Sub-Regionalism Within the African Union: Does It Enhance Regional Integration?

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Abstract

The African continent renewed its commitment to regional integration in the post-1990s period in keeping with the global changes at the time. As part of this revitalization, the Organisation of African Union was transformed to the African Union which has broader aims, and sub-regionalism was also embraced with the establishment of regional economic communities that act as stepping stones to greater regional integration. Both continental and sub-regional efforts have placed emphasis on economic integration with states as key players in the integration projects. The relationship between these two groupings is complex as the AU, which is meant to coordinate the activities of sub-regions, has little authority over the overlapping sub-regions. The sub-regions have seen some progress not only in economic cooperation related areas, but also in their ability to develop some areas of functional cooperation. However, these gains have not translated at the continental level. This paper argues that a regional integration agenda, largely centered on economic integration, has not ushered in the expected results and makes a case for functional integration as a distinct goal for regional integration. This is a more balanced approach that allows countries to share in non-economic benefits by belonging to a regional grouping.

Background

Over the years, especially after the 1990 period because of globalization and other related events including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent entrenchment of neoliberalism, countries have sought to manage their affairs differently from the 1990s era. An impetus was placed on regionalism to help countries deal with these changes. The African continent was not left behind during this transition period. While regionalism prior to such changes focused on protectionism, under the new conditions, a new regionalism that was more outward looking was sought to enhance national operating spaces that were increasingly being chipped away by global processes. This paper will analyze regionalism on the African continent, evaluating sub-regionalism and its role within the AU and greater integration. In addition to analyzing the emergence, roles and relationships between the sub regions and the AU, the paper will make a case for greater functional cooperation within the sub regions.

In order to achieve the goal of greater continental integration, playing a more significant role in global affairs, enhancing competitiveness and meeting the challenges of a rapidly developing world, a move was made from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU) which had broader aims. Not only did this happen, but in the same period, there were deliberate efforts to enhance sub-regions and regional economic communities within the continent as well. This was in keeping with the gradualist ideas of Nyerere and others that the building of regional unions should precede the creation of the United States of Africa. These efforts were all based on economics, and to this end, both the 1980 Lagos Plan of Action for the Development of Africa and the 1991 treaty to establish the African Economic Community (AEC) or the Abuja Treaty recognized the creation and continued roles of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as the basis for African integration. The treaty stated that the Community should be established in six stages with all involving the RECs over a duration not exceeding 34 years (1994-2027). The first stage, for example, embodied in Article 6 paragraph 2 (a) states, "Strengthening of existing regional economic communities and, within a period not exceeding five (5) years from the date of entry into force of this Treaty, establishing economic communities in regions where they do not exist" (Organisation of African Unity, 1991).

The Abuja Treaty recognized five main regions in Africa: West, East, North, South and Central Africa. There are eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on the African continent recognized by the AU, each was established under a separate regional treaty. They are:

- Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) comprised of Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Mauritania,
- Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) including Burundi, Comoros, D. R. Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe,
- Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) comprised of Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo and Tunisia,
- East African Community (EAC) including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi,
- Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) including Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and Sao Tome and Principe,
- Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo,
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) made up of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda,
- Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) comprised of Angola, Botswana, DR Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Paradoxically, the RECs and the regions are not effectively aligned, which means that some RECs straddle two or more regions complicating the regional configurations.

Within these main eight RECs therefore, there are overlapping sub-regions. In West Africa, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), comprised of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo and the Mano River Union (MRU), coexist with ECOWAS. In Central Africa, in addition to the main REC, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), there are two sub-groupings, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL), consisting of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda. East and Southern Africa share four main RECs: COMESA, EAC, IGAD, SADC with two additions in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). North Africa is host to the two RECs of UMA and CEN-SAD. Members of CEN- SADs straddle other economic communities and sub-regions. These interrelationships depict the complex nature of regionalism and sub-regionalism on the African continent, a kind of *spaghetti bowl*, to use Jagdish Bhagwati's phrase, organization of states in their efforts to take advantage of regionalism (Bhagwati & Krueger, 1995). These overlaps have certain implications including competing commitments with varied rules resulting in a higher cost of intra-African trade, and resource and effort wastage due to duplication effectively undermining integration (Ndomo 2009). This obscures, and effectively renders, counteractive the goals of integration.

At the sub-regional level, there are a myriad of networks navigating socio-economic community agendas, however, at the supranational level, there is the African Union which is a greater regional institution concerned with the integration agenda of the entire continent. It is important to mention that given the sheer size of the continent, it has always been the aim of the AU to utilize the sub-regions or RECs as stepping stones to greater African integration. This is reflected in the AU's adoption of the 2008 Protocol on Relations between the RECs and the AU which establishes context for the coordination of the functions and activities of the AU and RECs. The AU, which is still an intergovernmental body, however, does not have much clout or ability to flex its muscles over sovereign states or sub-regions. There is no coordinated African foreign policy, for example, no articulation of a common position when dealing with external actors on an economic agenda. In trade issues, this has allowed the EU to dissect the continent or use sub-regions during recent negotiations of the economic partnership agreements (EPAs). This further complicates regional integration and unity within the continent. In this case, the sums of the parts seem to be greater than the whole where the AU is the parent yet the children have all the say.

The Role of the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Given the complex nature of sub-regionalism and the reality that countries adopt positions or join groups that will suit their self-interest, makes the task of the AU as an overarching institution even more difficult. This reality also calls for the AU to act as a whip exercising authority over members, a role which it currently does not play. The Constitutive Act implies this authority, but the reality is far from it. This will be discussed later in this paper. The institutions such as the Pan African Parliament, the Court of Justice, and the Commission are weak with limited effectiveness due largely to financial constraints. The specialized committees together with the executive council were set up to perform executive duties in an attempt to reconcile the objectives of continental unity and the socio-economic and political realities of the continent, and have had some successes. However, their overall effectiveness leaves a lot to be desired.

The RECs on the other hand have been able to develop areas of functional cooperation. Those areas are not directly linked to economic integration that has not been reached in the continental arena. Functional cooperation according to Girvan (2007) involves sharing services and undertaking joint activities in different areas in order to reduce costs and achieve synergies. These areas include: transportation, culture, education, telecommunications, health and related areas. This is understandable since sub-regions are easier to manage. Moreover, sub-regions have overtime had a history of cooperation that strengthened the bonds of community members in ways not achieved at the continental level given the diversity. In East Africa, examples of these include the East African Railways, telecommunications and posts, and the East African Common Services Organization. Within all the sub-regions, historically, there has been free movement of people which is not the case continentwide with different barriers in place between countries. Formal functional cooperation has generated significant gains for the different regions. Functional cooperation was also pursued at the REC levels because of a perception that the emphasis of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community and later the AU on economic integration would unevenly benefit different countries. This is exemplified in Article 4(1) of the Abuja Treaty (Organisation of African Unity, 1991) where the objectives are set out as follows:

a. To promote economic, social and cultural development and the integration of African economies in order to increase economic self-reliance and promote an endogenous and self-sustained development;
b. To establish, on a continental scale, a framework for the development, mobilization and utilization of the human and material resources of Africa in order to achieve a self-reliant development;
c. To promote co-operation in all fields of human endeavor in order to raise the standard of living of African peoples, and maintain and enhance economic stability, foster close and peaceful relations among Member States, and contribute to the progress, development and the economic integration of the Continent; and
d. To coordinate and harmonize policies among existing and future economic communities in order to foster the gradual establishment of the Community.

The setting of such goals is good for galvanizing action to the wider cause of African development. This paper however argues that an agenda centered largely on economic integration will not be very beneficial. A more targeted approach to other areas including functional cooperation would provide a clearer level of focus and allow for easier implementation. Some elements of functional cooperation are included in the objectives (social and cultural development). In Article 4(paragraph 2e), there are 16 ways that have been delineated to reach the objectives. 90% of these speak to economic integration. One of the very few that speaks to other functional areas including culture, human resources and education can be found in subsection 4(2)e, and refers to "*The harmonisation of national policies in order to promote Community activities, particularly in the fields of agriculture, industry, transport and communications, energy, natural resources, trade, money and finance, human resources, education, culture, science and* *technology*" (Organisation of African Unity, 1991). This is the emphasis that was mentioned previously.

Functional Cooperation

This is very unlike other regional groups such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) established in 1973 under the Treaty of Chaguaramas which embraced functional cooperation as a separate matter and one of its objectives since its inception. The other two objectives of CARICOM are economic integration of the member states by establishing a common market regime and coordination of foreign policies. It has seen the most progress in achievement of the objective of functional cooperation and has led to sustainable development in areas related to health, education, sports, regional security, disaster preparedness and culture. Examples include the University of the West Indies, the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) that has established a regional system of examinations, the West Indies Cricket Team, the Caribbean Festival of Arts (CARIFESTA), and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) among others (Hall, 2003; Hall & Benn, 2005).

Functional cooperation has been sought as a more balanced approach which has allowed countries to share in and contribute to the essential non-economic benefits of belonging to a regional grouping. The extent to which they have acted as stepping stones to continental unity is however debatable as these gains have not trickled up to the continental level. It is essential to form connections between RECs on such functional gains to act as a conduit between this lower level of integration and the higher continental one. Given evidence of success of functional cooperation in the Caribbean, more effort should be placed on its pursuit. Functional cooperation at the REC level also aligns with the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is an organizing principle that aims to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen. It recognizes different operating spaces including international, regional, sub-regional, national and local levels. It also speaks to the upward and downward governance relationships, in this case the greater regional space dealing with the AU and the sub-regional spaces marked by the RECs. Subsidiarity is a key procedure of and is defined in Article 5 on the Treaty on European Union. It dictates that the EU does not take action (except on matters for which it alone is responsible) unless the EU action is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local levels, and therefore, regulates the exercise of powers in the European Union and its institutions (Bomberg, Peterson & Stubb, 2008).

Though not codified within the AU as it is in the EU, the principle of subsidiarity is de facto a reality in the relationship between the AU and RECs. This is evident in the areas of functional cooperation where avenues of common interest and key sectors are delegated to the RECs. A good example is in the area of health, specifically HIV/AIDS. Research has shown that the HIV/AIDs prevalence in the SADC region has been significantly reduced. Such gains took place under the implementation of certain legal instruments within the SADC Treaty which set out principles and procedures under which member states conduct their cooperation in specific areas. These instruments were the Protocol on Health, Declaration on HIV/AIDS, and Declaration on

Gender and Development. Member states sought to prioritize the fight against HIV/AIDS as the region is one of the most affected in the world. According to a report named SADC Gender Protocol 2014 Barometer, their research shows that new infections among adults have decreased by over 50% in Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Moreover, new infections have decreased by over 25% in Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland (Morna et al., 2015). This shows the success of the link between subsidiarity and functional cooperation. Specific issues such as health have been left as the responsibility of the RECs and are more effective at this lower level as opposed to the wider AU level. These gains can then be harmonized between the RECs to allow for the connecting of these different nerve centers into the wider integration process.

Economic Cooperation

An analysis of the state of integration within each REC confirms the divergent levels of progress within each. In West Africa, ECOWAS, which comprises 15 West African countries and was established on the 28th of May 1975 under the Treaty of Lagos, represents a regional institutional framework for the coordination and promotion of economic cooperation in West Africa (Ndomo, 2009). ECOWAS has played a significant role in the region in the areas of peace and security, trade, and the free movement of people and goods in the region. Overtime, several institutional structures have been established to work and speed the attainment of the community's objectives. They include the conference of heads of government and state, the council of ministers, the commission, the community parliament, and the community court of justice, and the ECOWAS bank for investment and development (EBID). ECOWAS is a customs union, however, and within it is the UEMOA that consists of eight French speaking territories that have deepened their integration process and formed an economic union.

The Treaty for Establishment of the East African Community (EAC) was signed on November 30, 1999 and entered into force on 7 July 2000 following its ratification by the original three Partner States – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Republic of Rwanda and the Republic of Burundi acceded to the EAC Treaty on 18 June 2007, and became full Members of the Community with effect beginning 1 July 2007. Its objectives include developing policies and programs aimed at widening and deepening cooperation among partners in political, social, economic and cultural fields (African Union, n.d.). The main organs of East African grouping include the summit comprising all heads of state and government, the council of ministers, the east African legislative assembly, and the East African court of justice. It also has an East African development bank and the secretariat of the EAC. The EAC expanded the existing customs union and established a common market in 2010.

The Treaty establishing COMESA was signed on 5 November 1993 in Kampala, Uganda, and was ratified a year later in Lilongwe, Malawi on 8 December 1994. Its main focus is on the formation of a large economic and trading unit that is capable of overcoming some of the barriers that was faced by individual states (Tumusiime-Mutebile, 2014). It is therefore committed to promoting peace, security and stability among members. There are four organs of COMESA which have the power to make decisions on its behalf; these being the authority of heads of state and government, the council of ministers, the court of justice, and the committee of governors of central banks. The secretariat oversees daily operations of the community. The community launched a customs union in 2009.

The SADC was established by the SADC Treaty signed by heads of state and government at Windhoek, Namibia on 12 August 1992 in pursuance of the development of the Southern African region. Institutions of SADC include the summit of heads or state or government, summit troika of the organ, the tribunal, the council of ministers, the standing committee of senior officials, the secretariat, and the parliamentary forum (Morna, Dube, Makamure, & Robinson (Eds.), 2014). Its aims include, but are not limited to, promoting equitable economic growth as well as policies and programs to combat HIV/AIDS. SADC is still working towards building its FTA before moving on to the level of customs union. The EAC, COMESA and SADC are also working toward a Tripartite Free Trade Area to reduce the *spaghetti bowl* effect of overlapping membership. In general, there has been some interest and movement in sub-Saharan Africa towards a reduction in duplication and overlap. This attempt at horizontal linkages is a positive move if RECs are indeed to act as stepping stones to further integration of the continent. Such horizontal linkages create a much-needed bridge between the AU and the RECs, and should be replicated throughout the continent.

An example of the possibility of such horizontal linkages can be seen in the regional payment strategies that have been adopted by some of the RECs. In 2012, COMESA established a regional payments and settlement system (REPSS) that allowed for a more secure, easier and faster transfer of funds for member states (Settlements can now be made within a day among members.) through their Central banks (Tumusiime-Mutebile, 2014). This route has been endorsed as a cost-saving mechanism and has promoted trade within the market. The EAC in 2014 also established a similar mechanism, the East African Payment System (EAPS) with an aim to link the monetary systems of the member states to enhance integration of the region's financial sector (East African Community, 2015). The possibility is real in this instance because of the overlapping membership of the two RECs. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda are members of both RECs which means that they enjoy these facilities with more countries. There are other such occurrences on the continent. SADC's Integrated Regional Electronic Settlement System (SIRESS) was operationalized between four countries of the CMA,
including South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland, in 2013 (Wentworth, 2013). The implementation of such systems supports the aim of regional integration to facilitate trade between member states.

A successful example can be seen in the convergence of COMESA and EAC, two customs unions. A country cannot have membership in two customs unions because of the Common External Tariff (CET). There had to be harmonization of the CETs of the two RECs for the benefit of countries such as Kenya and Uganda that are members of both COMESA and EAC. To further intensify the integration process, the tripartite FTA between COMESA, EAC and SADC will harmonize their CETs allowing for an even larger market with over half of the continent countries (26) joining the partnership. There are different areas of harmonization covered by the Tripartite

program. These include infrastructure, energy, trade in services, movement of business persons, customs procedures, health and technical standards, unfair trade practices, and institutional arrangements. The examples however remain far and wide. UNECA's
Assessing Regional Integration in Africa: Rationalizing Regional Economic Communities (ARIA II) Report states that "despite strong efforts at coordination and harmonization if policies, the success has been generally limited" (UNECA, 2006, xiii).

The UMA was founded on February 17, 1989 when the Constitutive Treaty of the Union of the Arab Maghreb was signed by the five Heads of State in Marrakech. Its main aim encompassed economic growth of the region through liberalization. This involved adopting common policies to promote the free movement of people, services, goods and capital within the region. UMA has 10 main institutions: the presidency council, the consultative council, the secretariat, the monitoring committee, the meeting of the prime ministers, the council of foreign ministers, the ministerial specialized commissions, the judicial organ, the University of Maghreb, and the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Foreign Trade (BMICE) (UNECA, 2014). There has been little progress at the free trade area of integration.

CEN-SAD was established on 4 February 1998 following the Conference of Leaders and Heads of States held in Tripoli, Libya. Its objectives included economic integration through liberalization with functional integration in specific areas including cultural, educational and scientific. CEN-SAD has the following organs: the conference of heads of state, the executive council, the general secretariat, the Sahel-Sharan Investment and Trade Bank, and the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ESCC) (UNECA, 2014). There is overlapping of membership within the UMA and CEN-SAD. This union is in the free trade area stage of economic integration.

The ECCAS was established on 18 October 1983 by members of UDEAC (Customs and Economic Union of Central African States), Sao Tome and Principe, and members of the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL). The fundamental objective of the Community has been the promotion of cooperation, peace and stability and development in all areas of economic and social activity. ECCAS' institutions are the conference of heads of state and government, the council of ministers, the court of justice, the general secretariat, the advisory commission, and specialized technical committees (UNECA, 2014). ECCAS is a free trade area.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa was created on 21 March 1996, in Nairobi when the Assembly of Heads of state and government signed a Letter of Instrument to Amend the IGADD Charter/Agreement. Its programs are wide-ranging in order to include economic cooperation in different functional areas, to promote liberalization and development within the region, to push the agenda of COMESA and AEC, to promote peace and security within the community, to raise the standard of living of the population, and to work towards achieving regional food security. IGAD consists of four organs: the assembly of heads of state and government, the council of ministers, the committee of ambassadors, and a secretariat (UNECA, 2014). IGAD is a free trade area. There have been discussions of a merger between IGAD and the EAC in keeping with greater economic integration as designated by the Abuja Treaty.

This progress, albeit not sweeping within the RECs, shows a conscious effort at finding common ground and addressing common interests. Progress however remains slow in most of the RECs. According to Balassa's (1961) ranking of economic integration below, five groups (IGAD, ECCAS, CEN-SAD, UMA and SADC) are still at the first level of free trade. Two, ECOWAS and COMESA, are at the customs union level. The EAC is the only one at the common market stage, and Sy (2014) states that the region has doubled its intra-regional trade in the past 5 years, and the regional GDP quadrupled within the past 10 years. However, conflicts within certain countries in the REC affect their cohesion. In the EAC's case, Burundi has been the source of lapse in cohesion. The EAC is one of the smaller REC's and has unsurprisingly gone the furthest in terms of economic integration. This can be credited to two main reasons: the smaller the region, the faster the pace of regional integration; and the sub-region also has historical antecedents of functional cooperation mentioned earlier that the current programs were able to build upon. If focus continues to be on economic integration, progress will continue to be a challenge. SADC for example has challenges transitioning from an FTA to a customs union because of difficulties involved in establishing a single Common External Tariff (CET). This is due to the 11 different individual tariff policies that require convergence into a single and uniform tariff regime (Morna et al., 2014). This complicates the negotiation process. ECCAS on the other hand has gone through prolonged periods of inactivity.

Integration

All the RECs are mainly economic integration projects. Different stages of economic integration require different levels of commitment from member states. An FTA is the easiest to negotiate, and, where most of the RECs are positioned, imposes relatively few constraints on national decision-making autonomy. A customs union costs governments autonomy in foreign economic policies as joint institutions are required to negotiate and administer common external trade policies. The common market requires even more cost to governments in terms of policy autonomy. African states have a fierce dedication to preserving national sovereignty. Unless there is a reconceptualization of the understanding of sovereignty from 'ceding or losing' to 'pooling,' it will continue to retard any attempts at deepening integration in accordance to the Abuja Treaty. According to Bela Balassa (1961), there are five escalating stages of economic integration. These are:

1. A free trade area in which tariffs and other trade barriers between participating countries are abolished, but each country retains its own tariffs against non-members.
2. A customs union that involves the equalization of tariffs in trade with non-member countries.
3. A common market where not only trade restrictions but also restrictions on factor movements are abolished.
4. An economic union that combines the suppression of restriction on commodity and factor movements with some degree of harmonization of national economic, financial and monetary policies in order to remove discrimination that was due to disparities in these

policies.

5. A total economic integration that presupposes the unification of policies listed above and requires the setting up of a supranational authority whose decisions are binding for the member states.

All the RECs contain elements of functional cooperation in addition to economic integration. Most of the RECs, except ECOWAS, were formed or re-established in the late 1980s to 1990s period in keeping with the global momentum for new regionalism. Sub-regionalism was embraced as a tool for cooperation. These mechanisms however maintain the state as the main gatekeeper for domestic interests to enter the regional arena (Moravcsik, 1998). States are still masters of the process of integration. No authority is delegated to supranational institutions and other actors are not given due importance. Therefore, even though they have embraced open regionalism, the regional integration process is still state-centered. Other actors such as civil society organizations, labor unions, other interest groups, and the private sector are not included in the 'new' constructions of regions. The emphasis is on market factors with the state dominating the agenda. This is reflected in the myriad state institutions, including the Heads of Government, and Council of Ministers among others, that dot all the RECs. This top down approach is reflected in the African Union (AU) as well.

The AU, which replaced the OAU after its dissolution, inherited the old structures and institutions such as the Assembly of the Union, formerly the Assembly of Heads of Government, Executive Council formerly the Conference of Ministers, the Commission formerly the Secretariat, and the Pan African Parliament (PAP). These are the four main organs. There are also advisory bodies including the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSSOC), and seven specialized committees as well as proposed financial institutions and an African Court of Justice.

The AU is similar to the RECs to the extent that it was established as an organization with separate functional institutions to deal with specific agendas such as peace and security, and good governance (Ndomo, 2009). The Preamble of its Constitutive Act acknowledges one such issue that requires functional attention and is assigned to the AU Peace and Security Council. It states that "the scourge of conflicts in Africa constitutes a major impediment to the socio-economic development of the continent and the need to promote peace, security and stability as a prerequisite for the implementation of our development and integration agenda" (African Union, n.d.). The RECs have specialized committees dealing with different areas. In terms of embracing open regionalism, the AU differs from the RECs. Oppong's (2010) view of the AEC as the economic leg of the AU is correct. The AU has greater objectives championing social, cultural and political unity of Africans. To this extent, it embraces a neo-functionalist strategy which involves the creation of specialized trans-national institutions with more competencies than member states. It has attempted to introduce other actors in the process, and this is evidenced by the formation of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), which in principle, allows for civil society to organize itself to work in partnership with the AU. However, structure is one thing, but the functional aspect is still lacking because of contextual setting and authoritarian norms. The AU is still criticized for its top-down elitist approach with states taking center stage and acting as gatekeepers in the regional integration agenda.

In terms of the main organs, the RECs replicate the organs of the AU. All RECs have supreme organs led by the heads of government and state, the council of ministers, a parliamentary forum, and a secretariat. In addition, they also have courts of justice and, unlike the AU, most have functional financial institutions. The legal standing of the RECs within the AU/AEC according to Kolbeck (2014) is however problematic. She argues that Article 88(1) of the AEC Treaty states that "[t]he Community shall be established mainly through the co-ordination, harmonization and progressive integration of the activities of regional economic communities."

Moreover, Article 3(l) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (CAAU) lists as an objective of the AU the coordination and harmonization of policies between existing and future RECs for the gradual attainment of the Union, which includes the establishment of the AEC (UNECA, 2014). These two provisions therefore envision RECs as the "building blocks" or "implementing arms" of the AU/AEC's goal of an economically integrated African continent. She further argues that,

> "In this process, RECs are given different unofficial names that should demonstrate the concept of RECs as subordinates in the implementation process of the Abuja Treaty towards the full realization of the AEC. However, these terms do not have any legal meaning. Neither the AEC Treaty nor the CAAU contains a specific provision on the status of the RECs within the AU/AEC" (Kolbec, 2014).

Given the subordinate position in this relationship, Oppong (2010) adds that a vertical association with binding decisions from top to bottom is implied. Confusion comes because, although RECs are building blocks for the AEC, the RECs have their own legal personalities. They are not members of the AEC or party to the Abuja Treaty. This is because only individual member states within the RECs are party to the treaty. As a result, RECs are not legally bound by the policies and laws of the AEC (Oppong, 2010). This has implications for the implementation of the regional integration project, and has contributed its inconsistency and a dismal record because the AU's role to act as overseer is limited.

The Future

These sub-regional arrangements that were expected to lead to an all-African common market by the year 2025 are questionable. This target does not seem achievable given the slow pace of economic integration within the sub-regions. If most of the sub-regions are still grappling with the first stage of economic integration at this smaller, more manageable geographic space, it is highly unlikely that there will be an African common market by the set date. This has been compounded by the global economic crisis that forced countries to look inward, placing on the back burner any greater regional agenda among other issues such as insecurity.

Moreover, the AU nations have recognized the important role that RECs, and over 10 Regional Trade Arrangements (RTAs), play in the overall economic integration of the continent, and evidence suggests that actual intra-African trade is very low. A report by UNCTAD (2015) gives the figures that this is 11% of Africa's total trade over the past decade. This is in comparison to 21% for Latin America and the Caribbean, 50% for developing Asia, and 70% in Europe. Among the chief reasons for this low figure, they identify low implementation of RTAs coupled with unrealistic deadlines, weak domestic and institutional capacity as well as human resource and financial constraints.

Given the evidence so far, it is clear that setting up institutions is not a problem for the African states both at the REC and Union levels. Take off subsequent to elaborate institution formation is lacking. This is however a crucial element if these institutions are to work for the betterment of the African people. The next process should be to build the capacity of these institutions in order to strengthen their performance if they are to act as 'building blocks' to greater continental unity. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2006),

> "capacity building may be described as entailing those actions that invest in an organization, the ability to formulate, plan, manage and implement policies and programs towards the full attainment of that organization's objectives and goals. This would require the creation within the organization, of a critical mass of skills, knowledge and expertise and the availability of the requisite financial resources and organizational instruments, processes and mechanisms, all interacting in ways that conduce to effectiveness in the formulation and prosecution of policy, and success in the implementation of plans and programs" (UNECA, 2014).

This captures the problem areas that have been overly diagnosed over time, and speaks to their comprehensive treatment. It is a process that involves engaging stakeholders as well as taking ownership of the process and making informed choices. This requires strong national, governmental support and commitment since states continue to play a crucial role in the integration process. The reality that five of the eight recognized RECs are still at the infant stage of FTA is an indictment to political will within these countries. This will work for economic integration, but if functional cooperation is to also be successful, it will need the crucial input of other actors including but not limited to CSOs, professional associations, labor unions and other interest groups to allow for that extra push in non-economic areas.

In conclusion, greater African integration remains a valued goal for Africans. The renewed impetus via transformation from the OAU to the AU and the formation of RECs have had varying results. There is still a need to push for active regional integration beyond rhetoric on the continent. This paper calls for deepened functional cooperation at the REC level and denounces the current singular vision focusing on economic integration. This will involve embracing functional cooperation as a fundamental goal of the regional integration process that will feed into economic integration, but will also result in non-trade gains, increasing efficiencies, eliminating redundancies, and enhancing the quality of life of African people.

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