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REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE ECOWAS REGION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BY ADEBUSUYI I. ADENIRAN

SUMMARY

- The originating concept of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is to facilitate free movement of persons and goods within the West African sub-region, has remained largely elusive over time.
- Prioritization of national interests over larger regional interests by ECOWAS member states is the greatest obstacle to migration and socio-economic integration in West Africa.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on May 28, 1975 to facilitate a common socio-economic space for West Africans. The ECOWAS Commission is comprised of 15 member states – the Republic of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Four years later, in 1979, the Commission's Protocol on Free Movement was conceived as an instrument to enable free movement of ECOWAS citizens within the sub-region (ECOWAS, 2011a: 2). This protocol was projected as an integral part of institutionalizing a single regional socio-economic space where all citizens can benefit from opportunities in member states, including the utilization of arable land by indigenous agriculturists, access to coastal areas by landlocked member states, employment of English and French language experts and, most significantly, unrestricted access to natural resources by member states.

But since the inception of the Commission, free movement of persons and goods within the sub-region has not been fully realized. Incompatibilities in immigration and customs policies, monetary zones, and official languages among

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member states, have impeded productive migration and integration within the sub-region. These limitations have compelled ECOWAS to transform its conceptual notion of “ECOWAS of States” to “ECOWAS of People,” in which the people would be the focus of regional unification, rather than the state (ECOWAS, 2010: 1–3). Having identified the ineffectiveness of state-led approach to migration and integration, the ECOWAS now embraces a bottom-up approach that is more communal in focus.

This backgrounder explores the process of the ECOWAS’ transmutation from the ECOWAS of states to the ECOWAS of people, including the existing problems and cogent possibilities inherent in the process of attaining free movement of persons and goods within the sub-region.

TRANSBORDER MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

At its core, the ECOWAS looks to strengthen regional migration and the integration process, especially through its inter-governmental organizations and their activities. But migrating citizens within ECOWAS member states continue to experience routine intimidation and harassment by officials along the common borders. For instance, routine threats of arbitrary arrest and denial of passage if bribes are not paid are still common (Adeniran, 2010), even though the ECOWAS policy on a common passport for the entire sub-region has been in place since 2005 (Gheho, 2011: 1). Between Badagry (the exit point from Nigeria to Benin) and Noe (the entry point from Ghana to Cote d’Ivoire), there are an estimated 120 border posts and security check points, forcing individuals crossing these borders to switch intermittently from one official language to the other and exchange currencies several times across borders.

The projected unification of the ECOWAS and The West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) has been largely unattainable. The ECOWAS’ intent of a common external tariff regime and of a single monetary zone has not been realized as a result of disagreement over an appropriate formula and subsisting colonial undercurrents.

Presently, eight monetary zones exist within the sub-region, making trans-border social and economic interaction a Herculean task. Specifically, major constraints include the plurality of socio-economic groupings

whose formations, aims and market measures are as divergent as their membership compositions. A good example of this is the contradictory roles of the ECOWAS and the UEMOA that have needlessly split the West African sub-region along Anglophone and Francophone dichotomies.

Differences rooted in colonialism among ECOWAS member states have made attempts at enhancing regional migration and integration improbable, including fomenting political instability and border hurdles. Additionally, persistent economic instability experienced by member states has weakened capacities to create feasible macroeconomic policies. Equally, most of the social, economic, and political goals created for the ECOWAS overlap and are unrealistic because of half-hearted commitment by member states. For instance, the “right of residence and of establishment,” recognized in the 1992 amendment of the ECOWAS Treaty, has not been functionally implemented because of member states’ commitment to other organizations (ECOWAS, 2000).

At another level, national interests often take precedence over regional interests among member states. The much needed political zeal required to drive the regional agenda at the level of national policy advancement has been lacking. For example, in mid-2004, Liberia requested that all legal West African migrants in the country should undergo a process of (re)registration while those without legal status should be deported. In most cases, national exigencies override sub-regional interests (Afolayan, 2004); in other cases, simultaneous membership of dualist regional groupings has prevented effective execution of ECOWAS decisions by national governments. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement has remained the most flagrantly abused protocols targeted at regional integration by member states.

SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSBORDER MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

Migration in West Africa carries a significant potential contribution to socio-economic integration and development, particularly in developing societies. Regional trans-border migration has made positive contributions to the social and economic advancement of individuals and nations by increasing mean household incomes in the ECOWAS sub-region. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that cross-border remittances, which are increasing, contribute to poverty reduction in the region through investment activities

(Adeniran, 2009:225). The increasing volume of fund transfer homeward by migrant workers within West Africa, for instance from Cote d'Ivoire to Nigeria, Senegal and Burkina Faso and from Nigeria to Benin and Togo, has rekindled interest in the development potential of remittances at the regional level (Adeniran, 2008: 8).

Of particular interest in this regard is the trans-border practice of the Ejigbo-Yoruba (Nigerian) migrants in Cote D'Ivoire, who have formidably utilized the platform of informal cross-border networking to attain most of the integrative targets of the ECOWAS; targets, which have remained largely elusive, within the formal realm. Through cross-cultural marriage and mastery of Ivorian languages (such as colloquial Abidjan French, Bete and Baure), the Ejigbo-Yoruba have been able to build on existing pre-modern ties in West African states to establish long-lasting trade networks across the region (Adeniran, 2008).

Within the transnational social space, the Ejigbo-Yoruba are able to retail Ivorian commodities in Nigeria and Nigerian commodities in Cote D'Ivoire. Some Ivorians (especially, spouses, friends and benefactors of the migrants) are equally linked up with the Nigerian market. Such linkages have been made feasible through the workings of the migrants' ethnic network operating between Nigeria and Cote D'Ivoire.

It is important to understand what can be learned from such informal and relatively functional migratory and relational exchange—as presented by the Ejigbo-Yoruba along the Nigerian-Ivorian corridor—and what specifically can be applied at the larger ECOWAS level to enable trade liberalization within West Africa. Interestingly, it has been reported that through the platform of informal cross-border interaction within the West African sub-region, the Ejigbo-Yoruba have been able to make both Nigerian and Ivorian societies interdependent over time (Adeniran, 2010).

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

Recent political and economic developments in some West African countries have reflected fluidity in the patterns of immigration and emigration within the sub-region. Some of the countries that were previously destinations for migrants have suddenly transformed to migrant-sending countries due to extant socio-economic incongruence and, sometimes, political instability

within their societies. Such countries include Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. On the other hand, countries that were previous migrant sources are now migrant recipients—as seen in the cases of Liberia, Guinea and Benin. This has been largely due to relative peace in the affected countries and not necessarily resulting from any economic prosperity.

Concrete steps are currently being taken by the ECOWAS to ensure free movement of persons and goods within the sub-region. As an initial measure, common borders among West African countries are being unified as a single entity. Most of the unification projects are expected to be completed by mid-2012. The next step will be an outright obliteration of unified border posts. At such stage, a true “ECOWAS of People” would become attainable (ECOWAS, 2011b).

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First published in 2010 by The Centre for International Governance Innovation



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