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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ECOWAS AND THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA)

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Abstract

The paper examined African regional integration through a comparison of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Guided by Bela Balassa's stages of economic integration, the study used a qualitative comparative design based on institutional documents, trade data and relevant secondary literature. It examined tariff liberalization, free movement, customs arrangements, non-tariff barriers and emerging continental trade rules. The findings show that ECOWAS has developed a more established institutional framework, reflected in free movement and sub-regional trade, but deeper integration is still constrained by infrastructure deficits, policy differences, weak compliance and delays in monetary integration. AfCFTA, on the other hand, has a broader continental reach and has moved from negotiation towards implementation through initiatives such as the Guided Trade Initiative and the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System. However, differences in infrastructure, productive capacity, customs systems and national implementation are significant limitations to the extent to which its opportunities are realized. It was concluded that institutionally, ECOWAS and AfCFTA should be regarded as complementary levels of African integration rather than competing frameworks. Among others, the study recommended greater use of interoperable payment systems to facilitate cross-border transactions and aid regional trade.

Keywords:

Regional Economic Integration; ECOWAS; AfCFTA; Trade liberalization; Regional Value Chains

1. INTRODUCTION

In Africa, trade integration is often considered the foundation of wider regional integration, since freer exchange in goods and services usually precedes coordination in investment, labour mobility, and public policy (Iloh & Ojukwu, 2021; Karangizi & Mumbengegwi, 2021). Historically, the continent's integration agenda originated from post-independence Pan-African thought, the establishment of the OAU in 1963, and later efforts such as the Lagos Plan of Action and Abuja Treaty, all of which promoted gradual economic cooperation through regional blocs before continental union (Karangizi & Mumbengegwi, 2021; Leshoele, 2023). Simultaneously, regional trade has been seen as a way to reduce Africa's dependence on external markets and promote self-reliance, even though many economies are still tied to primary commodity exports and vertical trade relations with industrialized partners (Udofa & Ekeuwei, 2023; Ekeuwei & Akpan, 2024; Ajewumi et al., 2024).

Regional economic integration in Africa has produced notable achievements through trade agreements, transport, and customs reforms, security cooperation, and market-building initiatives, although progress has varied across sub-regions (Hartzenberg, 2011; Ezugwu & Duruji, 2023; Rakhimzhanova, 2025). Important milestones include the strengthening of regional economic communities, the Tripartite Free Trade Area, and the operationalization of the AfCFTA in 2019–2021, which were all designed to expand market access, harmonize rules, and simplify cross-border exchange (Hartzenberg, 2011; Karangizi & Mumbengegwi, 2021; Tröster & Janechová, 2021). These efforts have enhanced political cooperation and conflict management, especially in West Africa, where ECOWAS has shown relative effectiveness in regional security through initiatives such as ECOMOG and coordinated responses to terrorism (Fisher & Oludemi, 2022; Fayomi & Adeola, 2015). They have also promoted socio-cultural interaction through freer movement, wider business networks, and the growth of cross-border social exchange, though the implementation strides have been uneven among countries in the region (Osaro, 2025; Rakhimzhanova, 2025).

ECOWAS and AfCFTA are two interconnected but distinct scales of integration in Africa. ECOWAS, established in 1975, was created to promote cooperation and integration in West Africa, with the long-term aim of economic and monetary union, free movement, and an expanded regional market (Bassey et al., 2024; Fisher & Oludemi, 2022). Over the years, ECOWAS has pursued trade liberalization, the movement of persons and monetary integration, giving it an important place in the wider process of African economic integration (Bassey et al., 2024; Kostyunina, 2025). AfCFTA operates at a continental level, seeking to bring together the African market through tariff reduction, the removal of non-tariff barriers, improved customs procedures and greater industrial and productive integration (Ajewumi et al., 2024; Adamu et al., 2023; Hagos, 2023). The two frameworks therefore differ in scale and institutional experience, that is, ECOWAS has a longer history of sub-regional cooperation, while AfCFTA provides a broader platform for connecting Africa's existing regional markets and expanding intra-African trade.

Progress under both architectures has nevertheless been constrained by practical difficulties. ECOWAS is bedevilled by weak institutional capacity, uneven implementation of regional protocols, low levels of formal intra-regional trade, overlapping commitments and insecurity across some borders (Obikaeze, 2025). AfCFTA faces related problems, including inadequate infrastructure, differences in economic and industrial capacity, inefficient customs procedures, non-tariff barriers and regulatory differences among member states (Ajewumi et al., 2024; Ezugwu & Duruji, 2023; Hagos, 2023). These constraints limit the extent to which regional integration impacts trade, employment, investment and broader economic development in the region. The study therefore compares ECOWAS and AfCFTA to assess their achievements, continuing constraints and prospects for deeper economic integration in Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Regional Economic Integration

Regional economic integration refers to the process through which neighbouring countries reduce trade barriers, open their markets to one another, and coordinate economic policies to increase trade and economic cooperation (Gibb, 2017; Iloh & Ojukwu, 2021). The process widens markets beyond national borders, encourage investment, improve production through economies of scale, and make the movement of labour and capital easier across participating countries (Rakhimzhanova, 2025; Karangizi & Mumbengegwi, 2021; Popović, 2010). In Balassa's (2013) framework, integration develops through successive stages, beginning with a free trade area and moving through a customs union, common market, economic union, and, at the deepest level, monetary union (Gibb, 2017; Broude, 2010; Popović, 2010). Each stage requires a greater degree of policy coordination, meaning that removing tariffs alone does not necessarily produce meaningful economic integration. African regional integration has broadly followed this path, but its progress has also depended on political commitment, institutional capacity and the availability of infrastructure that enable goods, people and capital to move across borders (Leshoele, 2023; Bonilla Bolaños, 2021).

Regional economic integration is particular to Africa owing to the challenges of disaggregated markets, small domestic economies and the geographical isolation of several landlocked countries, which restrict the ability of individual states to achieve economies of scale and compete effectively in wider markets (Yaduma & Khan, 2019; Karangizi & Mumbengegwi, 2021). Such integration widens markets and facilitates intra-African trade, which is thereby expected to facilitate industrialization, regional value chains, export diversification, employment creation, and broader economic development, while also reducing dependence on external markets (Ajewumi et al., 2024; Elganainy et al., 2023; Brandi et al., 2025). It also responds directly to long-standing African development constraints such as tariff and non-tariff barriers, overlapping regional arrangements, poor implementation, infrastructure deficits, burdensome border procedures, and uneven institutional development, all of which have historically slowed the pace and effectiveness of integration (Iloh & Ojukwu, 2021; Elganainy et al., 2023). Regional integration in Africa serves both as a development strategy and a response to persistent economic weaknesses, seeking to overcome fragmented markets, high trade costs and poor connectivity while reducing the vulnerability of African economies to external shocks. Its broader purpose is to establish a larger and more integrated market that bolsters industrial development and sustained economic growth.

2.1.2 ECOWAS and AfCFTA as Integration Frameworks

ECOWAS and AfCFTA are complementary integration frameworks in that the former operates as a subregional customs-oriented bloc in West Africa, while the latter provides the continental trade architecture meant to connect regional blocs into a wider African market (Kostyunina, 2025; Lunenborg & Roberts, 2021; Vambe, 2024). More specifically, ECOWAS grew from the 1975 Lagos Treaty as a West African economic union project, whereas AfCFTA was adopted in Kigali in 2018 under the AU's Agenda 2063 and the Abuja Treaty roadmap to accelerate continent-wide market integration (Igwe et al., 2021; Lunenborg & Roberts, 2021; Garba & Alexander, 2023).

Table 1 below provides an overview of both frameworks as instruments of regional economic integration in Africa

Table 1: Comparative overview of ECOWAS and AfCFTA as frameworks for African integration

Framework	Origin and Objective	Scope and Level	Core Mechanisms
ECOWAS	Founded in 1975 to advance West African economic integration and a common market (Igwe & Ochinanwata, 2021)	West African REC and one of AfCFTA's pillars	ETLS, CET, free movement, customs union, planned monetary union
AfCFTA	Adopted in 2018 to create a single African market in goods and services	Continental framework across 55 AU states	Tariff cuts, trade in goods/services protocols, dispute settlement, trade facilitation, policy harmonization

Source: Author's Compilation

ECOWAS uses deeper subregional instruments, while AfCFTA uses broader continental rules. ECOWAS applies the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and a Common External Tariff for intra- and extra-regional trade, which places it among the few African RECs operating as customs unions (Gbigbidje & Temishi, 2023; Lunenborg & Roberts, 2021). AfCFTA, by contrast, is structured around continent-wide liberalization in goods and services, phased negotiations on investment and competition, and harmonized rules intended to facilitate trade between RECs as well as within them (Lunenborg & Roberts, 2021).

ECOWAS has developed a relatively established institutional model for regional integration, with notable experience in cross-border movement, trade liberalization and customs cooperation (Sibanda, 2021). AfCFTA operates at a broader level, seeking to bring African markets together, expand opportunities for trade and investment, support industrial development and establish common rules for continental trade (Manboah-Rockson, 2020; Sibanda, 2021; Ajewumi et al., 2024). Despite the difference in scale and institutional maturity, both are concerned with expanding economic opportunities through regional value chains, investment and improved competitiveness among African economies (Manboah-Rockson, 2020; Fon et al., 2025; Hagos, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The Balassa's Stages of Economic Integration Theory (1961) is adopted for the study Balassa developed the theory from earlier customs-union analysis, particularly those associated with Viner, and linked economic integration to market expansion, efficiency, growth and policy coordination (Abdin, 2013; Popović, 2010; Balassa, 2013). The theory identifies five stages: free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union and complete economic integration. The movement from one stage to another involves progressively wider commitments, from removing internal trade barriers and establishing a common external tariff to facilitating factor mobility and coordinating economic policies (Balassa, 2013; Crowley, 2006; Andrei, 2014; Popović, 2010; Andrei, 2013). Although subsequent scholarship has questioned whether regional integration always follows this sequence, the theory is useful for examining differences in the depth of integration (Andrei, 2014; Mirakyan, 2023; Crowley, 2006).

The main value of the theory for this study is its attention to what lies beyond tariff reduction. Deeper integration requires institutions capable of implementing common rules, coordinating policies and sustaining commitments among member states (Abdin, 2013; Popović, 2010; N'djah, 2020). ECOWAS and other African regional arrangements have not always progressed neatly from one stage to the other. In perspective, trade liberalization, free movement, infrastructure cooperation and other forms of integration have often developed alongside one another, while political and institutional conditions have produced uneven progress (Desiderio, 2025; Masiko, 2022; Bonilla Bolaños, 2021; Crowley, 2006). Regional integration may therefore advance at different speeds across countries and sectors instead of through a uniform sequence (Mirakyan, 2024; Butorina, 2025).

Applied to the study, the theory provides a basis for distinguishing institutional depth from geographical reach. ECOWAS has pursued market integration and eventual economic and monetary union for several decades, giving it greater experience with sub-regional integration mechanisms (Bassey et al., 2024). AfCFTA, on the other hand, merges a much wider continental market and is presently centred on trade liberalization, while providing a broader platform for more extensive integration in the future (Eko-Raphaels & Mojekwu, 2025; Masiko, 2022). Hence, the Balassa's stages are applied to the study as a comparative guide rather than a fixed path, enabling the study to assess where ECOWAS and AfCFTA stand, what has been achieved, and how weak implementation, policy divergence and differences in national capacity affect movement toward greater integration (N'djah, 2020; Masiko, 2022; Bachellerie et al., 2010; Perskaya et al., 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative comparative-historical design based on secondary data from ECOWAS and AfCFTA documents, African Union, UNCTAD and African Development Bank publications, and relevant academic sources. The data were analyzed using qualitative content and comparative thematic analysis, with emphasis on trade liberalization, institutional arrangements, rules of origin, border management, payment systems, and intra-regional trade.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Current State of Regional Economic Integration Activities in ECOWAS and AfCFTA

ECOWAS has five decades of experience in trade liberalization, customs cooperation and free movement, but important commitments have only been partly implemented. AfCFTA, on the other hand, has a much wider geographical reach but is still translating a continental legal framework into regular commercial activity. Both should therefore be seen as connected levels of integration instead of competing arrangements since ECOWAS provides an established subregional platform, while AfCFTA seeks to link such regional markets into a wider continental system (Kostyunina, 2025; Lunenborg & Roberts, 2021).

ECOWAS has developed a substantial institutional framework since its establishment in 1975, covering trade, customs, movement of persons and monetary cooperation. However, its present position is mixed, as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) provides for the duty-free movement of qualifying products originating within member states through established rules of origin and procedures for recognizing eligible goods, thereby providing a practical mechanism for preferential intra-regional trade (ECOWAS, n.d.). This gives ECOWAS a functioning mechanism for preferential trade, even though documentation problems, non-tariff barriers and inconsistent implementation pose serious limitations. These limitations are more conspicuous when informal cross-border trade is considered, especially the movement of agricultural products, food items and other consumer goods by small-scale traders. A large part of this activity takes place outside the formal customs system, which means that official figures do not represent the full extent of trade among ECOWAS countries (OECD/SWAC, 2025). This partly explains why recorded intra-regional trade appears relatively low despite considerable commercial activity across West African borders. ECOWAS has therefore continued to improve the collection of informal cross-border trade data to obtain a more accurate estimate of the volume and value of regional commerce (ECOWAS Commission, 2025).

Free movement has been one of ECOWAS's stronger areas, achieved through the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment, which has created a relatively advanced regional mobility regime, particularly for traders, workers and other people whose livelihoods depend on cross-border movement. However, the existence of visa-free movement has not removed all practical barriers, even as ECOWAS stakeholders acknowledged in 2025 that the protocols governing the movement of persons, goods and capital were still not fully implemented, while the objective of a fully operational regional common market has been unattained (ECOWAS, 2026). Monetary integration is even less advanced, as the proposed Eco still experiences challenges relating to macroeconomic convergence and the different monetary arrangements within the subregion, leaving monetary union as an outstanding objective instead of an achieved stage of integration (ECOWAS Commission, 2025).

Some recent reforms nevertheless indicate that ECOWAS is trying to address the practical side of integration. In March 2026, customs administrations from Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal met to advance self-certification of Community origin under the ETLS. The reform enables compliant exporters to declare the origin of qualifying goods directly on commercial invoices, reducing dependence on separate certification by national authorities (ECOWAS Commission, 2026). Such administrative changes may appear minor, but they address the type of border-level friction that prevents formal trade preferences from being fully utilized.

Operating at a different scale, AfCFTA's purpose is to create a single continental market for goods and services while addressing the fragmentation of African trade through tariff liberalization, rules of origin, trade facilitation, dispute settlement and wider areas such as investment and digital trade (African Union, 2025a; UNECA, 2025). Its implementation has gradually moved beyond just negotiation, specifically through the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI), which provides a practical setting for participating countries to apply and test tariff concessions, rules of origin and customs procedures, thereby moving the AfCFTA from a largely legal framework towards actual cross-border trade (African Union, 2025a).

In terms of the interaction between both frameworks, ECOWAS participates in AfCFTA negotiations as a customs-union bloc, meaning that continental tariff liberalization holds implications for its existing tariff structure and government revenue. Lunenborg and Roberts (2021) estimated that a 97% tariff-liberalization scheme could produce ECOWAS tariff-revenue losses of about US$262.7 million, representing 12.5% of total tariff revenue, while a 90% liberalization scenario could result in losses of about US$201.9 million, or 9.7%. These estimates are relevant owing to the need for existing regional blocs to adjust their tariff systems while managing the fiscal consequences of liberalization, if effective continental integration is to be achieved.

Another area of development worthy of consideration is the financial infrastructure supporting AfCFTA, with the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) enabling cross-border payments in African currencies and reducing the need for foreign currencies in intra-African transactions. In July 2026, the Bank of Central African States (BEAC) officially joined PAPSS, extending the system into the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and strengthening the financial connection between Central Africa and the wider continental market (PAPSS, 2026). The Digital Trade Protocol similarly extends the integration agenda into electronic transactions, digital payments and other forms of technology-enabled commerce, areas that were largely absent from the previous generation of African regional agreements (African Union, 2024).

ECOWAS has built considerable experience in free movement and subregional trade, but uneven implementation has limited the extent to which its long-standing commitments have translated into a fully functioning common market. AfCFTA operates across a much wider geographical area and represents a nascent model for continental trade, even though its progress is contingent on national implementation, adequate infrastructure, customs capacity and the ability of countries with different economic structures to apply common rules effectively (Kostyunina, 2025; UNECA, 2025).

4.2 Comparative Analysis of Institutional and Operational Frameworks

ECOWAS has a longer-established subregional structure covering trade, customs and movement of persons, while AfCFTA provides the wider continental framework through which these regional markets can be connected. The difference is therefore not expressed only in geographical coverage but also in the depth of existing institutions and the extent to which agreed rules are implemented in practice.

Table 2 below shows the comparison according to structural and institutional governance of both frameworks.

Table 2: Structural and Institutional Governance of ECOWAS and AfCFTA

Comparative Metric	**ECOWAS**	**AfCFTA**
Geographic scope and membership	Sub-regional bloc of 15 West African states (ECOWAS Commission, n.d.).	Continental framework covering 55 African states, with 49 having ratified and deposited instruments of ratification by 2025 (African Union, 2025b).
Primary administrative body	ECOWAS Commission, Abuja, Nigeria.	AfCFTA Secretariat, Accra, Ghana.
Decision-making structure	Authority of Heads of State and Government, Council of Ministers and other Community institutions (ECOWAS Commission, n.d.).	AU Assembly, Council of Ministers and AfCFTA technical and implementation bodies (African Union, 2025).
Legal and institutional character	Regional integration framework with binding Community instruments and a regional judicial institution.	Continental treaty-based free-trade framework implemented through State Parties and national institutions.
Dispute settlement	ECOWAS Court of Justice, with provisions allowing individuals direct access in specified circumstances (ECOWAS Commission, 2005).	AfCFTA Dispute Settlement Body, principally concerned with disputes between State Parties (African Union, 2018).

Source: Author's Compilation

The institutional difference is necessary because ECOWAS has developed considerably deeper regional institutions, which has not however eliminated implementation problems. However, AfCFTA operates with a broader but less expanded consolidated institutional structure because its implementation is dependent on cooperation between the continental institutions and national governments. By August 2025, 49 countries had ratified and deposited their instruments of ratification, while 48 of the 50 tariff schedules had been verified. In addition, 25 State Parties had formally indicated their readiness to trade, and agreement had been reached on 92.43% of the Rules of Origin (African Union, 2025b). This indicates that the continental framework has moved beyond the negotiation stage, although implementation is still incomplete.

Table 3: Economic Scope, Trade Volumes and Regulatory Frameworks

Operational Metric	**ECOWAS**	**AfCFTA**
Target market size	More than 400 million people (ECOWAS Commission, 2026).	About 1.3 billion people**,** with a combined GDP of about US$3.4 trillion (African Union, 2025b).

Intra-bloc trade	Intra-regional trade remains below 15% of total trade (ECOWAS Commission, 2026).	Intra-African exports accounted for 14.6% of total African exports in 2024 (African Union, 2025).
Tariff liberalization	ETLS provides preferential, duty-free treatment for qualifying originating products (ECOWAS Commission, n.d.).	AfCFTA provides for the progressive elimination of tariffs on 90% of tariff lines**,** with 97% targeted under the agreed liberalization framework (African Union, 2025).
Rules of origin	Community rules determine eligibility for ETLS preferences.	Product-specific rules of origin seek to prevent trade deflection while encouraging African sourcing and regional value chains (Ajibo & Kaime, 2025).

Source: Author's Compilation

The figures indicate that a larger regional market has not, by itself, resulted in a corresponding increase in intra-regional trade. ECOWAS has a smaller market and decades of experience with regional trade arrangements, but intra-regional trade is still below 15% (ECOWAS Commission, 2026). AfCFTA has created a larger potential market, but intra-African exports accounted for only 14.6% of total African exports in 2024, which denotes that African economies still trade more extensively with external markets than with one another (African Union, 2025b).

In the Rules of origin, ECOWAS has an established system under the ETLS, whereas AfCFTA has had to develop rules capable of operating across a much wider range of production structures. Ajibo and Kaime (2025) argue that AfCFTA rules of origin enhances regional value chains by encouraging producers to source inputs within Africa, but that their effectiveness is influenced by factors including adequate productive and institutional capacity.

Comparatively, ECOWAS has had more time to build subregional institutions and cooperation mechanisms, whereas AfCFTA covers a much larger geographical and economic space. ECOWAS therefore still faces the task of making its existing commitments work more effectively by reducing trade barriers and closing implementation gaps. AfCFTA has the difficult task of applying common rules across countries with considerable differences in economic and institutional capacity. ECOWAS and AfCFTA are therefore more closely connected than competing, since existing subregional arrangements provide part of the foundation for the wider continental market.

4.3 Comparative Challenges of Regional Economic Integration in ECOWAS and AfCFTA.

The comparison focuses on the practical conditions that influence how ECOWAS and AfCFTA promote cross-border trade and economic cooperation. Table 4 summarizes the main areas of concern, the position of each framework, and specific examples supporting the comparison.

Table 4: Comparative Challenges and Prospects of ECOWAS and AfCFTA

Dimension	ECOWAS	AfCFTA	Evidence/Examples
Infrastructure and trade costs	Weak transport infrastructure and high transaction costs limits the movement of goods within West Africa (ECOWAS, 2025; AUC/OECD, 2025).	Infrastructure deficiencies across African economies increase the cost of participating in the continental market and regional value chains (AUC/OECD, 2025; UNECA, 2025).	ECOWAS identifies infrastructure as a key driver of regional integration, while the OECD estimates that Africa requires about US$155 billion annually in infrastructure investment to support stronger growth (ECOWAS, 2025; AUC/OECD, 2025).
Trade finance	Limited access to finance constrains firms' ability to participate fully in regional trade, particularly smaller businesses (Afreximbank, 2025).	The wider African trade-finance gap is a constraint on firms seeking to enter cross-border supply chains (Afreximbank, 2025; AfDB, 2026).	Africa's unmet trade-finance demand was estimated at about US$74–92 billion in 2024 (AfDB, 2026).
Overlapping commitments	ECOWAS must reconcile its existing customs arrangements and tariff structure with AfCFTA commitments.	AfCFTA operates alongside existing RECs, creating differences in tariffs, rules of origin and administrative procedures (Medinilla et al., 2019; Prasad, 2021).	ECOWAS's existing customs union arrangements have to be accommodated within the broader AfCFTA framework instead of simply being replaced (Prasad, 2021).
Economic disparities	Large differences in economic weight exist among members, with Nigeria accounting for about 62.7% of ECOWAS regional GDP (ECOWAS, 2025).	Differences in productive and institutional capacity affect countries' ability to participate in continental value chains (UNCTAD, 2026).	Smaller economies may face greater adjustment pressures when competing with firms from larger and more industrialized economies.
Regional value chains	Existing regional trade provides a base for greater production and processing across West Africa, but weak infrastructure and limited industrial capacity remain constraints.	AfCFTA provides a wider framework for cross-border production and sourcing through its rules of origin and cumulation arrangements.	UNCTAD (2026) finds that limited awareness of rules, customs complexity and high logistics costs restrict the use of cross-border cumulation.
Market expansion	ECOWAS provides an established subregional market of roughly 400 million people, creating scope for deeper intra-regional production and trade.	AfCFTA connects more than 1.4 billion people and provides a much larger continental market.	UNECA (2025) estimates that full implementation could increase intra-African trade by about 45%, equivalent to approximately US$276 billion, by 2045.

Financial integration	The proposed Eco is constrained by difficulties surrounding monetary convergence.	PAPSS provides a practical mechanism for facilitating cross-border payments without requiring immediate monetary union.	PAPSS has expanded its payment network across African markets, allowing transactions to be settled through participating African currencies and payment systems (PAPSS, 2025).

Source: Author's Compilation

ECOWAS and AfCFTA face similar integration problems, but at different levels. ECOWAS is dealing mainly with infrastructure gaps, border delays and differences in economic capacity within an established subregional system. AfCFTA has the more extensive task of applying common trade rules across countries with different institutional and economic conditions, with its implementation having to fit with existing ECOWAS tariff arrangements, rules of origin and regional institutions. As a result, the effectiveness of AfCFTA in West Africa is partly influenced by how well ECOWAS coordinates its existing trade commitments with the wider continental framework.

4.4 Prospects for Regional Economic Integration in ECOWAS AND AfCFTA

Despite the existing constraints, there is still considerable scope for deeper regional integration, particularly because AfCFTA brings together a continental market of more than 1.4 billion people, while UNECA (2025) estimates that full implementation could raise intra-African trade by about 45%, representing approximately US$276 billion by 2045. The more useful response, therefore, is for African countries to focus on the conditions that can make this potential achievable, especially by moving away from dependence on raw-material exports and building stronger production and supply links between countries. This is buttressed by Udofa & Ekeuwei (2023) who submitted that the experience of more advanced countries in Asia, and more specifically, the USA and Canada, indicates that integration becomes more domestically beneficial when trade liberalization is accompanied by diversification, investment and improvements in domestic productive capacity. African countries therefore need to use regional integration not only to expand markets but also to strengthen production and reduce excessive dependence on primary exports

The experience of Asia is useful in this regard, although its approach should not be transferred to Africa without considering the continent's different conditions. Asian economies combined trade liberalization with investment and cross-border production networks, enabling countries at different stages of development to become more economically connected without first establishing a highly centralized political or monetary system (Canuto & Tran, 2025). Serving an important lesson for ECOWAS and AfCFTA, practical measures that make cross-border trade, investment, payments and production easier for businesses should be enhanced before more ambitious forms of institutional integration are pursued.

Financial integration is also a practical area in which this approach can be strengthened and sustained. PAPSS is designed to facilitate cross-border payments through African payment systems and reduce reliance on external currencies, which is relevant because difficulties in making payments can restrict trade even where tariff barriers have been reduced. PAPSS noted that its network had enabled real-time cross-border payments across 17 countries, linking 14 national switches and more than 150 commercial banks, although the network has expanded as new institutions join (PAPSS, 2025). ECOWAS and AfCFTA should therefore give greater attention to expanding and strengthening such payment arrangements, since improving the practical ability of firms to pay and receive money across borders may produce faster gains in regional trade than attempting to establish a single currency before the necessary level of monetary convergence has been achieved.

5. CONCLUSION

Regional integration is often assessed by the agreements and commitments made by governments, but its real value depends on how these arrangements work in practice at the border. A reduction in tariffs may have little effect on trade where traders still face delays, excessive documentation, poor transport infrastructure, inconsistent customs procedures and difficulties with cross-border payments. This study therefore examined ECOWAS and AfCFTA from the standpoint of what their integration arrangements actually make possible, rather than only what their treaties intend to achieve.

The comparison points to a difference in both experience and scale with ECOWAS building a substantial subregional framework around free movement, trade liberalization and regional cooperation, though infrastructure problems, non-tariff restrictions, uneven compliance and political differences still hinder its operation as a common market. AfCFTA collectivizes a much larger market and has entered practical implementation through the Guided Trade Initiative and PAPSS. Its practical test, however, lies in whether the rules agreed at the continental level can be effectively applied in day-to-day trade.

The comparison also shows that ECOWAS and AfCFTA should not be viewed or considered as competing arrangements since ECOWAS offers an established subregional base from which West African countries can participate in the continental market, while AfCFTA gives that market a scale that ECOWAS alone cannot provide. Therefore, further progress in African integration is unlikely to result from the adoption of additional agreements alone, instead, progress will depend on reducing the cost and uncertainty of cross-border trade and making existing arrangements easier for businesses to use.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study's findings, the study recommends that:

1. ECOWAS central banks should complete the connection of national payment switches to PAPSS and expand access through commercial banks and fintech providers. This would make local-currency settlement more accessible to SMEs and reduce some of the payment difficulties associated with cross-border trade.
2. The ECOWAS Commission and AfCFTA Secretariat should establish a joint mechanism to reconcile tariff schedules, rules of origin and customs procedures to reduce the confusion created by overlapping regional and continental rules.
3. ECOWAS and AfCFTA institutions should direct industrial and adjustment financing towards countries and sectors with limited productive capacity.

Priority should be given to processing facilities, transport links, skills development and inputs needed to connect smaller economies to regional manufacturing networks.

4. Border agencies should introduce simplified digital clearance procedures for small consignments, particularly agricultural and retail goods. ECOWAS should also build on existing efforts to improve informal trade data and provide small traders with clearer information on registration, customs requirements and access to formal payment channels.
5. ECOWAS member states should give priority to roads, border posts, logistics facilities and digital customs systems along major intra-regional trade corridors. The emphasis should be on infrastructure that reduces the time and cost of moving goods, rather than infrastructure expansion without a clear connection to trade flows.

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