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THE ECOWAS REGIONAL INTEGRATION AGENDA: A MODEL-BASED ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established primarily to achieve an economic integration goal in the West Africa sub-region. In-spite of its existence for 49 years, it is often assessed and projected mainly via the prism of its peace support and peace keeping operations through ECOMOG, a role that was forced upon it circumstantially. The objective of this study is to assess ECOWAS as a regional economic integration agency using a standard economic integration model. Data for the assessment was sourced through secondary sources. The study showed that ECOWAS regional integration process is in four (4) stages or levels: (1) a free trade area; (2) a customs union; (3) a common market, and (4) an economic and monetary union. The findings revealed that ECOWAS has achieved level one (1) and is in the process of fully achieving level two (2) in the regional integration processes scale. Levels three (3) and four (4) are still outstanding. The study concluded that, for it to achieve its primary goal of economic integration, it is important for ECOWAS to be more aggressive and purposeful in the pursuit of its original regional economic integration agenda, and to expose itself to regular assessment using a reliable, realistic and acceptable economic integration model.

Key Words: Region, Integration, ECOWAS, EU, Protocol, Treaties.

1. Introduction

For decades, the concept and practice of regional integration has been known as a way to encourage trade flow between member states, to facilitate more efficient allocation of resources by stimulating competition and increasing the capacity of the internal market, and this is expected to result in faster economic growth and, over the time increased per capita income. (Butorina & Borko, 2022). Although the European Union (EU) is seen as a model for regional integration (Jetschke & Murray 2020), its evolution was very much in the form of integrating actors initially concerned with security issues, before embracing issues of economic, social, cultural, environmental, and other developmental needs (Komla 2007). Significantly unlike the EU, the major propellant and motivating factor for the formation of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was the need to foster economic and political cooperation of the contiguous countries in the region, while the issue of security

emerged as a later day sine qua non for the realization of the organization's original goals. The birth of ECOWAS brought great hope and expectations for state and non-state actors alike, who envisaged business across borders as a concept that is better promoted through regional integration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Processes of Regional Integration

Jalloh, C.C. & Abass, A. (2014) opined that, sub-regional organizations established around the world have aimed at developing their integration arrangements via economic instruments, to reduce tariff and other non-tariff barriers to trade. Preferential trade areas, free trade areas, customs unions, common markets and economic unions are all key features that constitute part of the foundational bedrock of contemporary international trading system. Bamba, (2009), explained that there are five stages of regional integration processes. These are, preferential trade arrangement, free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union. Chidi Julius Lloy (2019) distinguished between regional integration and economic integration. He averred that, while economic integration concept can be used generically in reference to growing economic ties among countries which may or may not be geographically contiguous, regional integration can cover the full range of public sector activity, including not only the coordination of economic policies, but also regional security, human rights, education, health, research and technology and natural resources management among contiguous countries. He then listed five levels of regional integration with their features as follows:

1. **Preferential Trade Arrangement** - Provision of merely lower barriers among participating nations, while non-members face higher levels of barriers to trade. It isthe loosest form of economic integration.

2. **Free Trade Area** - All barriers to trade are removed among members. Each member retains its own barriers to trade with non-members.

3. **Customs Union** - No tariff or other trade barriers between members. They have common external tariff (CEF) on the rest of the world by custom members.

4. **Common Market** - Have all characteristics of customs union. Has no invisible trade restriction, contains harmonization of trading standards and practices. Monetary and fiscal policies of member states are harmonized.

5. **Economic Union** - Most advance type of economic integration. It has all attributes of a common market such as coordination of macroeconomic and budgetary policies and common currency.

Kenton, W. (2021), listed seven stages often used by specialists to define economic integration. These are: a preferential trading area, a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, an economic union, an economic and monetary union, and complete economic integration.

The final stage represents a total harmonization of fiscal policy and a complete monetary union.

All of the regional integration organizations of the world had always been propelled by one context or the other and the propelling context could be strategic, ideological, political or economic. Economic integration was the principal reason for the emergence of ECOWAS. In-spite of this, poverty remains a chronic challenge in the sub-region. Oduro, A.D. and Aryee, I. (2003) in their working paper titled "Chronic Poverty in West Africa", painted a gloomy picture of the poverty situation of the sub region as follows:

> it has a population of approximately 250 million people, with just under half of this population living in Nigeria; it consists largely of low-income countries with Gross National Income per capita ranging from US$1330 in Cape Verde to US$180 in Guinea Bissau and US$130 in Sierra Leone in 2000; the median Gross National Income per capita in 2000 was US$330. …… a situation that is suggestive of a substantial proportion of the population being poor over extended periods of time.

As at the time of Oduro and Ayree's conclusion, ECOWAS had been in existence for 28 yrs. Although West Africa recorded an impressive economic growth between year 2000 and 2020 (Oxfam, 2021), the benefits went to a tiny few, increasing the gap between the richest people and the poorest, with 1% of West Africans owning more than everyone else in the region combined (Oxfam, 2021). Hence, Ye, Yemin *et al* (2024) affirm that Africa is the poorest continent on earth. Furthermore, in spite of its 49 years of existence, its achievements in maintaining peace in the sub-region, and the annual reports of achievements often given by the ECOWAS Commission, ECOWAS needs to be evaluated in the context of a regional integration model as in this study.

3. Methodology

The work examined the emergence of ECOWAS with a detailed look at its Treaty and protocols up to date through the use of secondary data, this was with the view to laying a foundation for an unbiased scrutiny of its achievements. A listing of its achievements was done in line with its stated objectives. These achievements were then subjected to a regional integration model in order to obtain a model-based assessment. Various ECOWAS documents, such as ECOWAS treaties, protocols, conventions, annual reports, conference reports and speeches, publications as well as documents on ECOWAS policy positions on regional integration, were used. Data was sourced from published scholarly works available in books, academic journals, seminar papers, periodicals, and internet. The data gathered is cross matched with the theory adopted for analyses in the study.

4. Theoretical Framework

Regional Integration theories seek to explain the establishment of regional international organisations. They explain why and under which conditions sovereign states decide to transfer political authorities to regional organisations; how regional organisations expand their tasks, competences and members; and what impact they have on states in their region. (Schimmelfennig, 2018). The EU is the standard point of reference, and the three common theories that explain EU's existence are intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism and post-

functionalism. Neofunctionalism regards transnational corporations, interest groups and supranational actors as the major players in the integration process, undermining national governments. Post functionalism propounds an integration scenario that ultimately undermines national sovereignty to create a politically integrated region. Intergovernmentalism however argues that national governments are the main actors in the integration process, and that they use regional integration to achieve their national economic and security interests. Verdum (2020) highlighted the fact that, integration scholars used integration theories to explain why integration progresses or stalls. This is achieved through the application of integration models in assessing the achievements of such organisations. Students of integration particularly those working within the discipline of political science, he argued, adopt a theoretical framework to aid their scholarly analysis. The theories point to where to look for the actors and where to find mechanisms of integration, so as to know where to expect the action to be. Intergovernmentalism, he concluded, is one such theory.

For the purpose of this work, intergovernmentalism is used as the theory of analysis. This is particularly suitable because in analysing relevance of ECOWAS and determining the extent of its integration role, we shall be dealing only with State actors whose objective is the protection of national interests. Jean-Paul Rodrigue's model is used as model of assessment.

5. Regional Integration in ECOWAS: A discursive analysis

In exploring ECOWAS as a regional integration organisation, the following questions will be answered:

a. What is the regional integration process adopted by ECOWAS?
b. What level of integration has ECOWAS reached considering its stated achievements to date?

5.1 Processes of ECOWAS regional integration

Jalloh & Abass (2014) opined that, sub-regional organisations established around the world have aimed at developing their integration arrangements via economic instruments, to reduce tariff and other non-tariff barriers to trade. Preferential trade areas, free trade areas, customs unions, common markets and economic unions are all key features that constitute part of the foundational bedrock of contemporary international trading system. Bamba (2009), explained that there are five stages of regional integration processes. These are, preferential trade arrangement, free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union. Chidi Julius Lloy (2019) distinguished between regional integration and economic integration. He averred that, while economic integration concept can be used generically in reference to growing economic ties among countries which may or may not be geographically contiguous, regional integration can cover the full range of public sector activity, including not only the coordination of economic policies, but also regional security, human rights, education, health, research and technology and natural resources management among contiguous countries. He then listed five levels of regional integration with their features as follows:

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In his work, the geography of transport system, Jean-Paul Rodrigue, (2020) posited that economic integration can be classified into five additive levels, each present in the global landscape. These are: **free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union** (single market) and **political union. The model is presented in the figure below.**

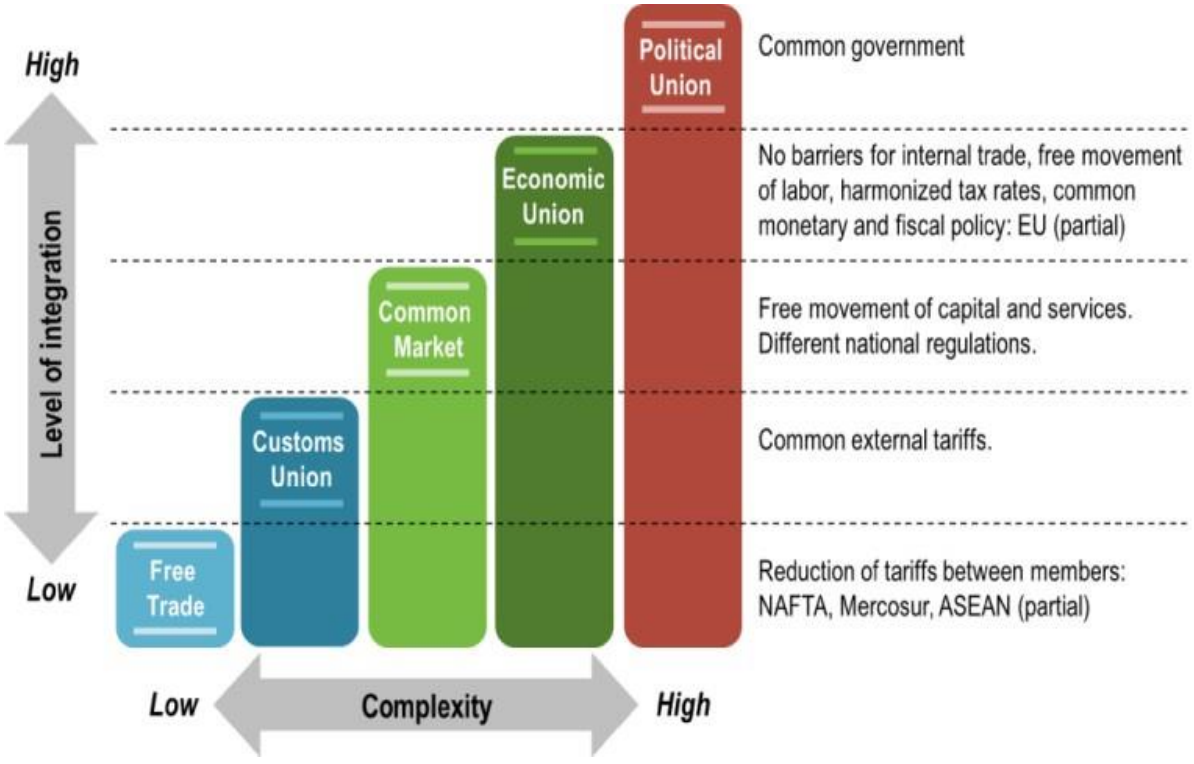


Figure 1. Levels of Economic Integration by **Jean-Paul Rodrigue, (2020)**

Putting this model on a scale of 1-5, free trade is on level 1, customs union is on level 2, common market on level 3, economic union on level 4, and political integration which is a complex stage is in the final level which is level 5.

5.2 Achievements of ECOWAS.

In giving a fair assessment of ECOWAS as a regional integration agency, it is important to examine in detail its achievements over the years.

At the end of its fifty-eighth ordinary session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government held on 23rd January 2021 via videoconference, ECOWAS reaffirmed that "the major achievements of ECOWAS through the years cut across all sectors and include":

(1) The adoption of the Macroeconomic Convergence Report by the ECOWAS Convergence Council.

(2) Establishment of the ECOWAS Monetary Institute (EMI).

(3) Adoption of methodological guides for the harmonization of Public Finance Statistics, Government Financial Operations Tables (TOFE), External Trade

Statistics, Balance of Payment (BOP) and International Investment Position (IIP).

(4) Conclusion of the review of the Sahel Strategy document and its action plan to boost regional security.

(5) Formulation of an ECOWAS Common Trade Policy (CTP) and ECOWAS Trade Development Strategy

(6) Completion of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the signing by 13 Member States.

(7) Custom Union in the offing with the implementation of the CET by Eight Member-States.

(8) Free Movement of goods and persons boosted with the adoption of the ECOWAS Biometric Identity Card to facilitate mobility and promote security in the region.

(9) Drafting of a Regional Border Management Manual for use in immigration/security training institutions.

(10) Launching of the Ecolink project, which aims to transform and improve key operations within the ECOWAS Community.

(11) The Systems, Applications & Products (SAP) component of Ecolink aims at improving the financial management systems and ensuring real-time information for effective decision-making in the Community Institutions.

(12) Promotion of strategic products for food security and sovereignty including combating cross-border livestock disease.

(13) Renewed efforts to enhance the environmental governance, general environmental protection, capacity building as well as Sustainable resource management for development in the Member States.

(14) Re-award of the contract for the construction of the Sèmè-Kraké Joint Border Post (Benin-Nigeria)

(15) Evaluation of tenders completed for the works, contract for final engineering designs for the rehabilitation of sections of the Enugu-Bemenda road between Nigeria and Cameroon and the construction of a Joint Border Post (JBP) and a Border Bridge at Mfum border.

(16) Feasibility study for the extension of the West African Gas Pipeline Network concluded

(17) Development of Regional Power Market with the setting up of regulatory and economic environment.

(18) Promotion of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies and services.

(19) An ECOWAS Directive on Energy Efficiency Buildings (EEB) aimed at promoting energy efficiency in buildings in ECOWAS Member States has been developed by ECREEE

(20) Establishment of a Regional Centre for Disease Control.

(21) Maintain and strengthen the actions undertaken to consolidate peace and security in the region.

(22) Consolidating the implementation of the, Common Market, Trade Liberalization Scheme (TLS) and the Protocol on Free Movement of persons, goods and services. Signing of the Supplementary Act on Dakar-Abidjan Corridor, and laying of the first stone for the regional electricity project. The project covers Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

(23) The regional peace and security architecture provides for conflict prevention, management and resolution, as well as early warning System. The latter allows ECOWAS to analyse human security issues and anticipate political crises, food shortages, health problems and disasters.

(24) ECOWAS is now poised in the coming years to intensify efforts aimed at sustaining peace and political stability already achieved, in order to

> create the best conditions for the development of the region." (ECOWAS, 2013)

ECOWAS follows the integration process already discussed. In a collaborative study between Spain and ECOWAS supervised by the Directorate of Cooperation with Africa and Asia, four stages were identified in the process of ECOWAS regional integration. These are the creation of a Free Trade Area, a Customs Union, a Common Market and, finally, an Economic and Monetary Union. Each of these four stages, especially the first and second stages however, contain various other programmes that must be implemented by ECOWAS in order to meet the criteria of the particular stage.

Drawing from ECOWAS Revised Treaty and the opinion of scholars, the processes of regional integration in ECOWAS include: economic integration through a free trade area; a customs union; a common market and an economic union. This is contained in its treaty as highlighted below:

a. **the establishment of a common market** (Article 3.2d: i - iii). This includes:
   (1) the establishment of **a free trade area** at the community level.
   (2) the establishment of **a customs union**.
   (3) the establishment of **a common market.**

b. **the establishment of an economic union** (Article 3.2e) through the adoption of common policies in the economic, financial, social and cultural sectors, and the creation of a monetary union**.**

It needs to be stated that ECOWAS did not set out to achieve a political union. In its entire treaty, nowhere was a political union mentioned, while the treaty was emphatic on economic union both in the preambles and several of its provisions. Therefore, any assessment of ECOWAS as a regional integration organisation must be done strictly as one of regional economic integration.

6. Assessment of ECOWAS Level of Regional Integration.

The list of the achievements of ECOWAS above as released by the Directorate of Communication ECOWAS (2016), constitute **"the major achievements of ECOWAS through the years"** and **"cut across all sectors".** It will form the basis of assessing the level of regional integration achieved by ECOWAS in its 49 years of existence. Of the entire list of 24, fifteen (15) cover foundational or preparatory actions and programmes targeting infrastructure, power, energy, free trade, immigration, customs union, and economic union; these are serials 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22 and 24. Three (3) are administrative actions (serials 1, 10 and 11); three (3) are security actions (serials 4, 21 and 23); two (2) are governance actions (serials 13 & 20); while **only one (serial 8) is an accomplished economic integration action**, albeit with challenges. It is now pertinent to match these achievements with the assessment model adopted for this study by providing answers to the following questions:

6.1 Has ECOWAS effectively created a Free Trade Area? This is the first step towards the targeted economic union vide article 3.2d(i) of ECOWAS treaty. The facilitating instrument is the ECOWAS "Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment"

which was adopted in May 1979. It granted ECOWAS citizens the right to free entry and exit within ECOWAS states for a maximum of 90days in the first instance. The protocol abolished the use of visas by ECOWAS citizens entering ECOWAS countries while such citizens were only required to possess valid travel certificates and international health certificates. It allowed ECOWAS countries the right to refuse the entry of an inadmissible immigrant into their countries under their respective laws and in a case where an individual is deported from a country, that country should guarantee the security of that individual in terms of life, property and family.

In July 1986 the delayed right of residence came into force when all member states ratified it although the right of establishment hasn't been implemented. In order to achieve the objectives of Article 2(2) the treaty requires member states to abolish all forms of obstacles preventing the protocol on free movement from being implemented, the abolition was to serve as a foundation for regional cooperation and integration in West Africa. All these provisions came into force through supplementary protocols to strengthen the protocol on free movement of persons, right of residence and establishment.

In ensuring the free movement of persons, right of residence and establishment therefore, ECOWAS adopted the following protocols:

1. Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. (29th May, 1979.) Original Protocol

2. The Protocol on the Establishment of an ECOWAS Brown Card relating to Motor Vehicle Third Party Liability Insurance. (29th May, 1982).

3. Convention Regulating Inter-State Road Transportation between ECOWAS Member States. (29th May, 1982).

4. Convention Relating to Inter-State Road Transit of Goods. (29th May, 1982).

5. Supplementary Protocol on the Code of Conduct for the implementation of the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the right of residence and establishment. (6th July 1985)

6. Supplementary Protocol on the second phase (right of residence) of the protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. (1st July 1986)

7. Supplementary Protocol amending and complementing the provisions of Article 7 of the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the right of residence and establishment. (25th June, 1988)

8. Supplementary Convention establishing a Community Guarantee Mechanism for inter-state road transit of goods. (29 May 1990)

9. Supplementary Protocol A/SP2/5/ 90 on the implementation of the Third Phase (Right of Establishment) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment. (29 May 1990)

10. Convention on Extradition (6th August 1994)

11. Supplementary Protocol amending the Protocol on the establishment of an ECOWAS Brown Card relating to motor vehicle third party liability insurance. (21st December 2001)

As at December 2013 ECOWAS annual report, of these eleven protocols that touch on free movement of ECOWAS citizens within ECOWAS, ten (10) were fully in force. Cape Verde had not ratified five protocols, Cote D'Ivoire and Niger Republic each had three outstanding for ratification, Benin Republic was yet to ratify two, while Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Liberia had one each outstanding. Of the fifteen members, only Nigeria, Ghana and Mali had ratified the Supplementary Protocol amending the Protocol on the establishment of an ECOWAS Brown Card relating to motor vehicle third party liability insurance.

In summary, these protocols as a community of laws, introduced a unified ECOWAS passport and brown card to aid the free movement of persons, vehicles, goods and services across states. They granted the right of residence to visiting ECOWAS citizens beyond the initial 90days, while migrants got the right to seek employment, provided they acquire an ECOWAS residence permit. Member states are to grant these migrant workers that have conformed to the rules governing their residency under the ECOWAS protocol, equal treatment with nationals of the host country in areas such as business activities, and in the case of job loss, re-employment and training and also participation in socio-cultural activities.

With these protocols active, ECOWAS has effectively created a free trade area and has satisfied the requirement of level 1 of the Economic Integration model of Jean-Paul Rodrigue, (2020), which is adopted for this study.

6.2 Has ECOWAS Created a Customs Union? In moving towards a customs union, ECOWAS has put in place the following protocols and conventions to create the necessary environment for a customs union:

1. Protocol relating to the definition of the concept of products originating from member states of ECOWAS. (5th November 1976.)

2. Protocol relating to the re-exportation within the ECOWAS, of goods imported from third countries. (5th November 1976.)

3. Protocol relating to the assessment of loss of revenue by member states. (5th November 1976.)

4. Protocol relating to the fund for cooperation, compensation and development of the ECOWAS. (5th November 1976.)

5. Supplementary protocol amending Protocol relating to the definition of the concept of products originating from member states. (29th May 1979.)

6. Supplementary protocol amending Article VIII of the French Text of the Protocol relating to the definition of the concept of products originating from member states. (Treatment of Mixtures). (28th May 1980.)

7. Supplementary protocol amending Article II of the Protocol relating to the definition of the concept of products originating from member states. (29th May 1981.)

8. Convention for Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters. (29th May 1982.)

9. Convention for the temporary importation of passenger vehicles into member states. (6th July 1985.)

10. Protocol relating to the definition of the concept of products originating from member states of ECOWAS.(31st January 2003.)

11. Protocol relating to the application of compensation procedures for loss of revenue incurred by ECOWAS member states as a result of trade liberalization scheme. 31st January 2003. (Annexed to the Treaty of ECOWAS)

All these protocols and conventions contained provisions to aid the creation, create, and sustain the emergence of a customs union in ECOWAS. They also provided for compensation to member states for loss of revenue due to their membership of the customs union. However, for a customs union to emerge, ECOWAS needed to put in place "a set of uniform/common external policies and tariffs for trade with non-members". In other words, it must have a free trade area and operate a set of common external tariffs for trade with non-members.

By ECOWAS own admission in the list of its achievements, it is yet to attain the status of a customs union. Only 10 member states have so far implemented the Common External Tariff (CET), which came into effect in Jan. 2015, with a five-year transition plan. Regarding the Customs Union which is a higher step than that of the free trade area, the process of its implementation has been extremely difficult due to the complexity of work and economic and political issues for Member States to move towards the harmonisation of customs tariffs at Community level. (ECOWAS Report 2016). The Customs Union is yet to be fully realised. (Tinubu, B.A. 2023).

6.3 Has ECOWAS Established a Common Market?

The definition of a common market requires that the integrating member states establish a free trade area; a customs union and free movement of production factors such as labour and capital, without any restriction among member countries. **If one of the conditions is not satisfied, the resulting market is not a common market.** With the absence of a customs union, ECOWAS does not qualify to rank as a common market irrespective of the deployment of any of the pre-requisites of a common market. The Common Market is yet to be fully realised. (Tinubu, B.A. 2023)

6.4 Has ECOWAS Created an Economic Union?

By definition, when members of a common market progress to the level of integrating the monetary and fiscal policies of member states such that taxation and government spending are coordinated, while a common currency and fixed exchange rates are adopted, it becomes an economic union. The first operating key requirement is that only a common market can metamorphose into an economic union, and in the process adopt a common currency. ECOWAS has not attained this status.

7. Discussion of Findings

Intergovernmentalism argues that national governments are the main actors in the integration process, and that they use regional integration to achieve their national economic and security interests. This is true of ECOWAS as only sovereign countries, fifteen (15), of West Africa are members. Being sovereign nations, the pace of integration which is dependent on ratification of protocols and conventions, is dependent on domestic laws. Verdum, A. (2020) highlighted the fact that, this explains why integration progresses or stalls. Through the application of an integration model in assessing the achievements of the organization, one is able to arrive at a scholarly conclusion.

Jean-Paul Rodrigue's (2020) model is used to assess the achievements of ECOWAS. The model has five-levels of integration, namely: Free Trade Area, Customs Union, Common Market, Economic Union and Political Union. Since by its treaty, ECOWAS does not set out to achieve a political union, only four levels will be applied in assessing ECOWAS. This is presented in the table below:

Table 1. Level of Economic Integration achieved by ECOWAS so far.

Level of Integration	Nomenclature	Features and Pre-Requisites.	Remarks
1.	**Free Trade Area**	1.Free Movement of Persons. 2.Unrestricted Residence. 3. Right to Establish businesses.	**ACHIEVED**
2.	Customs Union	1. Free Trade Area.[YES] 2.Unified Customs Tariffs. **(Compulsory but in progress)**	**NOT ACHIEVED**
3.	Common Market	1. Customs Union **(Compulsory)** 2. Free movement of capital and services. 3. Different national regulations	**NOT ACHIEVED**

4.	Economic Union	1.Common Market. **(Compulsory)** 2. No barriers to internal trade. 3. Free movement of labour. 4. Harmonized tax rates. 5.Common monetary and fiscal policy. 6. Common currency.	**NOT ACHEVED**

Source: Author

The above table shows that ECOWAS has only fully achieved Level 1 of Economic Integration, i.e. a free trade area. Going by the assessment model adopted in the study and the achievements of ECOWAS as discussed, a Custom Union (Level 2); Common Market (Level 3) and Economic Union (Level 4); are yet to be achieved. "Although the Free Trade Area has been attained in ECOWAS, the Customs Union and Common Market have yet to be fully realised." (Tinubu, B.A. 2023).

8. Conclusion

The study assessed ECOWAS as a regional integration agency. It concludes that, in view of the economic integration model adopted for analysis, ECOWAS is only at Level 1 of 4 levels in the path towards economic integration. Although the organisation has transformed its secretariat to a Commission, and has changed the status of its Executive Secretary to that of President of the Commission in an effort to have an effective administrative machine that can implement its programmes, its primary goal of creating an economic union is far behind.

An incidental finding of this study is that, trending searchlight on ECOWAS seems to focus on components of the organisation's activities. Equally, annual reports simply reel out lists of "achievements" which are not matched with its primary objective. It is important and desirable to expose ECOWAS to regular integration model assessment if its regional economic integration agenda is to be fulfilled.

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