

## REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA: THE ROLE OF AFRICAN UNION

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### Abstract

*Regional integration has been a vital instrument in the advancement of the economic, political and socio-cultural development in Africa. This study examines Regional Integration in Africa, focusing on African Union as a regional organization. The establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its transformation to AU is a demonstration of the great desire of African political leaders, both at home and in the Diaspora, for unity, cooperation, and the unification of Africa as a sure way to progress. The study raises the following research questions: What was the rationale behind regional integration in Africa? What were the challenges of regional integration in Africa? Does AU advance the integration of the continent into world economy? The specific objectives of the study are: to examine the rationale behind regional integration in Africa, to ascertain the challenges of regional integration in Africa, to ascertain how AU advances the integration of the continent into world economy. The study adopts the regional development theory as its theoretical framework. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used in the study. The instrument of data collection was through an in-depth interview. The study identifies basic challenges of regional integration in Africa, which include overlapping membership, inadequate funding, lack of political will, inequitable sharing of benefits etc. Despite these challenges, the study reveals that there are areas where outstanding successes and improvement have been recorded as a result of regional integration in Africa. The study further recommends that; AU should create structures to prioritize the wellbeing and needs of integrating member states; prioritize the interest of Africa as a continent and build formidable structures for the implementation of its policies and programs; position itself as a mechanism to facilitate the integration of the continent into the world economy.*

**Keywords:** African Union, Regional Integration, Economic Communities, Intra-regional trade, World Economy

## **Introduction**

Prior to the invasion of Africa by the European Colonialists, the continent was known for its great diversity and complexity. It witnessed ancient civilizations, egalitarian political system as well as agricultural activities, rooted in hunting, gathering and mining. It is a continent that comprises of different cultural beliefs, traditions, kingdoms and empires; it was a peaceful continent, rich in mineral resources, vast lands and rock. Pre-colonial African societies favored traditions; but this oral-based Africa tradition and history poses major challenge in documenting Africa's pre-colonial past, as most of these oral histories were distorted and forgotten. According to Olatunbosun et al (2016), pre-colonial African communities never existed in isolation; there were corporation among them as neighbors, across regions and even across the African region. This interaction was rooted through marriage, commerce, migration, diplomacy as well as warfare/conquest. For instance, East Africa had close interaction with Chinese, Middle East and Indian Traders; Portugal had close economic ties Elmina (modern day Ghana) in 1482 which was its first African trading outpost. This is a testament to the notion that African continent in its pre-colonial era had traditional structures that enhanced and promoted its socio-cultural corporation and integration.

Regional integration has remained one the outstanding development of global politics and international relations which was approved by the United Nations on July, 1948 (Norman and Howard, 2002). Regional integration places much emphasis on regional grouping of states and its importance over independent sovereign state.

To this end, Pan-African leaders within the continent and in Diaspora (the likes of Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Jean-Jacques, Edward Wilmot, Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe etc) sought for a medium to enhance cooperation and integration in Africa. This was birthed out of the spirit of nationalism, anti-colonialism and self-determination of the continent. Since the end of the colonial era between late 1950s and 1960s, African leaders have made so much support and move for regional integration.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The need to improve regional cooperation as well as integration has been a major concern for African states. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the wake of independence, it became obvious that these independent African states would experience economic struggle and challenges. Hence it became necessary to form economic integration within the region.

However, the continent of Africa has been going through several issues, ranging from imperialism and neocolonialism to other socio-economic problems. In as much as the attainment of political independence has been fully achieved in the continent, the imperialist interference of the colonizers in the internal affairs of African States has not been totally eradicated. The issue of political instability has remained a monster that has metamorphosed into civil unrest, wars, electoral violence, kidnapping, high level of insecurity, boundary clashes and so on. In the words of Frank G.A (1969), Africa leaders and intellectuals who have been held in the grip of colonial ideology have not been able to fully appreciate the path to African political and economic development. The occurrences of crisis and political unrest in Africa have always thwarted the development of independent African States.

There are several countries in Africa facing different forms of security challenges. For instance; Darfur Crisis in Sudan, Tusi and Hutu crisis in Rwanda, Ivory Coast crisis, Al-Shabbab group in

Somalia, Herdsmen attack/religious crisis in several states in Nigeria (Jos, Kaduna, Benue, Niger, Anambra Ondo etc). More so, Africa since the end of colonial rule has been battling with debt crisis, debt servicing and poor economic structures. This problem can be traced back to the ills and ideological influence of the colonial masters, economic exploitation of the region by the West as well as the financial mismanagement of our rich natural resources by African leader. In a bid to address these diverse problems and enhance economic development in Africa, the need for regional integration became immanent.

Following the new international economic arrangements, the need for regional integration has gotten fresh momentum among different countries of the world; including the major developed economies, aiming towards the expansion of the economic space as a means to strengthen their economic and political base and relevance in the world economy. In view of these developments, Africa needs to strengthen regional cooperation and integration as a way to survive in the international economic and political new order (i.e globalization). Nevertheless, the end of the cold-war era brought in an important move in the scenery of North-South interactions. This is another significant issue of global importance that has reinforced the quest for regional integration in Africa vis-à-vis the formation of Regional Economic Communities in general and African Union in particular. It therefore became imperative for an improvement in Africa's regional integration as well as economic cooperation among African countries. This is seemingly a response strategy to effectively address various challenges of economic development in Africa.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

**Regional Integration:** According to Peterson (2001), implies the coming together of states within a particular region to increase their level of interaction with regard to economic, security, political, social and cultural benefits. He further observed that the degree of integration is dependent on the willingness and commitment of integrating states to share their sovereignty.

Regional integration entails an agreement made by neighboring states to have mutual ground for corporation. Regional integration is organized through a supranational body like EU, AU or intergovernmental structure. In the words of De Lambaerde and Van Langenhove (2007), regional integration is a worldwide phenomenon of territorial system that increases the interactions between their components and creates new forms of organization.

Regional integration as well as regional organization is currently part of the present global economic order and this has been recognized as the future of international system. Through regional integration, sovereign states come together to create common political, legal, economic and social institutions for collective governance. In Europe, regional integration has become a developed system of rules for the attainment of collective goals (e.g European Coal and Steel Community) which birthed the formation of the European Union. Regional integration is very essential in the contemporary international system because it creates a platform for competition in the international market. Sheriff and Nwokedi (2016) sees regional integration as balance of power, where states come together to support each other. In international politics, regional integration is the expression of a common sense of identity and purpose which is attainable through the creation of institutions. Increase in the creation of regional bodies in Africa is as a result of an increasing level of economic integration; which has equally enhanced political integration.

**Integration:** The concept of integration entails the coming together of different countries and regions through economic, social and political cooperation. Integration takes through three basic forms; economic integration, political integration and cultural integration. Economic integration involves the formation of a single market or economic groups among different countries or regions. The height or manifestation of economic integration is the removal of trade barriers and custom duties, to facilitate free movement of goods and persons and the formulation of common economic policies. Political integration entails the creation of common government. Cultural integration involves cultural exchange and activities that strengthens relationship among countries or regions. Haas (97:24-48) sees integration as thus:

*the process whereby political actors in several district, national settings are persuaded to shift loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new center, whose institutions posses or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing nation states.*

He went further to establish the fact that integration exist in two different levels; National Integration and Regional integration. National integration occurs within a single country while regional integration takes place among different countries.

### Research Questions

1. What was the rationale behind regional integration in Africa?
2. What were the challenges of regional integration in Africa?
3. Does AU advance the integration of the continent into world economy?

### Objective of the study

1. To examine the rationale behind regional integration in Africa.
2. To ascertain the challenges of regional integration in Africa.
3. To ascertain how AU advances the integration of the continent into world economy.

### Evolution of African Union

The formation of AU is traced back to the 1958 Conference of Independent African States which was set up by the representatives of eight African Sovereign States (which includes Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirate). The political leaders of these independent African states unanimously consented to the formation of the first regional organization in Africa, that is the Union of African States (UAS) (Howe, 1959 quoted in Sheriff and Nwokedi, 2016). More to this, the quest for African Unity, self-governance and anti-colonialism necessitated the Lagos Plan of Action, which was an initiative of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), enacted in 1980 by African Heads of State. A decade later, the Abuja Treaty provided strong support for regional integration in Africa. The underlining philosophy of the Abuja Treaty centered on African solidarity, unity and development strategy through industrialization (Marinov, 2013). Prior to the formation of OAU, there existed two groups with different philosophies as to how to organize a regional organization: these are the Casablanca and Moronvia group.

**The Casablanca Group:** This group was made up of leaders from five neutral African States – Nkrumah of Ghana, Tour of Guinea, Nasser of U.A.R, Keita of Mali, King Mohamed V of Morocco (Adeniji, 2010). This group, led by Kwame Nkrumah campaigned for a united states of Africa, with a policy of non-alignment; with single currency (like Euro), common market and military outfit.

**The Monrovia Group:** This group was made up of leaders from Nigeria, Senegal, Ethiopia, Liberia, Tunisia, and Togo; they sought for a con-federal Africa wherein the sovereignty of each African state is maintained. The ideology of the Monrovia group was adopted; and in 1963, leaders from the two groups came together and created the Organization of African Unity. Sequel to the philosophical ideologies of these leaders, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was established in the year 1963 to promote African Unity, eradicate colonial rules and western dominance as well as to foster development and cooperation among the newly independent African States. The OAU charter set out the following objectives: to promote African Unity; to coordinate and intensify efforts to attain good life and wellbeing for Africans; to defend territorial sovereignty of member states; to promote international cooperation, taking cognizance of the provisions of UN charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, the fundamental principles of OAU as enshrined in the Charter are herein outlined: sovereignty of its member states; non-interference in the internal affairs of member states; respect for territorial integrity of member states; peaceful settlement of dispute by negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) recorded great success in decolonization of African States from colonial dominance. The organization witnessed signification contribution to the development of human right laws but its adoption was slow and uneven. The failures of OAU were enormous compared to its achievements. One of the outstanding failures of OAU was its inability to maintain peace, security and stability within the continent. Its powers were too weak and as such, it was unable to manage internal and external conflicts, bad government, human right violation, poverty, poor economic development confronting most African States.

Following the inefficiencies of OAU in addressing these problems highlighted above, a special meeting was organized in Sirte, Libya wherein the declaration for the formation of African Union was adopted (Edward, 2015). This was also in line with the position of the Monrovia group for the creation of a supranational organization in place of OAU. In July, 2002, OAU was officially transformed into AU. However, the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU) is an important moment in the long struggle for African integration, as well as the need for a new African integration approach to globalization. Two important ideologies governed the African Union: the independence of each state and the principle of non-interference. The main objectives of AU are as follows: to strengthen unity and solidarity among African states; to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states; to accelerate economic, political and social integration in Africa; to enhance economic development and growth; promote African peace, security and stability; to strengthen African cooperation with international community etc.

However, African Union since inception plays crucial role in promoting economic, political as well as socio-cultural integration of its member states. One of the most important objectives of African Union is the creation of an integrated and united Africa. In other to achieve wholesome unity among its states, there became need for the co-existence of political and economic integration. This necessitated the need for African Union to collaborate with other Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa. These Regional Economic Communities (RECs) serve as building bloc to facilitate sustainable development and growth in Africa. There are eight Regional Economic Communities and they include: the Southern African Development



Community (SADC), Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Arab Maghreb Union, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), etc. These Regional Economic Communities (RECs) were formed to enhance growth and development in the continent. They aid infrastructural and agricultural development of the region. These RECs also promote political stability within the region and as well facilitates international cooperation of Africa with other regions of the world. Through the efforts made by these Regional Economic Communities (RECs), African Union has been able to establish and create transformative and developmental programs and agency. One of such programs is the establishment of NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development). NEPAD as an agency of AU is saddled with the responsibility to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable growth and development, integrate Africa in the world economy and to accelerate women empowerment.

### **Challenges to Regional Integration in Africa**

It is imperative to note that despite the principles and objectives of regional organizations in Africa (e.g OAU and AU), there are still diverse challenges militating against the success of regional integration in Africa. The African Union Common Repository (2008), explained this as thus:

*integration processes in the continent are hindered not only by the remnants of the political and socio-economic hangovers from colonial past but also from the deficiencies in the political, economic, social and administrative and cultural systems of African countries as well as unforeseen developments in the international economy.*

Other salient issues in African Regionalism are examined as follows:

**Inability of regional organizations to implement its Decisions and Programs:** Regional Economic Communities as well as OAU and AU lack the capacity to implement its policies, decisions and programs. For instance, Assogbari (2018) observed that only 15% of the overall decisions made by the African Union and Regional Economic Communities since inception have been implemented in full. This shows that regional organizations in Africa have not given its best in the actualization of its objectives. In the light of this, Kwasi (2017) argued that:

*AU has failed to influence the political Elites positively. African political system is characterized with seat-tight syndrome. African Union despite its diplomatic disposition has failed to influence African political leaders positively.*

There are lots of African political leaders who played against the dictates of democratic processes in office, yet, got no sanction from AU. For instance: President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda used his influence to manipulate the country's constitution in 2015 and 2017 to suit his selfish desires, but the African Union did nothing to remedy the situation. And as such, he held political power (as the president) for over 32years.

**Overlapping Membership of Regional Organization:** Within the continent, there are eight different Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and most African States are members of

multiple regional bodies. This overlapping membership account for the failure of member states to achieve the essential goals and expectation of regionalism in Africa.

**Problem of Inadequate Funding:** Regional integration processes in the continent has been weakened by lack of adequate funding. Regional Economic Communities as well as Regional Organizations in Africa has been perpetually dependent on external sources. This is because they are not able to generate funds to execute their programs and policies. Craig (2022) gave an apt analysis of financial challenges confronting regional integration in Africa, using AU as a case study; he observed that

*...at the October 2021 Executive Council Meeting, ministers approved an overall AU commission budget for 2022 for just over US \$650 million. This comprises US \$176million for operations, US \$195 million for programmes, and US \$279 million for peace support. International partners were expected to fund 66% of the budget and member states 31%. The remaining 3% was to come from the administrative and maintenance reserve funds.*

This shows the extent at which RECs and AU have remained financially incapacitated to fund its programs and budget, but rather, depend on external sources. Africa's over-reliance on international communities and governments has equally mitigated Africa's economic development and political stability. There is need for build reinforce and strengthen the capacity and authority of AU as a regional to boast integration and cooperation within the continent. This would enable Africa gain right to be heard and yield influence in matters of international importance.

### **Progress in African Regional Integration**

Despite the various challenges of regional integration in Africa, it is not out of place to highlight different areas where great impacts have been recorded in Africa's integration processes. Regional integration offers several benefits to African states since inception. For instance, through the establishment of AfFTA, closer trade and economic links has been created. This policy ensures the removal of customs duties, tariffs and all forms of trade barriers; thereby promoting free movement of goods and persons among neighboring African States. Moreover, the formation of RECs such as the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU), East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Arab Maghreb Union etc is geared towards enhancing sustainable development, corporation and integration among member states.

These regional arrangements facilitate growth and development of integrating member states; enhances industrial and infrastructural development. The programs of RECs and AU as regional bodies in promoting economic integration, has also strengthened political stability and international cooperation of Africa with other continents of the world. Adeniji (2010) noted that "integration is not an end in itself, but a process to support economic growth strategies, greater social equality and democratization". RECs and AU through integration processes, fosters close trade link with integrating states, thereby building Africa's capacity to participate in international politics and relations. The program and policies of AU continuously makes positive impact in the enhancement of the African States, the political classes before the global communities. It is therefore imperative to categorically state here that the African Union as a body for African

states review its policies to align with major concerns of the international community. In view of this, the African Union organizes summits annually and quarterly wherein political leaders and representatives of member states gather to discuss germane issues bothering on Africa at the international communities.

As a way to buttress this, Thomas (2019) states that

*these summits are often used by individual African states, group of states and by African political class as collective measures to mobilize regional and international organization such as the UN to address issues of concern to Africa or protecting member governments and governing elites of Africa from abuse by powerful states in the international system or fighting perceived injustices against Africa as a whole or addressing great power hypocrisy.*

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The liberation of all African states from the colonial masters informed the need to transform the formal Union to a new one in order to address the issue of economic stagnation, lack of unity, poverty issue, security and political instability, human rights violation, and epidemic of deadly diseases in Africa. However, in reality the objectives of the both organizations were similar; it is important to note that despite the challenges of regional integration in Africa, African Union has played major roles in advancing the economic, political and socio-cultural interest of member states.

Africa integration is a pre requisite to the development of AU as a regional body in the continent. Through NEPAD, AU is building strong relationship within Africa; partnering with organization like the African Development Bank to implement the programs of NEPAD in the area of regional infrastructure, agriculture, regional trade, health, nutrition, education, social development and finance will fast track the integration of African states within the continent.

Regional integration processes in Africa would record greater achievement if African Union is well structured to prioritize the wellbeing and needs of integrating states; prioritize the interest of Africa as a continent and build formidable structures for the implementation of its policies and programs.

More so, African Union as a regional institution should position itself as a mechanism to facilitate the integration of the continent into the world economy; promote mutual benefit among integrating member states.



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