



Assessing Political and Economic Barriers to Regional Integration in ECOWAS

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Abstract

This paper looks into the political, economic, and institutional challenges of regional integration facing the Economic Community of West African States through a systematic literature review. Despite considerable efforts in fostering economic cooperation, there are various obstacles that ECOWAS still faces, including political instability, diversity of political systems, economic disparities, inadequate institutional capacity, trade barriers, lack of infrastructure, and different currencies. The said elements do make harmonization of policies and effective implementation of regional agreements quite complicated. Guided by theories on institutionalism, dependency theory, and regionalism, this study reviewed current integration policies on their effectiveness and made suggestions on how challenges can be overcome through certain strategies. Recommendations have ranged from strengthening of institutional frameworks to political stability and good governance, economic policy harmonization, addressing of infrastructure gaps, facilitating currency unification, and inclusive development. By embracing them, ECOWAS would have ensured closer regional integration and sustainable development while exploiting opportunities offered by the international community for growth and prosperity in the sub-region.

Keywords:

ECOWAS, regional integration, political instability, economic disparities, institutional capacity, trade barriers, currency harmonization, infrastructure development, governance, sustainable development, policy recommendations, West Africa

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1.0 Introduction

Regional integration has long been viewed as a pathway for enhancing economic growth, stability and political cohesion among neighbouring states, particularly in Africa, where countries share similar developmental challenges and economic aspirations. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional organization that was established on May 28, 1975 (Yaya et al., 2019) with the sole aim of promoting economic integration and cooperation among its 15 member states. To achieve this objective, the regional bloc intended to harness regional resources, achieve economies of scale and aim for the member countries to attain a greater negotiating power in global trade and investment (Yaya et al., 2019). However, despite its efforts to foster regional unity and economic development, the body faces several political and economic barriers that hinder deeper integration of the member countries.

Hence, the factors affecting the integration of the member countries can broadly be grouped into two and these are political and economic barriers. Several ECOWAS members have experienced political instability, including coups, civil wars, and insurgencies. These conflicts disrupt governance and economic activities in some if not most of the member countries. Thus, making it difficult to implement regional policies consistently. Diversity in political systems is another factor affecting member countries; hence, member states have different political systems ranging from democracies to authoritarian regimes. Moreover, significant economic disparities exist among ECOWAS member states concerning GDP, industrialization levels, and infrastructure development. All these are factors that this paper thoroughly looked into in the analysis of the challenges of integration in the regional bloc.

Despite the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 with the primary objective of promoting regional integration and cooperation, member countries continue to confront formidable political and economic barriers that obstruct advancements towards deeper integration. These challenges manifest prominently in the forms of persistent political instability, uneven levels of governance effectiveness across member states, and divergent economic policies. Political instability within several ECOWAS' nations, characterized by frequent leadership changes, internal conflicts, and governance crises, undermines the consistency and reliability of regional agreements and collaborative efforts (Nnoli, 2019). The lack of political continuity and reliable governance structures inhibits the establishment of unified policies essential for effective regional integration.

Moreover, varying levels of governance effectiveness among member states exacerbate disparities in policy implementation and regulatory frameworks. Differences in administrative capacity, transparency, and institutional resilience across borders impede the harmonization of regulations and the enforcement of common standards necessary for seamless economic cooperation within the ECOWAS sub-region (Ojo, 2020). Furthermore, divergent economic policies pursued by individual member states, driven by distinct national interests and economic priorities, create significant barriers to achieving cohesive regional economic strategies. These divergences complicate efforts to coordinate fiscal policies, trade regulations, and industrial development initiatives across the ECOWAS region, thereby hindering the realization of shared economic goals and the full potential of regional integration (Nnoli, 2019; Ojo, 2020).

Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to policy recommendations by proposing strategies to address challenges to integration within the ECOWAS regional bloc. This endeavor involves informing stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, civil society, and citizens, about the impediments that hinder effective integration and cooperation within the ECOWAS regional bloc. Additionally, the paper seeks to enrich ongoing discourse by enhancing understanding of regional integration dynamics and strengthening expertise in political economy and international relations.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature review examines multiple articles and research studies to explore diverse perspectives among researchers on the subject matter. This exploration is primarily delineated into two overarching categories: conceptual issues and theoretical frameworks relevant to the subject under study. The conceptual issues section scrutinizes various contextual dimensions, while the theoretical frameworks section encompasses a spectrum of theories pertaining to regional integrations and blocs.

2.1 Conceptual Issues

There are inconsistent political systems that complicate the harmonization of policies and governance structures necessary for integration of the member countries of ECOWAS. Hence, member countries are often reluctant to cede the sovereignty of their respective nation to ECOWAS as a body because they have the perception that regional integration is a threat to their national sovereignty especially when it comes to decision making processes that are related to economic and political activities of their respective nation. As a result of this, their national interest is a priority to them. And this overrides their respective regional commitments, leading to inconsistent implementation of ECOWAS agreements across board. In addition to these, some, if not most of the ECOWAS countries, lack the institutional capacity to implement and enforce regional agreements if there is any. Lack of capacities includes inadequate administrative, legal, and regulatory frameworks. And without these, integration will be a herculean task. High level of corruption in some of these member states is also another factor undermining effective governance and economic management.

Moreover, we have disparities that pose economic challenges in harmonizing policies that foster balanced regional development. Such include trade barriers which presents a formidable obstacle to regional integration efforts. Despite initiatives aimed at establishing a common market, persistent hurdles such as tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and complex customs procedures persist within the regional bloc (Bonga & Mabe, 2020), restricting the seamless movement of goods, services, and labor. Because the member countries of ECOWAS are developing countries, there is no gainsaying that there is inadequate infrastructure in the region. This inadequate or lack of infrastructure in some cases include deficient transportation networks, poor energy supply, and inadequate or lack of communication systems especially in rural areas across member countries. Collectively, these factors increase transaction costs and diminish business efficiency within the region, undermining progress toward integration. Another factor is the use of multiple currencies, which complicates trade and financial transactions. This factor is often neglected. While there are efforts to introduce a single currency in the region, progress has been slow due to economic and political challenges that each country in the regional bloc is facing.

The member countries of ECOWAS are largely heterogeneous in terms of market size, demography, natural resources endowment and geographical location and there are inherent critical issues as a result of this diversity in wealth and in development levels among the countries (Yaya et al., 2019). Consequently, there are varied regulatory environments across member states that creates hurdles for businesses operating in the region. Non uniformity in the business laws, financial regulations, and labor standards in each country pose challenges to the harmonization and economic integration.

Despite the fact that the countries in the region understand fully well some of the benefits of regional integration, to achieve this has become a herculean task. If the region is integrated, there will be benefits of portfolio risk diversification and capital mobility among the nations in the regional block (Kumar, Sen, & Srivastava, 2014). The implication of this is that each country in the region can reduce their respective overall risk of investment portfolio by spreading their investment across different assets. And there will be easy mobility of their capitals across the countries in the region. The labor and capital mobilization across the region would have been easier if the region is not constrained by the use of various currencies and barriers such as work authorization even though there is no visa restriction in the regional bloc. Although there is an on-going effort at instituting a single currency in the regional block, but the progress in this regard has been very slow and it does not seem that this will be possible going by the fact that we have both anglophone and francophone countries constituting the majority of the countries in region with only Cape Verde speaking Portuguese language. Aside that, another important factor that seems to be working against the regional integration in Africa in which the ECOWAS regional bloc is not excluded is that the continent is divided into small autonomous countries, with barriers that deters freemovement of labour, goods and capital across countries in the region (Bonga & Mabe, 2020). According to Bonga and Mabe (2020), non-tariff and regulatory barriers persist across Africa as a whole, significantly increasing transaction costs associated with conducting businesses within the region. These barriers not only hinder the movement of goods, services, people, and capital but also restrict integration efforts across borders, particularly within the ECOWAS sub-region. For regional economic dynamics, this issue and other issues bordering on the integration of the region needs to be looked into wholistically.

However, scholars such as Awokuse (2007), Chang et al. (2009), Nunn (2014), and Bardi and Hfaiedh (2021) (as cited by Adu et al., 2022) have argued that economic integration agreements and trade liberalization policies offer substantial benefits for economic growth and development. In pursuit of these benefits, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has recently intensified efforts aimed at establishing a single currency for the region (Adu et al., 2022). This is because they are already aware that this is an issue in their quest to achieve regional integration. Therefore, to achieve growth and development in the region, economic integration among member countries must be taken seriously (Ayeni, et al., 2023). Hence, Bonga and Mabe (2020) on their own identified various challenges that hinder this regional integration efforts to include the lack of political leadership and will, uneven distribution of integration benefits, territorial imbalances, and currency disparities. All these factors according to them contributed to the collapse of the East African Community (EAC). They highlighted the absence of currency unification as a critical issue exacerbated by a lack of political will among leaders. Had there been a unified currency at the inception of the EAC in 1965, issues such as uneven distribution of integration benefits and territorial imbalances might have been mitigated. Such historical lessons have sparked considerable debate on the potential advantages of a single currency for the ECOWAS

region, prompting policymakers in this region to be seriously considering its implementation. Efforts towards achieving this single currency reflect lessons learned from past experiences and align with findings from various studies advocating the potential benefits of currency unification in the region (Adu et al., 2022).

Political instability of countries in the ECOWAS sub-region is another factor contributing to the lack of proper integration of the region. As Azu and Muhammad (2020) noted, majority of the regional trade agreement ascribe great importance to the political regimes of member countries, and preference is always given to democratisation even though the democracy is considered to be a copy and paste of the western countries' democratic system. This is true because with a democratic system in place, there will be obligation to look inward and circumspect so that the nation is not a pariah one. And by democratisation, each country should be able to establish a system that suits the nature of their composition with regional integration as part of the core value of such democratic system. Such system should have democratic elements such as: process of electing their leaders, checks and balances, term limit for elected officials and so on. This must be a system fashioned out and collectively agreed to by the respective citizens of each ECOWAS member states taking into consideration all the elements of democracy listed earlier and also having regional integration enmeshed into the system.

Going by recent events, in the beginning of 2023, the ECOWAS region faces a new period of instability following recent coup in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali (Siaplay & Werker, 2023) changing the countries' governance system from democracy to dictatorship. Aside from the military coups, countries in the region are also facing different challenges that could exacerbate into political turmoil, a good example is the EndSARS and EndBadGovernance riots in Nigeria in recent time. However, according to El-Bendary (2024) an opinion contributor of The Hill, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea went through a military coup between 2020 and 2023. And these countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea) stated that they were withdrawing their membership from ECOWAS. Their reason was that the regional body had drifted away from the ideals of its founding fathers and the spirit of Pan-Africanism. To these countries, there are ideals behind the formulation of the regional body, and the present crop of leaders including the leaders of their countries that they overthrew, have deviated from such ideals. Therefore, membership of their respective countries in the regional body is no longer necessary. Based on this, it is reasonable to conclude that political stability and the quality of governance place a serious test on the integration of countries within the bloc.

Moreover, according to the Centre for Systemic Peace, (as stated by Siaplay & Werker, 2023) West Africa's 5 successful coups in the last 3 years is much more than what the region has experienced in the last 30 years as shown in the Figure 1 below.

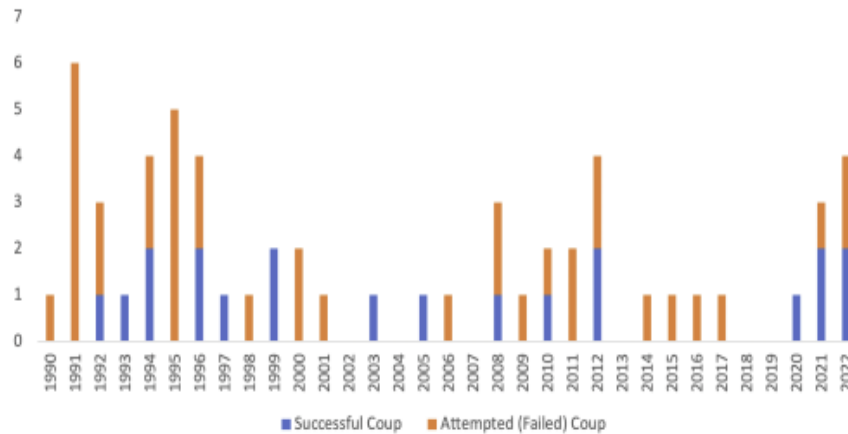


Figure 1. Coups in West Africa, 1990 – 2022

Source: Centre for Systemic Peace

Despite ECOWAS being perceived as the most successful model of regional governance on the continent (El-Bendary, 2024) such issue as this recent overthrowing of democratically elected leaders in some of the member states could lead to the erosion of confident among member countries because the body (ECOWAS) seems to be an incapacitated one. Especially considering the fact that the three ECOWAS members' states established Sahel Alliance in September 2023 in retaliations for the sanction that the ECOWAS imposed on them. Nevertheless, it is a known fact that the main cause of these coups is poor governance that led to insecurity. However, insecurity was cited as the primary justification by the coup plotters (Siaplay & Werker, 2023), despite the fact that the insecurity itself stems from deeper and unhidden underlying factors such as poor governance, lack of democratic dividends to the general masses or average citizens, corruption among the political class/elites and so on. See Figure 2 for Worldwide Governance Indicators.

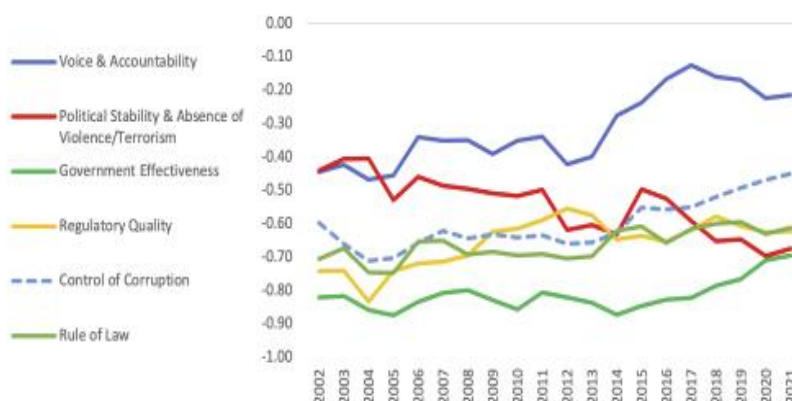


Figure2. West Africa's Worldwide Governance Indicators

Source: World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators.

2.2 Underlying Fundamental Theories Relating to the Study

Institutionalism

This is one theory that relates to the study, and it emphasizes the role of formal and informal institutions in influencing the conduct and outcomes of a nation in international relations. Therefore, institutionalism highlights the importance and ability of the countries in the ECOWAS subregion to establish norms, rules, and mechanisms for cooperation among member states. Hence, challenges are bound to arise when institutional frameworks lack clarity, effectiveness, or sufficient authority to enforce compliance with regional agreements and policies. Strengthening institutional capacity and legitimacy within ECOWAS is crucial for overcoming political and economic barriers to integration. According to Azu and Muhammad (2020) institutional democratic regime remains a benchmark for the existence of regional integration. Without institutionalism, integration of different countries to form a regional bloc will be elusive and no matter the efforts put into this by the respective countries, there will just be the body without integration. Kumar et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of institutionalism to include the stimulation of capital mobility in a regional bloc. And Yaya et al. (2019) concluded that ECOWAS has been experiencing difficulties in terms of implementing economic integration scheme as a result of the lack of strong institutional framework.

Dependency Theory

This is another related theory that posit that underdeveloped countries are structurally disadvantaged in the global economy as a result of their overreliance on developed countries for capital, technology, and markets (Monterrubio et al., 2018). The theory emerged in a reaction to modernization theories of development, arguing that international inequalities were socially structured, and that hierarchy is a central feature of the global system of the modern society (Chase-Dunn, 2015). Ordinarily one would have thought that Africa with a population of more than 1.4 billion is supposed to be a force to reckon with globally based on its market size and potential, but in reality, this is not the case; the dependency theory provides an explanation on this. Therefore, in the global context, dependency theory groups nations into 2 broad categories of developed and underdeveloped nations with the de-accumulation and accumulation of economic resources (Monterrubio et al., 2018). In the context of ECOWAS, dependency dynamics can manifest in unequal power relations among member states, where economically stronger countries may dominate the policy-making processes and benefit disproportionately from integration initiatives. Addressing dependency requires strategies that promote inclusive development, reduce economic disparities, and enhance the autonomy and self-sufficiency of lesser developed member states of the bloc.

Neo-functionalism Theory

This theory suggests that for a regional integration to start, there has to be initial cooperation in specific functional areas such as trade, security and harmonization of institutional capacities in the member states (Dyevre & Lampach, 2018). This is believed to have the potential to gradually lead to deeper integration in other sectors. For ECOWAS, neo-functionalism underscores the incremental nature of integration where initial successes in functional cooperation (e.g., trade liberalization, customs union) can build momentum for broader political and economic integration. This implies that ECOWAS was formed against neo-functionalism theory. Consequently, challenges arise when member states prioritize their respective national interests ahead of regional objectives. Hence, a deeper integration will be

resisted as a result of political sensitivity and or economic disparity among the bloc's member states.

Globalization

This refers to the interconnectedness of economies, cultures, and societies on a global scale. Within ECOWAS regional bloc, globalization influences integration by creating opportunities for regional trade, investment, and cooperation, but also exposing member states to external economic shocks and pressures. Therefore, globalization has the potential of facilitating integration by promoting cross-border flows of goods, services, and ideas. This is not without its challenges that include but not limited to the threat on national sovereignty and cultural identities. Hence, managing the impact of globalization requires ECOWAS to strike a balance between harnessing global opportunities and safeguarding regional interests. This is an area that the policy makers in the region need to look into through a brainstorming session involving the right stakeholders in region and from each member state.

Regionalism

This theory emphasizes the formation of regional blocs and alliances to pursue common objectives and address shared challenges. It should be noted that regionalism without the integration of the countries involved will result in lack of progress leading to a body with name and unfulfilled agenda. Hence, Economic Integration Agreements (EIAs) is a major avenue through which firms in a country can easily enter the export market (Gaga et al., 2023). In ECOWAS, regionalism provides a ground for mutual understanding on issues such as peace and security, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Thus, findings show that political and economic barriers to integration within ECOWAS include divergent national interests, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient infrastructure. Overcoming these barriers requires strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering inclusive development policies.

3.0 Methodology

The adopted methodology for this paper is a systematic literature review that involves a structured approach to gather, critically evaluate, and synthesize existing research relevant to this particular topic. This is a common methodology in academic research, especially in fields such as political science, international relations, and economics, where synthesizing existing knowledge is essential to inform new insights or policy recommendations. Therefore, this methodology entails conducting a systematic literature review that examined scholarly works focusing on regional integration, political economy, and international relations within the ECOWAS subregion. The primary aim of this review was to develop an inclusive understanding of the factors influencing integration among ECOWAS countries to identify key barriers and challenges documented in the existing literature.

Furthermore, the study undertook an evaluation of current policies and initiatives aimed at promoting integration within the ECOWAS sub-region. This evaluation sought to critically assess the efficacy of these policies, identify obstacles encountered during their implementation, and highlight deficiencies within policy frameworks that hinder effective regional cooperation among ECOWAS member states.

Overall, this methodological approach facilitated a systematic examination of the complex dynamics influencing integration efforts within the region in question, providing valuable insights into the underlying factors shaping regional economic and political integration in West Africa.

4.0 Study Findings

Political instability is a big test to the integration of ECOWAS countries. Frequent coups, civil conflicts, and governance crises disturb governance and economic activities in quite a number of member states, undermining the consistency and reliability of regional agreements and collaborative efforts aimed at deeper integrations. Besides, diversity in the political systems within member states complicates integration efforts. This region encompasses everything from democracies to authoritarian regimes, and each has placed its national interests above regional commitments, policies, and governance structures, which is clearly opposed to effective integration.

Besides, one can find a number of economic obstacles to integration in the significant differences of the GDP, levels of industrialization, and infrastructure development that characterize the ECOWAS member states, impeding the harmonization of economic policies that are relevant for balanced regional development. These disparities make it difficult to build a coherent regional attitude toward economic cooperation and expansion. Insufficient institutional capacity in most of the member states of ECOWAS is further inhibiting the effective implementation of regional agreements, let alone their enforcement. Generally, weak administrative, legal, and regulatory frameworks contribute to inconsistent adherence to ECOWAS agreements, undermining integration efforts and impeding progress toward common economic goals.

Tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and elaborate customs procedures are still persistent trade barriers. All these hamper intra-ECOWAS trade. The implication of such barriers to the free flow of goods and services is that it greatly limits the full economic benefit expected from regional integration. Furthermore, a multiplicity of currencies complicates financial transactions and economic coordination across borders, posing additional challenges to seamless integration. Finally, infrastructure deficiencies-considering the poor condition of rural transportation networks, energy supply, and communication systems increase transaction costs and reduce business efficiency within the ECOWAS region. These are considered serious defects to regional economic integration efforts and impede the movement of goods and services.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

First of all, strengthening of institutional capacity is urgently required to enhance regional integration in ECOWAS. This could be achieved by improvement in administrative, legal, and regulatory frameworks within the member states through specific programs related to building capacity, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Such a measure would ensure an effective implementation and enforcement of regional agreements for the perpetuation of consistency and reliability in governance practices. So, there is an essential need for a strong institutional framework which will efficiently address the challenges of regional integration and ensure the sustainability of the collaborative efforts undertaken by the countries under discussion. Also important for the success of integration is a need for the establishment of political stability along with good governance in the member countries. In this respect, ECOWAS needs to give stronger support to democratic governance, enhance

better mechanisms for conflict resolution, and introduce reforms in governance in order to ensure more political continuity in the region. The programs to be pursued will create a stable political climate, which will further engender more profound cooperation and convince the member states that they could rely on the commitment of one another for the realization of regional ideals. The ability of ECOWAS to contribute towards political stability will reduce instability that might undermine regional agreements and development efforts and thus contribute to a more integrated and resilient region. Additionally, looking into the harmonization of economic policy especially in areas where obstacles are inhibiting integration in ECOWAS bloc. This is in the harmonization of trade regulations, fiscal policies, and industrial development strategies. This could be achieved through the promotion of dialogue that would lead to resolving national priorities with regional integration objectives, improving the coherence and effectiveness of these policies. Such harmonization would result in a single economic framework and a unified approach toward economic cooperation – economic preconditions necessary to underpin common prosperity. Trade barriers will be torn down and regulatory frameworks simplified; goods, services, and investments flowing across the region will rise.

Infrastructure deficiencies remain among the greatest challenges facing regional integration. Efficiency in the economy and connectivity within the region needs to underpin investment in hard infrastructure, like transport networks and energy grids, and in soft infrastructure, such as digital connectivity. These are the critical infrastructure areas that need to be developed by ECOWAS, as this would reduce transaction costs, enhance business efficiency, and facilitate, in general, the free movement of goods, services, and people across the community. This would definitely enhance economic integration through the removal of logistical barriers, together with increasing prospects for cross-border trade, while strengthening the overall competitiveness of the region within the global economy. Acceleration of currency harmonization is another key area of the integration process. The single currency exchange or the enhancement of a process that engender an easy convertibility of the currency would greatly facilitate cross-border transactions and also reinforce financial integration among member states. The existence of multiple currencies within the region brings about serious challenges to regional economic cooperation because it complicates trade and investment flows. Addressing the currency-related barriers will boost the efficiency of financial transactions, increase economic ties among member states, and enhance the region's economic resilience in the face of external shocks. Equally important is the need to encourage inclusive development across ECOWAS member states. Addressing inequalities in GDP, Industrialization, and infrastructure development should be undertaken as policies for eliciting balanced regional growth. By targeting investments in lesser developed countries of the regional bloc, ECOWAS can reduce economic inequalities and ensure that all member states benefit from the integration efforts. Therefore, inclusive development will help to mitigate the risks of marginalization and create a more equitable distribution of the benefits of integration, ultimately contributing to long-term social and economic stability in the regional bloc and bring about mutual trust among member states.

Furthermore, enhancing regional cooperation mechanisms is essential to strengthening collaboration among ECOWAS member states. Firming up communication channels, promoting joint initiatives, and facilitating mutual support in addressing common challenges will bring about improvement in the effectiveness of integration efforts. Therefore, a more cohesive and coordinated strategy will enhance the solidarity of ECOWAS members, enabling them to collectively address the challenges of regional integration and to capitalize on shared opportunities for growth and development in the region. On a different note,

navigating the impacts of globalization requires strategic policy frameworks that harness global economic opportunities while safeguarding regional sovereignty and cultural identities. It is in this regard that the regional bloc needs to roll out policies, which take advantage of recent global economic trends-in increased trade and investment flows-while ameliorating the possible negative consequences on regional interests. By adapting to the evolving global landscape, ECOWAS will be well positioned to enable its member states capitalize on global economic opportunities and foster regional development.

In conclusion, overcoming these political and economic obstacles to deeper integration within ECOWAS require a multidimensional approach. These include strengthening institutional capacity, harmonization of economic policies, addressing the gaps in infrastructure, putting in place development that is inclusive, increased regional cooperation, and strategic responses to globalization challenges. With such strategies, the regional body will be on track toward its lofty aspiration for deeper economic and political integration. Moreover, these strategies will help overcome some of the current obstacles for ECOWAS in building a better and more cohesive regional bloc that will be capable of achieving its goals on sustainable development and sustaining a long-term economic progress.

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