CHAPTER 11.
THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

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1. Background

The efforts by African States to bring about the economic and political integration of the continent date back to the period preceding the adoption of the OAU Charter in May 1963. At the time of concluding the OAU Charter, emphasis was placed on attaining political integration. The African leaders agreed on uniting Africa through initially the political liberation of the territories under foreign colonial rule. The expectation was that after the political liberation of the whole continent was attained, it would be easier to integrate the continent economically.

However from 1968 onwards, African leaders started taking concrete steps to launch continental economic integration. Several OAU Sessions of Assembly of Heads of State made declarations that culminated in the adoption of the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos in 1980 which called for the creation of an African Economic Community. The Treaty establishing the African Economic Community1 was signed in 1991 and came into force in 1994, by which time many Regional Economic Communities (also referred to as RECs) had already been established under their own treaties.

1 The AEC Treaty is also known as the Abuja Treaty as it was signed in Abuja (Nigeria), on 3rd June 1991.

There are eight major Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa which are recognised by the African Union namely:

(a) Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) established in 1975;
(b) Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) established initially as the Preferential Trade Area of Eastern and Southern States in 1981 and transformed into COMESA in 1994;
(c) Southern African Development Community (SADC) established in the current form in 1992 initially established in 1980 as a Development Coordination Conference (SADCC);
(d) Economic Community for Central African States (ECCAS) established in 1983;
(e) Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) established in 1989;
(f) East African Community (EAC) established in 1999;
(g) Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) established in 1996 initially established in 1986 as an Authority for dealing with Drought and Desertification (IGADD); and
(h) Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) established in 1999.

Each of the RECs (apart from UMA) has signed the Protocol on Relations between the RECs and the African Union. However each of the RECs in Africa has a different historical background that influences its current role in the integration of Africa.

Six other groupings have an integration agenda that can contribute towards the African Economic Community. These are: Mano River Union (MRU), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), West African Monetary Union (UEMOA), Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), Economic Community of the Great Lakes (CEPGL) and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). However all these other institutions have not set as their principal objective to contribute as building blocs to the attainment of the African Economic Community and are considered more or less as subsets of the eight recognised communities.

There are many other institutions in Africa that can also contribute to the integration of Africa but which do not have as their principal mission to be building blocs of the AEC.