regional bloc. It entails the implementation of policies such as the free movement of goods, persons and services across the border and the performance of non-tariff barriers. Even though some ECCAS countries have extended integration to harmonising their macro-economic policies through the creation of the CEMAC custom union, a lot remains to be done with regards to implementation as most of these countries are still trying to ensure the free movement of goods, persons and services and non-tariff barriers.

2.2. Applicability of Regional Integration between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea

Most of the officials interviewed thought that regional or economic integration between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea is still very ineffective due to the frequent closure of the border by Equatorial Guinea. The Commissioner of Immigration said: "…economic/regional integration is not effective between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea because Cameroonians need a visa to reach towns other than border towns. …the multiple closures of the Equatorial Guinean border do not facilitate trade relations. Sometimes the border is closed for over eight months…"

The Commissioner of Immigration in Kye-Ossi further explained, …on 1 September 2014, Cameroon signed a communiqué stating citizens of all CEMAC countries do not require a visa to enter Cameroon. This has been implemented in Cameroon. However, …most Cameroonians require a visa to go into Equatorial Guinea, further than the border area. …This is compounded by their frequent border closure for no concrete reasons.

A married female ICBT trader from Idenau aged 30 - 40 who lived in Equatorial Guinea confirmed this: "…to live in or go beyond the border towns, Cameroonians need to have a visa or a residence permit."

The Commissioner of Immigration in Kye-Ossi called it "…credential, renewed every three months. People without these documents are often arrested and imprisoned. Those who can bribe the Equatorial Guinean officials at least 150.000 FCFA or more not to be arrested…"

The Commissioner of Customs at Kye-Ossi said: "…Until Article 1 of the general principles of the CEMAC Custom Code is revised to accommodate the tenets of regional integration, CEMAC countries cannot say they are practising the principle of free movement of persons, goods and services. Under this article, the notion of borders still applies to the movement of persons and goods…"

Article 1 of the Customs Code within the CEMAC region states, among other things, that the custom territory of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa includes the Central African Republic, Republic of Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Republic of Gabon, Republic of Chad and the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, apart from the frontiers common to these states where they are borderless. The Commissioner explained that under this Article, as long as each of these countries within the ECCAS region still upholds their borders/boundaries, regional integration cannot be said to be implemented.

The Divisional Officer of Kye-Ossi said: "regional integration between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea is practised to some extent. Diplomatic relations between the two countries are effective. However, the frequent closure of the Equatorial Guinean border stalls trade relationships between the two countries…".

The Commissioner of Immigration for Kye-Ossi added: "…the implementation of regional integration is timid on the Equatorial Guinean side because of its governance system. A dictator rules this country, and he takes every decision. It is also because Equatorial Guinea is a tiny country, so they believe practising integration will be so overwhelming for them as Cameroonians might overrun their country…"

From the above, it can be established that even though Cameroon signed a communiqué facilitating the free movement of goods, services and goods across their borders, the implementation of regional integration is still very timid as some laws, like the custom code, still impedes its applicability as well as the governance system alongside political will in Equatorial Guinea which does not allow for the implementation of the different elements that facilitates regional integration.

The main findings from the field revealed that the key officials interviewed identified three main components to define regional/economic integration. These components included an economic exchange between two or more countries, abolition of any form of trade restrictions (free movement of persons, goods and services and Non-Tariff Barriers) and trade exchange that improves the welfare of the concerned countries. Correspondingly, literature by Balassa (1962: p. 1), Kahnert et al. (1969), and Marinov (2015) affirms the above assertions.

The preferential trade agreements purported by most respondents to support the definition and advantages of regional integration affirm Jacob Viner's (1950) theoretical explanation of the Customs Union theory. It emphasises the benefits of economic integration between states which is trade creation. Findings revealed that bilateral trade relations between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea (and, by extension, other ECCAS states) have created trading opportunities between the two countries, with traders being able to buy and sell across the two borders easily. This has improved economic welfare as high-cost domestic output is replaced by the lower-cost output produced in the other country (DeRosa and Gilbert, 2005). However, as stated by Collier (2007), persistent concerns about sovereignty and national sentiments among the public may lead politicians to sabotage the ratification or implementation of regional schemes, leading to a political economy of signing but not implementing regional integration.

African leaders need to be more committed to effecting the regional policies their countries have ratified. Also, there must be a mentality change among Africans and their leaders. Former President of Kenya Uhuru Kenyatta said these borders are not your creation but the creation of people outside of the African continent who made these borders not to develop us but to extract from us. Now that it is time to develop ourselves, we must start looking at these borders and removing the barriers that have defined us in the past and now hinder us from being the giant we want to be.

2.3. Regional Integration, Bilateral Trade and Their Influence on Informal Cross Border Trade within ECCAS

It is glaring that Informal Cross Border Trade is a significant determinant of intra-African trade. The magnitude of informal cross-border trade in border regions has been considered the new form of micro-regionalism that challenges the state's authority. It reinforces and consolidates regional integration in Africa, especially within ECCAS, yet is considered illegal. Although it causes losses to state revenue and challenges state authority, ICBT accounts for at least half of Africa's economic activities and significantly impacts poverty reduction.

Most ICBT traders are unregistered and, therefore, illegal. Law, No 2016/004 of 18 April 2016, governing external trade in Cameroon stipulates that an importer or exporter in Cameroon must meet the following conditions to be registered traders:

A stamped application (1.000 FCFA fiscal stamp) addressed to the Minister of Trade on the company's letterhead; a certified copy of the Certificate of incorporation (Régistre du Commerce); a copy of Attestation of Localisation; a certified copy of taxpayers card; an attestation of Clarence from CNPA; an authorisation to carry out commercial activities in Cameroon (for foreigners), an authorisation to import/export particular goods from their competent ministries; a 30.000 FCFA receipt from the Ministry of Trade; a 15.000 FCFA receipts for CNCC; an attestation of existence for those exporting coffee and cocoa; a declaration to respect the rules and regulation governing the cocoa and coffee sector (for exporters of coffee and cocoa); a certified copy of the National Identity card of the Director.

Law No 2016/004 of 18 April 2016 also stipulates in its Section 12 that every import/export transaction must first be declared with the competent authorities for purposes of statistics, inspection, control and issuance of a certificate of origin, in particular concerning exports under conditions laid down by the law in force. Under Section 14, importers/exporters must comply with the customs code and the applicable trade control regulation. Section 15(1) states that an invoice is essential for importing and exporting goods for commercial purposes.

The representative of the Ministry of Trade in Kye-Ossi explained that "going by the laws stipulating the conditions for being importers/exporters, most of these traders do not meet the requirement. As a result, they trade informally." This was also affirmed by the representative of the Ministry of Trade, Department of External Trade, Yaoundé who reiterated that "most of what we have as trading or intra-African trade is informal because these traders are not registered and do not follow the laws of importing and exporting as stated by the Law."

Most, if not all, cross-border traders do not present any invoices when they declare their goods. The representative of Customs Campo said that "most of these traders do not only present their invoice, but most of their goods are underrated and not registered in National statistics." The representative of Customs in Kye-Ossi said that "this is even aggravated by the existence of ethnic ties that transcend borders…trade is done based on family ties." This informal trade is what is referred to today as intra-African trade.

This has even flourished more given that regional integration, which was intended to formalise trading across the African borders and ECCAS in particular, has and is experiencing weaknesses in its implementation process; thereby reinforcing and strengthening informal cross-border trading, making it the core of regionalism in the sub-region. The weakness in border enforcement, insecurities, lack of political will, and closure of border markets have been identified as the leading promoters of informal cross-border trade. ICBT also creates and sustains a network of alliances by creating a hybrid governance system through negotiating with state and non-state actors at the borders and the changes in trade routes.

The Commissioner of Immigration in Campo said that: "…ICBT has contributed immensely to the economy of Cameroon, the development of the town of Kye-Ossi as a regional market and its empowerment of the traders involved. However, the non-implementation of trading policies and lack of political will by Equatorial Guinea authorities, which has resulted in the frequent closures of the border, has reinforced the existence of ICBT. Even though the border is frequently closed, sometimes with reinforced security, it has still been porous, with informal cross-border traders using alternative routes to access Equatorial Guinea to buy goods. These traders still strengthen regional integration and bilateral trade between these countries clandestinely, despite the insecurity and lack of political will from the government…"

Political will and insecurity have caused major border markets and transportation routes to lose their influence, with bush routes gaining prominence. Security and border officials' alongside rebels, have taken advantage of these situations to assert their power and influence by extorting money from traders.

The representative of Customs Campo said that a hybrid governance system exists involving state and non-state actors at the borders and changes in trade routes. "Informal cross border traders most often negotiate with custom officials to under-invoice, so they pay lower customs duties." Most of the traders interviewed corroborated this, explaining that it was a strategy to cope with the excessive customs duties that were otherwise demanded.

In corroborating all this, a customs official in Kye-Ossi referred to family ties that transcend borders: "…Most of these traders use their ties across the borders and as inhabitants of the border areas to get goods across the borders without paying or passing through customs services. They either use farm routes or hide the goods among their agricultural produce or cross the borders claiming that the goods are gifts from relatives on the other side…"

In explaining the effects this has on national revenue, the customs official said, "although small in quantity, given its frequency, it can add up to huge quantities of goods imported across the border without passing through customs checks."

Still supporting the network of alliances and governance systems through negotiations that exist at the borders, the representative of Commerce in Kye-Ossi said: "…We understand with the traders; we sanction less and sensitise more. We organise seminars and workshops to educate the traders on formal procedures to make their business more profitable. However, these traders often prefer to sustain their networks of alliance and negotiation. Most are illiterate, so they do not take time to read the documents we provide or the training we endeavour to give to improve their conditions."

The Commissioner of Immigration in Kye-Ossi explained that border officials who are supposed to reinforce its implementation are also guilty of a lack of information or reluctance in using the information on bilateral trade and by extension regional integration. He explained that his assistant, implementing the 1 September 2019 communiqué from the Director of Immigration allowing CEMAC citizens free entry into Cameroon, received an official query for letting foreigners into the country without visas. In contrast, Gabon still required Cameroonians to have a visa.

Governments' lack of political will to implement regional integration policies challenges regional integration.

Bad roads and numerous checkpoints have enormously influenced the trading patterns of ICBT traders, as they spend a lot of their initial capital and profits on payments at these checkpoints. It is worse during conflicts like in the Central African Republic, where they are required to pay non-state armed groups before crossing borders, and they lose their goods, especially during the rainy seasons. Traders must pay officials at up to 36 checkpoints on the Douala-N'Djamena and Douala-Garoua-Boulaï routes. There are nine checkpoints on the Yaounde-Kye-Ossi route.

3. Conclusion

The article set out to interrogate the applicability of the understanding of Regional Integration within the ECCAS Region while determining the influence of Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) on African economic integration. Findings show that despite efforts to institutionalize regional integration in the ECCAS region, structural challenges remain a significant impediment to intra-regional trade. Informal cross-border traders consolidate what has come to be regarded as the "invisible" integration of Africa's economies through their involvement in a range of goods and services, resulting in transnational networks, culture and kinship. These can only be effective if African countries adopt a self-reliant and inward-looking economic integration strategy.

It is clear that ICBT continues to be the core of regionalism and integration between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea and in the ECCAS in general. In the absence of a universal, coherent integration, African states continue to engage with integration in an unenthusiastic, ambivalent manner. Where the governments of Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon have engaged in endeavours aimed at economic and political integration, minimal effort has been made to entrench the ideals, values and norms associated with African unity in the consciousness of their citizens. Laissez-faire policies in Equatorial Guinea have stoked tensions between nationals and foreigners. This shows the anomaly of national identity in the context of regionalism. Trade between these two countries is principally informal. In both countries, ICBT empowers and sustains many traders and their families.

Formal trade is very limited given that most policies, rules and regulations for enhancing economic integration did not consider the context and histories of the African continent. Unlike Ikome (2004), who stated that regional integration was seen as an inward-looking strategy and an indigenous continent-wide effort, its implementation has proven that these policies are just a microcosm of the governance system adopted during colonialism. It fails to embrace the very context and history of the African continent. As stated above and in line with Nkrumah's speech in 1963, as long as boundary fragmentations inherited from colonialism and instituted by the notion of the nation-state are not supplemented by mutual understanding, the continent will continue to see their neighbours as their enemies.

Empirical studies have shown that trade relations through ICBT between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea are trade-creating as it has not only contributed to the growth of the two economies but has greatly empowered the traders involved in the trade. However, bilateral relations between these two countries are very rigid. Equatorial Guinea has frequently closed its borders, threatened to erect a wall along the Kye-Ossi border and harassed Cameroonians on its territory (despite acknowledging the free movement of goods and persons).

This has caused a rift in the trade relations between the two countries. Cameroonians exploit Equatorial Guineans when they come to their country to trade. Such feelings/attitudes of mistrust, exploitation and harassment explain Nkrumah and Kenyatta's call for a mutual understanding between Africans; otherwise, regional integration will remain policy on paper. Citizens of these countries see themselves define themselves through a national rather than a sub-regional or even continental lens, people with a shared vision and destiny.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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