
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Regional Integration and The Theoretical Lapses

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ABSTRACT: *Regional Integration has many contending theoretical approaches. Once adopted, it is expected that it will lead to the attainment of the objectives of the regional body. ECOWAS adopted many approaches including Functionalism, Neo-functionalism and Inter-governmentalism. This paper seeks to explain if these theories were appropriate at the time they were adopted and to what extent the theories have influenced the performance of the ECOWAS. The study adopted qualitative approach while descriptive research method was applied. The findings revealed that ECOWAS, at inception, adopted David Mitrany's functionalist theory which stipulates that issues of low politics should be addressed first if integration is to be achieved fast. Midway, the regional body diverted to Ernest Haas' neo-functional theory of integration which theory stipulates that for cooperation that will lead to integration to be achieved, high political issues should first be addressed. Both theories believe in spill-over, that is, once either of the theories is applied and achieved, it will lead to the other. The application of these two theories in addition to the theory of inter-governmentalism inappropriately has resulted in integration stagnation of ECOWAS because of conflict of functions. Integration is such a complex project which should not be concentrated in single heads but base on necessary institutions for it to strive. It is therefore recommended that the ECOWAS should start working toward achieving political stability of member states while pursuing economic integration. It does not matter if that is tantamount to neo-functionalism, what is important is the creation of necessary economic environments for regional integration to strive.*

KEYWORDS: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), regional integration, theoretical lapses

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 for the purpose of promoting trade, cooperation and sustainable development throughout West Africa. The signing of the ECOWAS Treaty in Lagos on May 28, 1975, was in response to the plague of poverty and underdevelopment bedeviling West Africa, and as a result, practically provided the much-desired framework for the realization of rapid and sustainable socio-political and economic development throughout the sub-region. To date, the following are member states: Republic of

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and the Republic of Togo (Alaba, 2006).

All these countries differ considerably in their colonial history, natural resources endowment and institutional and administrative systems. At the one end of the scale is Nigeria, rich in human and natural resources, and at the other end is Burkina Faso with poor human and natural resources. These remarkable differences significantly and constantly shape their regional relations and their ability to participate meaningfully in regional economic integration programmes (Atai and Ita, 2018; Titus and Ita, 2019).

The ECOWAS Treaty provided for a gradual establishment of a customs union, common external tariff and harmonization of economic and financial policies of member states within a period of 15 years. It also made provision for compensation for losses encountered by member states in the course of implementing the provisions of the treaty (Alaba, 2006). The original treaty was revised in 1993, to broaden economic integration and increase political participation and cooperation throughout the sub-region, the revised treaty sought to attain an integrated common market and a single monetary union with an institutionalized Parliament for stronger political cooperation and participation within the sub-region.

One underlying assumption is the fact that integration positively affects the gross national products of member countries, as the resultant enlargement of the size of the market increases efficiency and greater advantages of economies of scale within the integrating area. Thus, as competition increases, better specialization is ensured as producers concentrate on areas in which they have the greatest advantage, thus better positioned to exploit large scale economies while at the same time, restructuring the regional economy to enhance the production base of the region. Another contention lies in the argument that the enlarged market offered by integration will sufficiently sustain heavy industries and better ensure the least unit cost of production which will in turn stimulate demand and consumption as well as increased investment and economic growth.

Similarly, as better allocation of resources is attained, prices should go down in favour of consumers in a way that is not detrimental to producers, thus, benefiting both the producers and consumers. Added to the theoretical benefit is the argument that the enlarged market size from integration will ultimately lead to increased trade within the region. As tariffs are eliminated, free flow of trade between member states increases, leading to trade creation as member states trade more with each other. In West Africa, economic integration is also viewed as an 'illustration of Pan-Africanism' and indeed, a practical step toward the economic liberation of the African continent. Some of the states such as Nigeria viewed integration as a veritable instrument for ensuring not only regional peace and security but also 'national security'.

In general terms, it is hoped that economic integration in West Africa will not only usher in sustainable socio-economic and political development, but will to a large extent, provide a solid platform for a united front in negotiations, involving the region and other regions of the world. Their collective aim is to support and enhance socio-economic development of member states and

the welfare of their citizens by promoting and coordinating trade, increased cooperation and self-reliance among them; and this they hoped to achieve by ensuring a common policy regime geared toward economic and financial stability through the institutional framework of the ECOWAS.

The mission, goals and objectives of the ECOWAS as put forward in the ECOWAS Treaty of 1975 are as below:

- The elimination as between the Member States of customs duties and other charges of equivalent effect in respect of the importation and exportation of goods;
- The abolition of quantitative and administrative restrictions on trade among the member states;
- The establishment of common customs tariff and a common commercial policy towards third countries;
- The abolition as between the member states of the obstacles to the free movement of persons, services and capital.
- The harmonization of the agricultural policies and the promotion of common projects in the member states notably in the fields of marketing, research and agro-industrial enterprises;
- The implementation of schemes for the joint development of transport, communications, energy and other infrastructural facilities as well as the evolution of a common policy in these fields;
- The harmonization of the economic and industrial policies of the member states and the elimination of disparities in the level of development of the member states;
- The harmonization, required for the proper functioning of the community, of the monetary policies of the member states;
- The establishment of a Fund for Cooperation, Compensation and Development; and
- Such other activities calculated to further the aims of the community as the member states may from time to time undertake in common (ECOWAS Treaty, 1975).

This study therefore, seeks to explain if the theories adopted by the ECOWAS in the process of integration were a step in the right direction and whether it has positively or otherwise influenced the performance of the regional body.

ECOWAS and Inter-governmentalism

Inter-governmentalism could be simplified as the relationship between governments. It came as a reaction to Neo-functionalism and has its root in neo-realism and Neo-liberalism. Neo-realism believes that the distribution of capabilities between member states induces differences of power, while Neo-liberalism focused on the interaction of states interest. An inter-governmental view was put forward by Putnam, who viewed regional governance as a two level game played by the member states i.e. at the national level, office holders build coalitions among domestic groups, while at the regional level, they bargain in ways that enhance their position at the domestic level by satisfying demands of key interest groups.

As postulated by Rosamond (2001), the mostly referred version of inter-governmentalism is Moravcisk's liberal inter-governmentalism thesis which is influenced by the works of Keohane on

neo-liberal institutionalism. Moravcsik (1993) argued that integration goes as far as member states want it to go and regional institutions exist due to the deliberate will of member states to satisfy their interests and are instruments for achieving member states' objectives. The regional level is the location where member states strategically bargain their interests, defined within domestic level negotiations. Inter-governmentalists scholars have argued to somehow strengthen neo-functionalists beliefs. Lindberg for example, states that member states' behaviour in negotiations at the regional level, gaining autonomy and space of manoeuvre in relation to their domestic constituencies, could also account for the success or otherwise of regional integration.

Others criticise (liberal) inter-governmentalism for being an approach rather than a theory (Rosamond, 2001), because Moravcsik failed to define the circumstances in which this theory could be empirically refuted - a criticism similar to that experienced by neo-functionalists. He also argued that Moravcsik's approach failed to account for the day-to-day policy-making where bargaining is not the norm and he also does not account for interactions among institutions and the impact of membership (Pollack, 2001). This is similar to the situation in ECOWAS in the sense that the bargaining powers were concentrated on the heads of government of member states.

The theory of inter-governmentalism places high premium on the bargaining skills of heads of state to be able to bring about integration. Its basic assumption is that integration takes place within domestic politics and is entirely a logical consequence of intergovernmental negotiations while downgrading the importance of supra-national institutions in the process of integration. To the inter-governmentalist, the heads of state who achieve greater success in this bargaining competition are those of the large state who buy off the small states and ensure that harmony is maintained with the interest of large state holding sway. The theory however postulates that weak states would need international institutions as they are confronted with more expansive and complex issues. ECOWAS have relied on the bargaining powers of the heads of governments to achieve integration ignoring the roles of institutions in enforcing rules and regulations as required in a complex organization such as hers.

The theory has low analytical value in explaining causes of success or failure of integration generally. Proponents of the theory place little importance on the 'behind the scene' events that take place before inter-state bargains. Its backlash lies squarely in its lack of explanatory power and core preconditions from which hypothesis could be generated. It is therefore doubtful that it could be adopted for the study of the process of integration of the ECOWAS.

Finally, its transformation and sharpening into liberal inter-governmentalism based on a two-pronged approach to integration does not go a long way in accounting for the integration process of the ECOWAS. Its assumption that the outcome of inter-state bargains are results of relative bargaining power of governments does not hold much water in the arguments of the ECOWAS. The role of supranational institutions in bringing about integration especially in Europe has not been fully appreciated by advocates of inter-governmentalism. The formation of the ECOWAS was much broader than the domestic politics of the members states of the regional body. Inter-governmentalism has not helped ECOWAS to achieve its goals. The approach is not in tandem with

what other regional bodies applied and recorded huge successes. EU, ASEAN etc are cases in point. ECOWAS relied so much on the ability of the heads of governments of member states to achieve regional integration.

ECOWAS and Neo-functionalism

Neo-functionalism advocates “top-down” approach to integration. They reject functionalist idea that global cooperation and inter-governmental organizations (IGOS) necessarily need to evolve from cooperation through IGOS that deal with functional issues, like delivering mail, and progressively build up to cooperation and IGOs related to security and other critical political issues. In other words, neo-functionalists are sceptical about the functionalist belief that non-political cooperation will lead to the elimination of international conflict and self-interest state action. They also worry that the functionalists’ evolutionary approach will not move quickly enough to head many of the world’s looming problems (Rourke, 2008). Instead, neo-functionalists argue that economic integration (functionalism) generates a political dynamic that drives integration further, for closer economic ties require more political coordination in order to operate effectively and eventually lead to political integration as well through a process called spill-over (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2009). The argument of neo-functionalists as stated above is that if IGOs are created and given resource and the authority they need to address central global problems, then in time, countries and their people will learn to trust and govern through these IGOS and possibly even shift their primary sense of political identity and allegiance to them (Rourke, 2008).

Neo-functionalist theory therefore holds that economic integration (functionalism) generates a “spill-over” effect, resulting from increased political integration. The theory of neo-functionalism was developed by Ernst Haas. He described integration as a process whereby “political actors are persuaded to shift their loyalties towards a new centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states” (cited in Jackson and Sorensen, 2003). He rejected Mitrany’s notion that ‘technical’ matters can be separated from politics. He said instead integration can be achieved by getting self-interested political elites to intensify their cooperation. Haas explained that ‘functional’ process of integration depends on the notion of ‘spillover’ when increased cooperation in one area leads to increased cooperation in other areas. Spillover, according to him, would ensure that political elites march inexorably towards the promotion of integration.

Neo-functionalist theory was centred on some core ideas. It is the Neo-functionalist idea that the society was composed of various groups of interests and the integration process would better satisfy them. Essential for the neo-functional thesis is the idea of spillover according to which integration would deepen from economic to political and the result would be an integrated union of states (and their societies) which would acquire the characteristics of domestic political systems (Rosamond, 2001). Another key element was the existence of a high authority (above the nation states which would give the integration process the right direction. A high authority which wrongly guides member states would be in the view of neo-functionalists the definite element that drives that given union to failure.

The integration process would be led by technocratic elites and therefore governance of the union would not be based on ideological grounds, but on pragmatic satisfaction of interests and on technocratic expertise. Edmund Haas, the founding father of neo-functionalism based his initial thesis on the idea of loyalty. In this sense, political spillover would be accomplished through a process of loyalty transference from the nation state to the high authority (or authorities) (Rosamond, 2001). Although initially the process of spillover was regarded as one directional, many scholars have also accepted the idea of spillback. They argued the fact that integration could stop or slow down further integration due to the pressure that it causes among member states.

The critique of neo-functionalism is rich and varied. One of the ideas mostly criticized is that of the decreased role and authority of the member state. Empirical evidence indicated the opposite and even ethical arguments were evoked such as those that the state was the guardian of key values of liberty and justice in the society (Rosamond, 2001). The idea of spillover, particularly the fact that economic integration would lead to political integration was challenged by various critics, most laying down the basis of inter-governmentalism through their critique.

Neo-functionalism by Haas (1970) differs from functionalism in a number of important respects. First, it is a theory of regional rather than global integration. Second, neo-functionalists have been more concerned with the institution building than the original functionalists which focused on economic issues. Central to the neo-functionalist view is that once commenced, sector integration will lead to a spill-over effect into other cognate areas of activity. It is the belief of Neo-functionalist that nation-states are the supra-national regional - institutions which spin the webs binding integration foster the growth of interest groups and promote closer cooperation between them and fellow technocrats in member states, thus promoting alliance across national boundaries and adding to the integrative momentum.

Central institutions and policies would have to be present and assigned the capacity to initiate social and economic processes thereby going beyond the normal mandate of an international organization. Tasks assigned to the institutions should be expansive - member states need to perceive some congruence between their interests and the project associated with the new institutions and common policies. The second process is based on the belief that goodwill, pursuit of common interests or common good would ultimately lead to greater integration. As the term implies, neo-functionalism is a variant of functionalism. Both theories are based upon the view that integration precedes best by working from areas of mutual and overlapping interests in a piecemeal. Both theories assume that people's loyalties to their existing nation-states will be steadily eroded as they see that integration has many positive benefits that these can best be obtained and sustained by new nexus.

The theory explained above is very significant because it enables us to explain if the formational approaches adopted by the ECOWAS were appropriate or otherwise. It should be noted that the ECOWAS founding fathers desired to achieve economic unity for its members. It adopted the Functionalist approach as they tried to address low political issues with the expectant spill-over to high political issues.

The ECOWAS has not achieved regional Economic integration. Today, it has shifted its theoretical approach to Neo-functionalism by trying to address political issues in the region. This is not as a result of direct spill-over from Functionalist approach adopted at the inception but because of conscious effort to resolve political crises in the region. This is evidenced in the war in Liberia, Sierra-Leone and recently in Mali. Senegal, Niger and very recently Gabon, are currently threading the path of war if their threats and warning against foreign interventions are anything to go by the ECOWAS initially adopted the functionalist theory but in practice pursued issues of high politics. Presently the body adopting two theoretical approaches (Functionalism and Neo-functionalism) in its quest to unite the region politically and economically.

ECOWAS and Functionalism

Functionalist theory espouses “bottom up” evolutionary approach to integration. It springs from the idea that the way to global cooperation (integration) is through evolutionary approach that begins with limited pragmatic cooperation on narrow, non-political issues (Rourke, 2008). According to Goldstein and Pevehouse (2009:353), functionalists argue that technological and economic development lead to more and more supranational structures as states seek practical means to fulfil necessary functions such as delivering mail from one country to another or coordinating the use of rivers that cross borders.

As these connections become denser and flows faster, functionalists predicted that states would be drawn together into stronger international structures. They argue that each such instance of cooperation serves as a building block to achieve broader cooperation on more and more, politically sensitive issues along the path to comprehensive cooperation or even global government. Functionalists support their view about cooperation by pointing to the thousands of IGOS, multilateral treaties, NGOs, and other vehicles that have been pragmatically put in place to deal with specific international concerns.

The development of functionalism as a theory of integration is traced to David Mitrany during the Second World War. Mitrany (1966) argued that greater interdependence in the form of transnational ties between countries could lead to peace. Mitrany believed, somewhat naively, that cooperation should be arranged by technical experts, not by politicians (Jackson and Sorensen, 2003). The experts would devise solutions to common problems in various functional areas such as transport, communication, finance etc. He argued that technical and economic collaboration would expand when the participants discovered the mutual benefits that could be obtained from it. When citizens saw the welfare improvements that resulted from efficient collaboration in international organizations, they would transfer their loyalty from the state to international organizations. In that way, economic interdependence would lead to political integration and to peace.

Functionalism espouses international cooperation in specific areas such as communications, trade, travel, health, or environmental protection activity. It is often symbolized by the specialized agencies, such as the World Health Organisation, associated with the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, European Union, etc. As opposed to the sole concerns of the discipline of international relations with security and conflict studies, functionalism arose as an operative

philosophy, which visualized a gradual evolution of a peaceful, unified and cooperate world. Mitrany's celebrated work "A Working Peace System" gives a clear exposition of his vision of building peace in the international system. The functionalists do not aim at creating a world federal structure, rather they seek to build 'peace by pieces' through transnational organizations, that emphasizes the 'sharing of sovereignty', instead of its total surrender. It is a 'bottom up' approach for building cooperative links among states.

Beginning with the assumption that wars are the products of crudely organized international system, which is founded on suspicion, anarchy, sovereignty, and national exclusivism which, in turn, considers war as an accepted means of settling international disputes, functionalists opine that governments will not surrender their national interests and will not dismantle easily. Therefore, they prescribe a realistic means of attaining idealistic ends. They propose a gradual approach towards regional or global unity, which will aim to isolate and, at the end, will render obsolete the stubborn institutional structures of international system, the nation-states.

Functionalists lay emphasis on the socio-economic and welfare needs rather than on the political needs. Functionalism prescribes the development of piecemeal non-political cooperative organizations involving sectors such as economic, technical, scientific, social and cultural. These are regarded as the functional sectors. The basic calculation that works behind such assumption, as Coulombis and Wolfe (1986) put it, is that it is easier to establish narrow-in-scope functional organizations (in sectors such as energy production and distribution, transportation and communications control, health protection and improvement, labour standards and exchanges and customs unions) than to develop grandiose political institutions that jeopardize the national sovereignty of member states.

This is the path adopted by ECOWAS by not embarking in the opening-up of roads network that would aid transportation and communication in the region. Such actions, as Groom (1991) observes, would be "international, sub-national and transnational according to their needs". This, Mitrany felt, would to some degree neutralize the antagonisms of the state system by the growth of crosscutting ties, and the development of a transnational community would emerge with different people working together for different purposes.

The outcomes of such functional organizations, which are less opposed by national governments because they revolve around non-political issues and most of the time are mutually beneficial for the participating states, has a 'spillover' effect. This means if an international cooperative venture works to mutual advantages in the sector of coal and steel production as in the EU, then it whets the appetite of and creates additional administrative requirements for participating governments to enter into cooperative ventures in related functional areas, such as transportation, pollution control and eventually to political unification (Coulombis and Wolfe, 1986).

Such 'spillover' effect will be reinforced by the 'learning process' and ultimately will affect the basic unit of international system, the states, the assumption being that, with the accumulation of a large variety of functional organizations linking people and their interests across national

boundaries, a transformation in both national attitudes and institutions will take place. Finally, transnational and supranational attitudes and institutions would render the nation-states useless. People would voluntarily transfer their allegiance and loyalty from individual states to transnational units leading to the emergence of a new 'functional' society with chief focus on 'functional' rather than 'territorial'. Therefore, following Mitrany's vision of functionalism, expanding network of international relations and agencies would erase political divisions and integrate the interests and lives of all nation-states. Hence, according to Mitrany (1966), there will be 'one solid international block of fiats' instead of 'detached national houses'.

Functionalism, however, was not without criticisms. Taylor, who wrote on international co-operation, contends that functionalism "is not and never intended to be, a systematic descriptive analysis". Functionalists are regarded as piecemeal social engineers and not the architect or purveyors of blueprints. Claude (1971) is critical about the length of time involved in the process of bringing about integration. He says that functionalism is not in a hurry, and its claim to offer hope to the world is implicitly based upon the supposition that a long period is both necessary and available for working out solutions to the problems". Many scholars fail to acknowledge the fact that cooperation exists in the social and economic fields in other words, the non-political sectors. However, such kind of separation between high politics and low politics is hardly tenable. Political issues seem to shape the social or economic activities of the structures of the international system. As pointed out by Kegley and Wittkopf, (1981), the reality is that technical cooperation is often more severely impacted by political considerations than the other way-round. The withdrawal from and the subsequent re-entry of the United States into the International Labour Organization (ILO) because of the politicized nature of the organization dramatized the primacy of politics. Indeed, functionalism makes the naive assumption that technical (functional) undertakings and political affairs can be separated.

These facts seemed to have been discovered by the ECOWAS of late when it tried to reconsider its approach to regional integration process by adding political consideration because of the need to resolve political crisis in member states. Despite such criticisms, it cannot be denied that functionalism was perhaps the inspiration behind the integrative process in ECOWAS, in Europe and also the functioning of international organizations like the United Nations along with its specialized agencies.

As a matter of emphasis, functionalism begins its analysis with a simple proposition that the provision of common needs can unite peoples across state boundaries. Many functionalist writers saw this as a welfare dimension in international relations. Here, some writers including Mitrany (1966) advocate a complete avoidance of issues of high politics (security, diplomacy, etc) and a full concentration on issues of low politics (economic issues) if integration is to be fully and quickly achieved. Functionalists believed that loyalties could be transferred away from the nation-state towards a new functional organization. This would occur because people would see that the provision of goods and services now depend upon transnational cooperation and, they would perceive that their best interests were now being served by the new arrangement. According to Akpuru-Aja (1998), functionalism holds that states which have common interests, values and

experiences can easily transfer their sovereign will by a function and not formula in the realization of set goals and objectives in the hope that in time the integrating states would shift from working together in certain technical areas or contest to creating a political union as a higher level of cooperating in specific, usually non-political issues, states can learn to trust one another in stream of time where cases of political conflict are eliminated. Functionalism makes the reduction of extreme forms of nationalism to pave way for greater mutual trust and confidence.

Also, functionalists see a kind of economic and political entanglements occurring as status increased their cooperation to meet functional tasks. As States became more independent it would be increasingly difficult to pull out of these arrangements and increasingly costly to remain outside for any length of time. In this way the functionalists anticipate the idea of spillover which is a distinctive feature of the neo-functionalists' literature.

The functionalist approach was adopted by the founding fathers of the ECOWAS. This theoretical approach has not brought about the desired economic transformation of member countries of the ECOWAS because its belief in "spill-over" has failed to occur in the ECOWAS. Also, the theory is silent on what could be the possible cause of the ECOWAS stagnation. Perhaps it would have been appropriate if ECOWAS had adopted Neo-functional approach at inception because it would have enabled the resolution of crisis in some member states as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc.

CONCLUSION

The founders of the ECOWAS at inception adopted inter-governmentalism as a theoretical approach to achieving economic integration in West Africa. They believed in the abilities of the Heads of governments of member state for integration. Today, the aim of the founding fathers of ECOWAS has not been achieved. This is because regional integration (such as ECOWAS) is too complex to be concentrated in single heads. Institutionalism would have been a better alternative right from inception. This approach in recent years seemed to be adopted by the ECOWAS. The formation of institutions like ECOWAS Parliament (EP) and the West African Common Industrial Policy (WACIP) among others is a step in the right direction. Today, the ECOWAS is pursuing both Economic and political integrations of member states simultaneously, ignoring the views of Ernest Haas and David Mitrany which say that integration is better achieved by either first addressing political issues with the resultant spillover to economic integration or by first addressing economic issues with the hope of achieving spillover to political integration. The adoption of Functionalism/Neo-functionalism and subsequent pursuit of both economic and political integrations simultaneously resulted in the insignificant and/or stagnation of integration in the ECOWAS. This is because politically, when war is waged between nation states (as in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Mali), it leads to the destruction of economic structures needed for integration. Will functionalism actually lead to economic integration? There is no clear-cut answer to the question. It depends on the extent of the political will of ECOWAS to ensure the political stability of member states before pursuing economic integration. It does not matter if that amount to neo-functionalism.

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