ECOWAS: Is it a Countervailing Power for Economic Independence?

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SINCE THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR there has been a growing awareness among the nations of the world that regional economic integration is necessary for the promotion of economic development and intra-regional trade. The signing of the treaty of Rome in 1957, which established the European Economic Community, set an example of regional economic grouping which has not been ignored by the developing countries.

In the African context, the emergence of independent African States has brought into focus the economic limitations of national boundaries inherited at independence, boundaries which disrupt the continuities of trade, flows of factors of production and also common economic policies. Although the West African countries fully appreciate the trade-restraining effect of their national boundaries, yet they have been very slow indeed to respond to the challenges which these boundaries posed. This is a case where political sensitivity has overridden clearly perceived economic advantages.

The United Nations General Assembly in many of its resolutions, has urged all developing countries to continue their efforts at fostering regional and sub-regional integration in order to expand trade among themselves. Also, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) since its inception has emphasized the need for developing countries to make real efforts to avail themselves of the opportunities presented for trade expansion and economic co-operation among themselves, both to foster their economic growth and also strengthen their overall position in relation to the developed countries. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has not ignored the compelling economic necessity for cooperation within its region. It believes that the harmonization of industrial development within each sub-region of Africa or within a group of countries is the answer to Africa’s development problems. The considerable amount of research on the economics of integration which the ECA has done in the regions of Africa strengthens its case.
A Brief History

It is significant that the need for economic co-operation in Africa was felt long before the movement for political independence became a reality for most African countries. The Pan-African Congress of 1945, held in Manchester, after noting the systematic exploitation of the economic resources of West Africa by the imperial powers, recommended *inter alia*, the establishment of a West African Economic Union. In apparent support of this view, the first conference of the political parties in Africa held in Accra in December 1958, also called for the removal of customs and other restrictions on trade between African States and the conclusion of multinational payments agreements, with a view to enhancing economic exchanges and consequent establishment of an African Common Market. The Organization of African Unity, in May 1973, at its tenth summit conference in Addis Ababa, adopted an African Declaration on Co-operation, Development and Economic Independence which, *inter alia*, urged African countries to step up inter-African co-operation particularly in the monetary and communications fields.

The pre-independence co-operative movements did not result in any important action. However, after the achievement of political independence West African countries intensified their efforts. Good examples are the West African Economic Community (CEAO) and the various bilateral trade agreements that exist today between the French-speaking West African States. But of great importance is the West African Clearing House which was launched on 1 July 1976, by the West African Sub-Regional Committee of the Association of African Central Banks, the first such Clearing House to be established in Africa. It takes care of the problems posed by the existence of different currency zones in West Africa by providing a facility through which members of the Clearing House could economize on the use of foreign exchange reserves and transfer costs. It would seem that both the Clearing House and ECOWAS stand out clearly as two very important post-independence co-operative schemes in that they embrace most of the countries in West Africa, thus transcending linguistic and cultural barriers.

Despite this effort, the West African intra-regional trade is, to a large extent, still divided into two main zones, the French Franc Zone and the Sterling Area; and the intra-regional trade is still very small. It would appear that many of the factors which hindered intra-regional and inter-zonal trade before independence are still as strong as they were. Some of these are lack of adequate infrastructure by way of road, rail, telecommunications and other links for the movement of goods and persons, vested interests in the preservation of the *status quo*, the persistence of semi-colonial ties, the stronger economic pull towards past colonial masters in Europe than to other African countries in the region, the competitive structure of industries and natural resources, shortage of basic statistical data for reliable assessment of probable repercussions of the integration process, lack of political will to surrender some elements of the national sovereignty to a supra-national authority with powers to take economic