

# The “Isms” of Regional Integration: What Do Underlying Interstate Preferences Hold for the ECOWAS Union?

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*As the world starts reopening following the lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, regional collaborations and trade matters have resurfaced. While the Brexit (British exit from the EU) negotiations have dominated regional trade headlines, the fate of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement is also being rethought. In all these, however, the issue of regional integration, administration, and governance of treaties and policies remain contentious areas. Considering these concerns, this article draws insights from the regionalization of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). We explore the “isms” (that is, the ideologies of realism, neoliberalism, intergovernmentalism, institutionalism, and regionalism) that impact upon the achievement and implementation of the regional governance system. We analyze ECOWAS’ current strategy toward the integration of the West African region, its successes, and its failures. Also, we highlight some of the challenges concerning the implementation of treaties. Finally, we evaluate the underlying national preferences and the implications for the “isms” in many settings.*

**Keywords:** Regional Integration, Regionalism, International Cooperation, Trade, Regionalization, ECOWAS, Realism, Institutionalism, Intergovernmentalism, Neoliberalism, Regional Organizations, Policy Changes, Comparative Policy, African Continental Free Trade Agreement, West African Monetary Union, Brexit.

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**Los "ismos" de la integración regional: ¿Qué tienen las preferencias interestatales subyacentes para la Unión de la CEDEAO?**

*A medida que el mundo comienza a reabrirse después de los recientes cierres provocados por la pandemia de COVID-19, las colaboraciones regionales y los asuntos comerciales han resurgido. Si bien las negociaciones del Brexit (salida británica de la Unión Europea [UE]) dominan los titulares del comercio regional, también se está repensando el destino del Tratado de Libre Comercio Continental Africano (AfCFTA). En todos estos, sin embargo, la cuestión de la integración regional, la administración y la gobernanza de los tratados y las políticas siguen siendo áreas polémicas. Teniendo en cuenta estas preocupaciones, este artículo se basa en la regionalización de la Comunidad Económica de los Estados de África Occidental (CEDEAO). Exploramos los "ismos" (es decir, las ideologías del realismo, neoliberalismo, intergubernamentalismo, institucionalismo y regionalismo) que impactan en el logro e implementación del sistema de gobernanza regional. Analizamos la estrategia actual de la CEDEAO hacia la integración de la región de África Occidental, sus éxitos y fracasos. Además, destacamos algunos de los desafíos relacionados con la implementación de los tratados. Finalmente, evaluamos las preferencias nacionales subyacentes y las implicaciones para los "ismos" en muchos entornos.*

**Palabras Clave:** Regionalismo, Integración, Realismo, Institucionalismo, Intergubernamentalismo, Neoliberalismo, Organizaciones regionales, Cambios en la política, Política comparada, Tratado de Libre Comercio Continental Africano, Unión Monetaria de África Occidental, ECOWAS.

**区域一体化“学说”：潜在的各国偏好对西非国家经济共同体联盟意味着什么？**

新冠肺炎（COVID-19）大流行引起的近期行动限制结束后，世界重新开放，区域合作和贸易事务重新浮现。尽管英国脱欧（Brexit，英国脱离欧盟）协商主导着贸易头条，但《非洲大陆

自由贸易协定》（*AfCFTA*）的命运也被重新考虑。然而在这之中，区域一体化议题、行政、相关条约和政策的治理仍然属于受争议领域。鉴于这类关切，本文研究了西非国家经济共同体（*ECOWAS*）的区域化，从中得出见解。我们探究了对区域治理系统的实现和执行产生影响的“学说”（*isms*，即现实主义、新自由主义、政府间主义、制度主义和区域主义的意识形态）。我们分析了*ECOWAS*对西非区域一体化采取的当前战略，以及所取得的成败。我们还强调了有关条约执行的部分挑战。最后，我们评价了不同背景下潜在的国家偏好以及对“学说”产生的意义。

**关键词：**区域化与一体化，现实主义，制度主义，政府间主义，新自由主义，区域组织，政策变革，比较政策，《非洲大陆自由贸易协定》，西非货币联盟，西非国家经济共同体（*ECOWAS*）。

Regional organizations have been placed under increasing scrutiny, largely due to global economic, social, and environmental changes. Regionalism in Africa is of much importance to policy makers, international organizations, political analysts, and practitioners. The Economic Community of West African States (*ECOWAS*) was formed on May 28, 1975, via a treaty in Lagos, Nigeria. It is now over four decades since the establishment of *ECOWAS*, yet there is considerable debate over its effectiveness (Dwyer 2015; Williams and Boutellis 2014). It is not clear what the main objective of *ECOWAS* is—trade, peacekeeping force, or regional governance? Also, it is not clear what are the underlying national preferences. Notwithstanding the portrayal of Africa as the most unstable continent in the world or a continent bedeviled by unpredictability and conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark 2018), the regional cooperation and integration of *ECOWAS* and the African Union (*AU*) is a manifestation that Africa is taking responsibility for its affairs and future (Gruber 2013; Kolo, Madichie, and Mbah 2019; Marchal 2013; Piccolino 2012; Rodriguez 2018; Straus 2012).

In contemporary politics, there is debate about the rise of intergovernmentalism and the applicability of grand theorizing (Smeets and Beach 2020). The underlying national preferences for joining regional organizations are either economic or geopolitical interests (Moravcsik 1998). Laursen (2008, 4) defined rationalism as “a process that leads to a certain state of affair and as the attainment, within a territory, of a ‘sense of community’ and of institutions and practices strong enough and widespread enough to assure, for a ‘long’ time, dependable expectations of ‘peaceful change’ among its population.” Joseph Grieco (1990, 35) buttresses that position, stating that “neo-liberalism essentially expects states to calculate costs and benefits of alternative courses of action in order to maximize their utility because of [their own] preferences.” Arguably, while rationalism as a mode of analysis has lost much of its prominence, rationalism as symbolic politics is still very much alive and is still the most powerful theory of international politics (Copeland 2011; Saint-Martin and Allison 2011).

In this article, we examine the practice and ideology of intergovernmentalism and realism in the achievement and implementation of ECOWAS policies and treaties. Debate on “intergovernmentalism has been moving in the direction of theoretical refinement, where more and more (sub)types were introduced: (old and ‘new’) ‘liberal intergovernmentalism’ (LI), ‘new intergovernmentalism’ (NI), ‘deliberative intergovernmentalism’, ‘intergovernmental union’, and even supranationalist intergovernmentalism” (Smeets and Beach 2020, 1138). The focus on ECOWAS is influenced by the paucity of empirical studies and the peculiarities of the region (Okoro *et al.* 2020). As a starting point, we reflect upon realism, neoliberalism, intergovernmentalism, institutionalism, and intergovernmentalism in regionalism connected to the “isms” alluded to in the title of this article. We examine the interplay of regional integration and political processes—particularly regarding the timing and sequence of events—to understand how these processes result in diverging patterns of policy change (Maags 2020).

Historical institutionalism, agenda setting, and policy learning approaches present different perspectives (Maags 2020). A prominent approach has been utilized to understand the mechanism of radical policy changes over the past years of ECOWAS’ existence. Borrowing from neoinstitutional theory (Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019), we contend that ECOWAS, as an economic and peace-building organization, has been very successful in promoting interstate peace among its members. However, the organization has struggled with poor implementation of economic, monetary, trade policies, regional growth, and in dealing with internal-members’ conflicts and terrorism (e.g., Boko Haram—one of the largest Islamist militant groups in West Africa). Neoliberalism assumes states to share a natural preference for relative, absolute, or individual gains in their interactions with other nations (Keohane 1986). These assessments are grounded conceptually in this article, in comparative analysis, and in the evaluation of treaties and protocols on free trade, free movement, peace, and security architecture.

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic that has strained the health, business, and social systems of nations globally, with the real economic impact becoming ever clearer. This adds urgency and scale to the collective and regional responses to economic, health, social, and environmental challenges concerning bilateral relationships, regional security, trade integration, and governance. Drawing upon a range of “isms”—regionalism, realism, and intergovernmentalism—we propose remedial courses of action for regional integration taken from the purview of ECOWAS. We first discuss the ideological approaches of realism and intergovernmentalism in regionalism. We then present the evaluation by examining ECOWAS membership, treaties, protocols, and policy changes. Next, we analyze ECOWAS’ underlying national preferences, institutional facilitation, and challenges. Conclusions and implications for regional integration round up the article.

### **The Ideologies of Realism and Intergovernmentalism in Regionalism**

Realism has dominated international relations theories. Charles Glaser's *Rationalist Theory of International Politics* began in the mid-1990s (Copeland 2011, 441). Since then, classical theories of international cooperation and integration are rationalist and state-centered, stressing the difference between regional integration and regional cooperation (Søren 2010). Realist theory argues that international institutions are unable to mitigate anarchy's constraining effects on interstate cooperation as a fundamental pillar of international politics (Copeland 2011; Grieco 1988; Saint-Martin and Allison 2011). Theories of regional cooperation and integration, such as “new regionalism” (Sahakyan 2016; Söderbaum 2012; Söderbaum and Sbragia 2010; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003) and “non-Western approaches” (Acharya and Buzan 2017; Acharya and Johnston 2007), focus on states as the main drivers of regionalism that develops through the processes of formal institution building at the regional level. Historically, regional integration studies started with research on the European Union (EU) as the teleological model for other regions, or indeed the world, to adopt (Rosamond 2006). Integration was defined as: “the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectation and political activities to a new centre whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states” (Laursen 2008, 5).

The assumption then was that, to succeed, other regional integration projects would have to try to emulate the EU as much as possible; not to do so could be taken as evidence of likely failure (Rosamond 2006). Realism's identification reveals that the problem of the relative gain for cooperation is based on its insight that states in anarchy fear for their survival as independent actors (Grieco 1988). According to Grieco, neoliberalism assumes that states share a national preference for absolute or individual gains in their interactions with other nations, independent of those achieved by others. There is also a decline in trust in representative institutions (Torcal and Christmann 2019). Realism proposes that the international environment severely penalizes states if they fail to protect their vital interests or if they pursue objectives beyond their means; hence, states are “sensitive to costs” and behave as unitary-rational agents (Grieco 1988).

Hoffmann advanced the suggestion that “in areas of key importance to the national interest, nations prefer the certainty, or the self-controlled uncertainty, of national self-reliance, to the uncontrolled uncertainty” of integration (Laursen 2008, 4). Neoliberalism's cooperation, institutionalism, and rationalism emphasizes the complex interdependence among states and their shared interests in dealing with the problems that arise at the regional level. In the 1990s, Andrew Moravcsik (1998) developed “liberal intergovernmentalism” to explain the process of integration in Europe, suggesting the combination of liberal theory to explain national preference formation and an intergovernmental theory of

interstate bargaining to explain substantive outcomes (cited in Laursen 2008, 6). Intergovernmentalism is defined by Smeets and Beach (2020) as: (i) the legal shape of an agreement, as established outside the Community framework; (ii) the process, meaning a (more) prominent role of intergovernmental bodies or arenas in the decision making; and (iii) the outcomes, meaning the dominance of member states *vis-à-vis* the regional institutions in shaping the substance of these agreements.

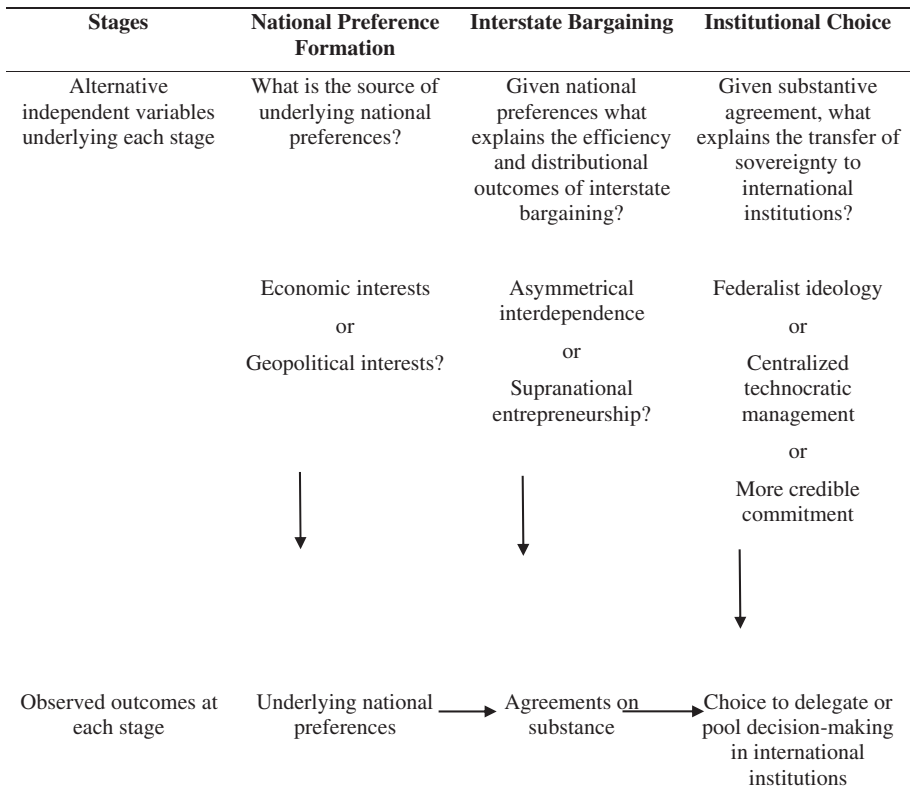
Nation states want to maintain their relative position within the international system to improve their security and, thus, ensure their survival (Waltz 1979). The political-economic approaches and liberal theories of international cooperation provide more society-centered explanations for how globalization translates into regionalism. They take economic and social interests as the starting point (Solingen 2008). Whereas neoliberalists typically highlight the salience of absolute gains, neorealists by no means underestimate the value of absolute capabilities for states' security, survival, and/or power accumulation (Mearsheimer 2001). These interests are channeled through the domestic political process of interest aggregation and interest representation. States are the master of regional organizations and gate-keep access to international decision-making processes. Andrew Moravcsik's (1998) liberal intergovernmentalism (Figure 1) has become an important reference point for most studies on integration, especially the big decisions he refers to as "grand bargains" (Laursen 2008, 6).

Explaining the framework (Figure 1), Laursen (2008) maintains that the first stage concerns national preference formation. It examines whether economic or geopolitical interests dominate when the national preferences of member states are formed. The second stage, interstate bargaining, seeks to explain the efficiency and distributional outcomes of regional bodies' negotiations. Offensive realists part with defensive neorealism in that they regard power maximization as the main driving force in international politics (Mearsheimer 2001). They likewise assert that "relative gains-concerns ultimately outweigh absolute gains-considerations in actors' political thinking" (Mearsheimer 2001, 83).

Neorealists and neoliberalists always disagree over states' natural preferences. On the one hand, the realist contention that political units invariably favor relative over absolute gains is disputable. On the other hand, the notion that neoliberal states are insensitive to how they fare with other nations appears even less plausible. Power-based approaches assume that, in the absence of a central enforcement power (anarchy), cooperation is risky for states that are concerned about the equal distribution of power among them (Baldwin 2013). The underlying national preferences could be how to maintain "relative" over "absolute" advantages. It could be the fear of survival. Such a rationale is implicit in neorealist thought. Donnelly (2000) posits that both power and security are inherently contingent on the development, increase, and sustainability of decidedly absolute capabilities, economic prosperity, and political independence. Arguably, the fact that "power is relative does not necessarily lead states to pursue relative gains" (Donnelly 2000, 61).



**Figure 1.**  
**International Cooperation: A Rationalist Framework**



*Source:* Moravcsik (1998; cited in Laursen 2008, 6).

One of the marked features of international politics has been the growth of regional groupings (Murdoch 2015). As such, the intergovernmentalism literature has connotations that go beyond the legal shape of—and formal involvement in—an agreement and the dominance of member states *vis-à-vis* regional institutions in shaping the substance of agreements (Smeets and Beach 2020). Nevertheless, the establishment of ECOWAS has been hailed as a breakthrough in international efforts to institute some form of economic cooperation and integration among West African nations (Ojo 1980). We assume that ideational and institutional processes impact upon regional governance at different points in time. Furthermore, “institutional forces create major constraints and opportunities that affect both the behaviour of actors and the diffusion of their ideas, it is the dynamic interaction between ideational, political, and institutional processes that determines policy change and, by extension, policy outcomes” (Maags 2020, 75).

## **ECOWAS Membership, Treaties, and Protocols**

Every intergovernmental system owes its inner logic and its unfolding to the diversity of domestic determinants and geo-historical situations (Laursen 2008). ECOWAS was formed to foster interstate economic and political cooperation. In 1972, the then Nigerian head of state Gen Yakubu Gowon and his Togolese counterpart Gnassingbe Eyadema toured the region in support of the integration idea. Most regional integration treaties include protocols on trade in goods, trade in services, investment, intellectual property rights, competition policy, rules and procedures on the settlement of disputes, etc. The Treaty of Lagos in 1975 establishing ECOWAS was originally touted as an economic initiative, but emerging political events led to its revision and therewith the expansion of scope and powers in 1993 (ECOWAS 2016).

### **Membership**

ECOWAS is among the most populated regions of Africa—with a population of about 378 million people in 2016—and Nigeria makes up more than half of the population with about 196 million (ECOWAS 2016). Currently, ECOWAS comprises 15 member countries (Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo) and was formed in 1975. Hence, there are dramatic economic, political, and historical differences between the nations in the community (Harvey and Cushing 2015). ECOWAS was based on the realization of the need to further promote an economically integrated West Africa (Saka, Onafowokan, and Adebayo 2015). It is important to highlight that Cape Verde (or Cabo Verde) joined in 1976 and Mauritania left in 2000 (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019). The current Chairman of ECOWAS is His Excellency the Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo, elected during the 57th summit hosted by the outgoing ECOWAS Chairman, President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger, at the Mahatma Gandhi International Conference Centre, Niamey, on September 7, 2020.

### **Treaty on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment**

In May 1979, ECOWAS member states adopted their first protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment, four years after the promulgation of the ECOWAS treaty. The protocol offers the right of ECOWAS citizens to enter, reside, and establish economic activities in the territory of other member states. It outlined a three-phased approach to achieve the “complete freedom of movement” envisaged by the treaty. The Treaty’s Part II: General Principles on Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment (Article 2), specifies that ECOWAS citizens have the right to enter, reside, and establish in the territory of member states (ECOWAS Treaty). Table 1 describes



**Table 1. Treaty on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment**

- 1979 Protocol A/P.1/5/79 relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment
- Sets outright of Community citizens to enter, reside, and establish in territory of member states (Article 2(1)).
  - Establishes a three-phased approach over 15 years to implementation of (I) right of entry and abolition of visas, (II) residence, and (III) establishment (Article 2).
  - Conditions entitlement to enter the territory of a member state on possession of valid travel document and international health certificate (Article 3(1)).
  - Reserves right of member states to refuse admission into the territory of Community citizens deemed inadmissible under domestic law (Article 4).
  - Establishes some requirements for expulsion (Article 11).
  - Confirms that Protocol does not operate to detriment of more favorable provisions in other agreements concluded by member states (Article 12).

*Source:* Adepoju, Boulton, and Levin (n.d., 2).

the major features of the Protocol and four Supplementary Protocols of ECOWAS on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment.

ECOWAS attempted to address the difficulties encountered in implementing the Supplementary Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, and Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). The difficulties revolved primarily around rules of origin, national participation in the equity capital of production enterprises, and the categorization of priority and nonpriority industrial products (African Development Bank [AfDB] 2019). Despite the treaties, close association, and a deep, multidimensional and peaceful relationship among member states, challenges and sources of conflict remain. Against this background, one has to question the treaties and protocols on Free Movement of Persons and Right of Residence, given the lack of an effective and efficient mechanism to check and control illegal activities across the borders. On August 19, 2019, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari unexpectedly closed Nigeria’s borders with Benin and Niger, declaring the time had come to end rampant smuggling from those countries (Mehouenou 2019). The Nigerian president defended the closure by saying Benin and Niger had failed to police their borders properly and chronic smuggling was the result (Mehouenou 2019).

The defeat of the constitutional treaty is a defeat of direct democracy and the underlying principles of regional integration (Laursen 2008). Unilateral border closures go against the protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence, Establishment, and Trade Liberalization. The closure of Nigerian borders to protect their country’s economy was in contradiction to the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol and raises the issue of regional integration by restricting not only the free movement of persons within the subregion, but also restricting economic activities. This action spelt doom for the millions of community citizens whose livelihoods depend on the daily movement of trade

across the borders. For Nigeria's neighboring countries, traders say the impact has been devastating (Mehouenou 2019).

The notion of "national interest" plays a pivotal role in the discourse of state action. The national interest has neither been self-justificatory nor arbitrary within the conventions of the ECOWAS treaties until now. Nigeria has made dramatic foreign policy decisions that may change both the African regional landscape and the behavior of other states. Nigeria and Ghana hold a hegemonic power over the historical trajectory of the ECOWAS. Hegemony depicts overwhelming or preponderant material power or the exercise of some form of leadership, including domination, over others. The notion of overwhelming power, dominance, and the exercise of leadership capture the Nigerian role and position since the formation of ECOWAS. Neorealists argued that states in the regional set-up maintain individual gains and the extent to which states pursue relative gains is inextricably related to their strategic environment so that it will vary from situation to situation (Powell 1994).

### **Treaty on Trade, Commerce, and Investment**

The underlying interstate preferences are either economic or political cooperation. The ECOWAS member states agreed to establish a customs union by 1990 that would enable the free movement of capital and goods. Arguably, ECOWAS is among the major African Regional Economic Communities that has been shaping the evolution of regional integration in Africa. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD 2018, iii): "The ECOWAS Treaty states that the common market should be ensured through 'liberalization of trade among the Member States by... removing non-tariff barriers to establish a free trade area at the community level... [and] the removal, among the Member States, of obstacles to the free movement of... goods.'"

The ECOWAS trade policy is meant to foster the smooth integration of the region into the world economy (ECOWAS 2016). In 2010, ECOWAS adopted its "West African Common Industrial Policy." The total trade of the region has averaged \$208.1 billion (ECOWAS 2016). Exports are projected at approximately \$137.3 billion while the imports total is about \$80.4 billion (ECOWAS 2016). The elimination of tariff and nontariff barriers to trade is at the core of their respective programs to foster freer trade and the free movement of the factors of production. According to UNCTAD (2018), trade and exports to member states and other regional blocs have been on a steady rise and between 1975 and 2010 the figures have more than quadrupled. ECOWAS trade has increased by an average of 18 percent per year between 2005 and 2014 (ECOWAS 2016). The main active countries in trade include Nigeria (which accounts for approximately 76 percent of total trade), followed by Ghana (9.2 percent), and Côte d'Ivoire (8.64 percent) (ECOWAS 2016).

One of the key policies of ECOWAS is its “trade liberalization” program. The objective is to progressively establish a “customs union” among the member states of the community. In line with this objective, intra-ECOWAS trade accounted for nearly 12 percent of total ECOWAS trade in 2016 (AfDB 2019). A key target is to increase the share of intraregional trade from currently around 12 percent of total trade to 40 percent in 2030, with a vision to “maintain a solid industrial structure, which is globally competitive, environment-friendly and capable of significantly improving the living standards of the people by 2030” (OECD, 2012, 416).

UNCTAD (2018) reveal the share of the intraregional trade by exports that show that Nigeria has 44.6 percent and Côte d’Ivoire 25.7 percent. Imports are more evenly distributed among the four countries of Ghana (25.7 percent), Côte d’Ivoire (18.4 percent), Nigeria (14.0 percent), and Burkina Faso (11.3 percent). The top ten key products of intra-ECOWAS trade in 2015 included: petroleum products and by-products (with a share of 48.3 percent, US\$4,847 million); lime, cement, and fabrics (excluding glass and clay) (3.4 percent, US\$342 million); tobacco (2.5 percent, US\$250 million); edible products and preparations (2.4 percent, US\$242 million); perfumery and cosmetics (excluding soaps) (2.3 percent); fixed vegetable fats and oils (crude and refined) (2.2 percent); articles and plastics (2.2 percent); electric current (1.8 percent); and footwear (1.5 percent) (UNCTAD 2018).

In Accra, on July 10, 2014, the ECOWAS heads of state announced their decision to endorse the EU-ECOWAS (plus Mauritania) Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). Since then, all EU member states and most of the 16 ECOWAS nations have signed the EPA. The EPA will result in the gradual opening of Ghana’s market to 75 percent of the tariff lines, equivalent to around 65 percent of the value of imports from the EU, by 2035 (Macleod *et al.* 2015). In the West African region, the regional integration process by free and open border trade has become defective. Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is pervasive along West African regional borders. It has a long history, given the region’s artificial and often porous borders, a long history of regional trade, weak border enforcement, corruption, and, perhaps most importantly, lack of coordination of economic policies among neighboring countries (Mbaye 2019).<sup>1</sup> Some of the states, like the Benin economy, depend on imports of food commodities and automobiles, which end up smuggled into neighboring states, thereby undermining the economic policies of affected states. According to Golub, Mbaye, and Golubski (2019), Benin has adopted a strategy focused on being an *entrepôt* state: that is, serving as a trading hub, importing goods and re-exporting them legally but most often sent illegally to Nigeria, thus profiting from distortions in Nigeria’s economy.

<sup>1</sup> Mbaye (2019) notes that ICBT takes several forms, not all of which are illegal. For example, trade in traditional agricultural products and livestock in bordering countries may involve little or no intent to deceive the authorities, as peasants and herders ignore artificial and unpoliced borders.

The agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that came into force on May 30, 2019, is a welcome development. One of the key objectives of the AfCFTA is to “create a single market for goods, services, facilitated by movement of persons in order to deepen the economic integration of the African continent” and following the Pan African Vision of “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa” enshrined in Agenda 2063 (African Union 2018). It has been estimated that AfCFTA will generate Africa annual income gains of \$134 billion per year, as it creates the largest free trade area by the number of countries with an amalgamated market size worth more than \$3 trillion, consumer business spending of over \$6.7 trillion, and the free movement of about 1.3 billion people (Chuku 2020). However, the implementation of the agreement has been shifted beyond the July 1, 2020 target due to disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

According to UNCTAD (2018), regional integration presents unique opportunities to drive Africa’s transformation and development. It appears that ECOWAS member states have different national interests. As stated earlier, the announcement from the Nigerian government to close borders on August 19, 2019 cast a shadow over a historic free trade agreement and was signed by 54 out of 55 African countries, reaching a key operational threshold (Mehouenou 2019). As explained earlier, unilateral border closures go against all the commercial and freedom of movement treaties of ECOWAS. Bouillon (2019) notes that the two main commodities being smuggled across Nigerian borders were petrol and rice. Petrol was being sneaked out from Nigeria—where subsidies make the fuel half as cheap as in its neighboring countries—and resold. Moreover, rice was being brought into Nigeria from Benin via its port in Cotonou, as Nigerians favor imported Asian-grown varieties over the locally grown products.

As explained earlier concerning underlying national preferences, power-based approaches assume sometimes that cooperation is risky for states. Under this condition upholding relative over absolute advantages becomes the order. The most visible winner from the closure of the borders is the Nigerian treasury, which has benefited from the falling cost of petrol subsidies and a rise in customs receipts from the authorized ports. Some scholars argue that the contemporary regional and global order is in crisis (Baldwin, Chen, and Cole 2019; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2019). Attempts to challenge the global or regional economy with such discrete revolutionary visions dominate. Realist and neorealist approaches focus on the capabilities of states that are often limited to dyadic or bilateral relations. Dissatisfaction with regional politics may, for instance, have contributed to the Brexit vote (the United Kingdom deciding to leave the EU). Mauldin (2016) suggests that three main factors led to this outpouring of votes to leave the EU: (i) economics—opponents of the EU argued that it is a dysfunctional economic entity; (ii) sovereignty—the rise of nationalism across the world; and (iii) political elitism—the political leadership of Britain faced a profound loss.

In the case of ECOWAS, the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 establishing ECOWAS was originally touted as an economic initiative, but emerging political and economic events and historical differences between the nations in the community constrain the implementation of agreed trade reforms that interfere with the objectives of the treaties. The propensity for relative capabilities might indeed sooner or later take precedence. Understanding state interests (economic, security, trade, territorial acquisition, etc.) and the various factors conditioning that process of interest development will nevertheless help to reverse the global disorder on regionalism.

### **Treaty on Monetary Union**

The introduction of the Euro as the single currency of the EU as a means of facilitating economic regional integration and development has led other regional organizations to establish a process of convergence like that of the EU as prerequisites for wider monetary integration. According to Saka, Onafowokan, and Adebayo (2015, 230), monetary integration is considered important in international economic relations because:

It plays important roles in the addressing of the problems of a multiplicity of currencies and exchange rate regime that often hinders trade flows between countries. The expected benefits of such a union include the promotion of trade; creation of larger market and widening of business/trade-related income-earning opportunities for the citizenry for improvement of their standard of living; facilitation of unhindered movements of persons and labor in the sub-region through the dismantling of barriers, thereby strengthening cultural, economic, social, and political cooperation (common central bank, judiciary, parliament, etc.); creation of a more favorable environment for collective pooling of resources for the development of essential regional infrastructure and enhancement of economic competitiveness, derivation of the economies of scale, and reduction in transactions costs.

A comprehensive understanding of the robustness of monetary policy in a potential monetary union is essential in the process of economic integration toward a common currency area (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019; Asongu, Nwachukwu, and Tchamyu 2017). According to Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe (2019), the idea of using a single currency across the region was reiterated and further articulated in July 1991 by member states. Under the auspices of the new agreement, a process of monetary integration was proposed to be adopted in two stages (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019). The heads of states of six African non-CFA countries agreed to join the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU),<sup>2</sup> as part of the first stage. For the second stage,

<sup>2</sup> WAEMU-UEMOA is a customs and currency union of eight countries that are all members of ECOWAS, promoting economic integration among members. The member states are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo.

it was proposed that non-WAEMU countries (Ghana, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria) will build their monetary area, which was first called West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) (Diop, Tillmann, and Winker 2017). Then, WAMZ and WAEMU should be merged to form a single monetary zone in ECOWAS with the adoption of the common currency in 2020 (see e.g., Diop, Tillmann, and Winker 2017). While the first and second stages were expected to be realized in 2015 and 2020, respectively, in July 2014, the ambition of materializing the first stage was postponed (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019). “This postponement is the fourth, given the three initial postponements in 2003, 2005 and 2009. The main justification put forward for the underlying postponement has centred on the absence of convergence among member states and insufficient preparation by member states” (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019, 485).

Therefore, the attempt to set up the WAEMU has been unsuccessful and the objective is yet to be fully implemented. Masson and Pattillo (2001) argued that the objective of the monetary union should not be allowed to distract attention from addressing the serious domestic problems faced by countries in the region, which will mainly be resolved by “putting one’s house in order” and opening up the economies externally. Asongu, Nnanna, and Tchamyoun (2020) highlight three motives for inquiring on the comparative African regional economies: notably, the growing relevance of regional integration, concerns of surplus liquidity, and ongoing debates surrounding the effects of globalization. Laursen (2008) explains that the first stage in international cooperation, according to the rationalist framework, concerns national preference formation (economic or geopolitical preferences). As we alluded earlier, neoliberalists highlight that interests are channeled through the domestic political process of interest aggregation and interest representation. It is, therefore, not in the interest of the individual countries of ECOWAS to enter a monetary union now or in the near future, unless the economies of these countries converge further (Harvey and Cushing 2015).

### **Treaty on Peace and Security**

The Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security was adopted in December 1999. It addresses peacekeeping, humanitarian support, and peacebuilding capabilities as well as the issue of cross-border crime and it also provided a supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. In contrast to currently held views, regional peace and intervention in wars were not the initial motives for forming ECOWAS. The Treaty of 1975 envisaged the group as an economic community to promote among member states cooperation and development in all fields of economic activity. It is significant to note that no reference was made to defense or security in any of the treaty’s 65 articles (The Conversations 2017). It could be argued that ECOWAS’ gradual movement



into security started in 1978 when ECOWAS adopted the nonaggression Treaty that called on member states to “refrain from the threat and use of force or aggression against each other” (Kabia 2011, 2).

ECOWAS was formed at a time when power vacillated between civilian and military rulers in the region (The Conversations 2017). The period was characterized by an extensive involvement of the military in the political process and nations accusing one another of supporting dissidents, separationists, or warlords. Notably, the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 did not contain components relating to the issues of peace, security, stability, and governance according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Against this backdrop, the treaty was revised in 1993. The “Revised Treaty” allowed the promulgation of protocols to regulate the peace and security architecture of member states (The Conversations 2017). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) was signed in May 1981 as was the Protocol on Mutual Assistance Defense (MAD) against any armed threat or aggression on a member state. This led to the creation of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group Allied Armed Forces. Critics regard this protocol as merely idealistic as it failed to provide an institutionalized response mechanism in the case of a breach (Kabia 2011, 2).

This collaboration must work well if economic cooperation and peace operations are to be effective (Williams and Boutellis 2014). Since the 1960s, when most countries in the West African subregion gained political freedom from colonial powers, the regional nations have adopted a variety of political systems, including multiparty democracy, one-party systems, and military autocracies (The Conversations 2017). Political scientists have long agreed that, after a long historical process of consolidation, wealthy democracies could remain stable indefinitely (Facchini and Melki 2019). However, recent events suggest that this may no longer be the case due to the direct effects of the economic crisis and its social consequences (Torcal and Christmann 2019). One of the achievements of the regional body is that ECOWAS has been a standby force in the member states, which can be deployed rapidly to prevent conflicts from escalating (The Conversations 2017, 2).

The West African region has developed a reputation for military coups more than anywhere else on the continent (Kabia 2011). Besides, conflicts in the region have been notably fueled by multiple interrelated causal factors including poverty, human rights violations, bad governance and corruption, ethnic marginalization, and small arms proliferation (Annan 2014). Since its inauguration, ECOWAS’ core strategy has focused on the promotion of economic development and prosperity of member states. However, following widespread conflict and instability in the subregion in the 1990s and early 2000s, a realization grew that economic prosperity cannot be achieved in the absence of peace and security (Kabia 2011).

Given the history of the conflict in the West African subregion and previous unarticulated measures to address the challenges of conflict and wars, ECOWAS has recently come up with Plans of Action (PoA). At the ECOWAS headquarters,

in Abuja, Nigeria, on January 28, 2019, the PoA of ECOWAS' Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) was launched. The PoA aims to create a platform for all ECPF Focal Point Directorates to strategize on the improvement of conflict prevention blueprints and to enhance effective cross-departmental collaboration, cooperation, and capacity building (ECOWAS 2016). The Framework's 15 components involving peace-building mechanisms, provide, among other things, tools for strengthening regional and national capacities for preventing violent conflicts or their recurrence in the region (Kabia 2011). ECOWAS (2016) states that the PoA drives the activities of the components which include: early warning, preventive diplomacy, democracy, and political governance, human rights and the rule of law, media, natural resource governance, cross-border initiatives, and security governance, women, peace and security, youth empowerment, the ECOWAS Standby Force, humanitarian assistance, and peace education (culture of peace), as well as the enabling mechanisms for these.

ECOWAS' political leaders intended to establish the regional body at the time the region faced numerous internal political conflicts. Consequently, one of the key achievements of ECOWAS has revolved around the institutionalization of stable democracy in the region. An exception is the coup in Mali in 2012 where ECOWAS gave a 72-hour ultimatum to the coup leaders to relinquish power or face sanctions. The regional body proposed measures such as land borders and the freezing of assets and placed a peacekeeping force on standby (BBC 2012). This trend has continued as the power tussle in Mali has recurred more recently—leading to the delegation of an ECOWAS peace envoy in the person of former President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria (Premium Times 2020), to mediate between President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and opposition leaders toward resolving the worsening sociopolitical situation in Mali. However, mediation has not been able to resolve Mali's political and economic crisis. On August 18, 2020 Mali's president, who has been accused of corruption and mishandling the deadly violence associated with Islamic extremists, was toppled by a military coup.

Integration is also seen as a political process (Grieco 1988; Laursen 2008). Regional integration helps countries reap other noneconomic benefits, such as peace and security. States have different preferences or priorities for regional integration, depending on their economy, geography, or preferences for sovereignty. However, inadequate policies and institutions may lead to inefficient outcomes. Also, reducing inter and intrastate conflict could be fundamental to achieving regional peace and security. It appears that regional treaties focus too much on the importance of trade liberalization and economic growth while focusing less on the drivers of political and social inclusiveness or sensitivities to liberalization.

### **ECOWAS Institutional Facilitation and Challenges**

The decision-making process in regional integration can be efficient and the common institutions established can be more or less adequate (institutional

capacity) (Laursen 2008). The rationale behind regional trade integration is that small nations need to work together to build and integrate their economies, encourage economies of scale, and have more political and economic weight in trade negotiations (Karaki and Verhaeghe 2018). A more compelling explanation, we believe, is not to view the free movement and free trade as effective to economic integration and growth. This is related to the claim that free trade has transformed, and will continue to transform, the world for the better (Boussebaa 2019). The EU has become one of the most important advocates of a deep trade agenda at the multilateral and regional levels (Leblond and Viju-Miljusevic 2019). Imperial revivalism goes hand-in-hand with nations pursuit of free trade with “emerging markets,” in an effort—aimed at maintaining access to those markets and ensuring the country’s various monopolies, much like in the days of the Empire—to continue to dominate the world economy (Boussebaa 2019).

The importance of regional integration in fostering economic growth is reflected in the ability of trade to engender structural transformation for countries in a trade bloc or single market (AfDB 2019). ECOWAS offers an existing and feasible regional framework for action in West Africa (Haysom 2014). However, the costs of trade are particularly high in the region (Chambers, Foresti, and Harris 2012). The costs or ease of doing business varies according to the member states, as shown by the World Bank’s (2020) “Doing Business” indicators. Not surprisingly, ECOWAS nations have recorded the worst performance in terms of ranking of doing business topics—ranked in the lower quarter of all indicators with the highest ranking of Getting Credit (122 out of 191) and lowest ranking Getting Electricity (160 out of 191) (World Bank 2016, 2).

Due to the external aggression and internal instability in the region, ECOWAS leaders moved to adopt measures to safeguard the subregion’s security (Kabia 2011). Consequently, the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council adopted an ECPF in 2008 (ECOWAS 2016). The first response of the regional body and neighboring states was to try to mediate a resolution to Mali’s political crisis. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2018), maintains that ECOWAS has developed a sophisticated Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) that collects information on potential conflict dynamics from the member states, making use of formalized agreements with civil society organizations.

The future of ECOWAS and the West African region remains uncertain but promising. Also, the underlying interstate preferences (i.e., regional power, trade, political, or security) is not clear. Regional integration theory emphasizes a sense of community and institutions and practices. It could be argued that the founding fathers of ECOWAS were inspired by this notion. Collective decision making is an important aspect of all regional integration (Laursen 2008). ECOWAS is nevertheless struggling to successfully copy western models of regionalism, which has become problematic in recent years. ECOWAS’ institutional changes have been too slow or insufficient to bring about radical regional integration and economic transformation. A key assumption of neoinstitutional theory has

been institutional determinism supported by stable organizing principles and frames of meaning (Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019). An underlying ECOWAS states preference is either economic or geopolitical interests (Moravcsik 1998).

In a recent article, Asongu, Nnanna, and Tchamyoun (2020, 1-2) explored “the role of globalization-fueled regionalization policies on the financial allocation efficiency of four economic and monetary regions in Africa from 1980 to 2008.” These authors built upon a previous article (Asongu, Folarin, and Biekpe 2019, 483) that examined “the stability of money demand in the proposed West African Monetary Union (WAMU)” using “annual data for the period 1981 to 2015 from thirteen of the fifteen countries making-up the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).”

At the time of writing, we are currently in September 2020 and AfCFTA remains a work-in-progress due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions, and lockdown. As the ambition of transiting into a monetary union gathers momentum, ECOWAS policy makers need to be mindful of the shaky structures upon which that ambition is being set. They cannot assume that success is a given due to the existence of the Dakar (Senegal)-based Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) backed initially by France and then the EU.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the idea of the “isms” of regional theories, realism presents a pessimistic analysis of the prospects for international cooperation and of the capabilities of international institutions. A major challenge for ECOWAS remains that of the financial burden associated with political and military missions and/or interference. ECOWAS peacekeeping interventions in West African countries, though they might have saved some lives, can largely be categorized as failures (Rodriguez 2018). As noted by Odobo, Andekin, and Udegbunam (2017), at the level of conflict prevention, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance prescribes measures urging its member countries to respect democratic principles, which would go a long way toward ensuring that conflicts do not arise. However, the problems of bad governance and corruption remain rife across the member states.

Another challenge is the absence of an effective system of power delegation; hence, much administrative bureaucracy is preserved. Ending wars and conflicts, especially in West Africa, has been quite a challenge due to its complex multicausal factors, multiple actors, and the nature of the conflicts; often contributing to prolonging conflicts (Annan 2014). Insufficient training, lack of support of the peacekeeping missions, lack of preparation, and misperceptions about the severity of the conflict at early stages of the mission have always been the challenges. This “seriously weakened” morale among the soldiers (Dwyer 2015). The relationship between ECOWAS, the UN, and the AU has been characterized by considerable conflict, mistrust, and tension—often hindering

<sup>3</sup> The common issuing institution of the member states of the WAMU. At the time of its founding on May 12, 1962, its membership comprised the Republics of Côte d’Ivoire, Dahomey, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Togo, and Upper Volta.

the predictability and conduct of effective peace operations (Williams and Boutellis 2014). For instance, during the Malian crisis, African players were accused in Paris of wanting to benefit from the crisis and of not being interested in solving it (Marchal 2013). A similar trend was observed in the politics of Western Sahara (see e.g., Madichie 2002).

### Conclusion

The political-economic strategy and liberal theories of international cooperation provide reasons why nations go into regionalization. The underlying national preferences include economic, social, security, trade, or territorial power. Utilizing a case study of ECOWAS, this article applied some of the “isms” of regional integration theories (i.e., realism, neoliberalism, intergovernmentalism, institutionalism, and intergovernmentalism) to examine the practice and ideology of regional cooperation, the achievement and implementation of regional policies and treaties. Our evaluation reveals that ECOWAS may not have lived up to its mandate. Arguably, some success in regionalism has been achieved. However, such success appears to be limited in its scope. Conceptually, the term “regionalism” has been given a variety of meanings related to international cooperation in economic, political, and security areas. By taking the regionalism approach, we examined the supranational level of territorial dimensions and the processes of liberal intergovernmentalism.

ECOWAS has been struggling to bring about the radical regional integration of West Africa with other economic blocs. The liberalization program has failed to achieve the desired results. In consequence, regional economic development has been slow. Reflecting on the treaties, Nigeria’s border closure in 2019 was in defiance of ECOWAS treaties on trade liberalization and freedom of movement signed by member states. Furthermore, the ECOWAS region is battling terrorism and internal security challenges. There is insecurity across the Sahel. Currently, there is a threat to security posed by activities of Boko Haram in North-Western Nigeria, Niger, and at the Cameroon border. In the North-Western, North-Eastern, and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria, clashes between bandits and Fulani herdsmen-farmers have degenerated beyond the control of internal security. The combined activities of Boko Haram, the armed bandits, and the armed Fulani herdsmen have left thousands of people murdered and millions displaced. Recently, U.S. intelligence warned that al Qaeda is expanding to Nigeria and penetrating other parts of West Africa.

Over the past 20 years, regional integration and trade negotiations—whether bilateral, plurilateral, or multilateral—have increasingly taken the center stage in global politics. The theory and practice of “regional integration” describe the kind of international integration that seeks to examine the source of underlying national preferences. The interests could be economic or geopolitical. Whichever way, we suggest in this article that the institutional choice should be



based on substantive agreement, which explains the transfer of sovereignty to international institutions. ECOWAS should, therefore, reorganize and re-develop robust institutions and programs to realize the commitments of the treaties and protocols—including the Mediation and Security Council, ECOWARN, the ECOWAS Standby Force, ECPF, and civil society. In contrast to currently held views, regional peace and security intervention were *not* the motives for forming ECOWAS. Rather, the regional body started as an economic integration union. However, indicators for performance in the ECOWAS region have produced mixed results. The economic relationship between the members of ECOWAS is asymmetric, with Nigeria and Ghana exerting the most influence.

ECOWAS should also pursue trade agreements that more fully take into account the dimensions of economic development and investments. New EPAs need to be signed between the ECOWAS and other regional trade blocs. ECOWAS should push for the new trade policy to grant 100 percent duty and quota-free access to the EU market in contrast to the limited access provided by the current EU-Africa EPAs. Future trade deals need, likewise, to be more pro-development and pro-industrialization than trade facilitating and rent seeking. ECOWAS should also focus on multilateral and bilateral public-private partnerships that encourage a five-way dialogue among businesses in West Africa, the African continent, and the EU or the United Kingdom. These platforms would facilitate the necessary guarantees to take on high-profile investments and trade along diversified product lines. AfCFTA can help address bottlenecks to the free movement of persons, goods, and human capital within Africa, making it easier for business owners, managers, and investors to travel, invest, and pull together resources.

Attempts to set up the WAEMU have been unsuccessful. The establishment of a common monetary union in the region is an integral part of the vision of the founding actors, but this vision has yet to be realized. Though trade and exports to member states and other regional blocs have been on a steady rise since the establishment of the treaty, the region falls behind other African regions when measured by economic progress. The costs of trade are particularly high in the region. The economy is heavily dependent on the informal sector and trade is impeded by severe cross-border smuggling and illicit transactions. This article argues that ECOWAS has been successful in promoting political democracy, trade integration, peace, and security in the region—yet member states' internal and domestic political crises remain critical challenges (e.g., political crisis, election rigging, human rights abuses, lack of separation of powers, corruption in public offices, and high rate of absolute poverty, etc.).

Policy change must occur through policy-orientated learning and change in core beliefs. We have argued that ECOWAS has struggled with poor policy implementation: especially surrounding the free movement of persons, goods, services, and trade liberalization. The union has also struggled with the poor communication of its culturally and historically colonized and diverse members.



ECOWAS should similarly embrace policies based on strong coalitions and the use of technical information. The negotiated agreements between ECOWAS, AU, EU, and other regional bodies needs to be solid. There must be a comprehensive and cohesive approach between ECOWAS, AU, and western governments in tackling insecurity across the continent.

This article calls for reflection on the activities of ECOWAS and the gaps between its establishing mandate and its milestones. Cognizant of the limitations of this article, we anticipate that future research would find it worthy to examine the changing pattern of regionalism—especially as nations begin to restart their economies after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already killed tens of thousands of people in many countries. The “isms” of the regional integration theory lenses may provide some common ground and ideas for future studies. As things currently stand, the views of globalization *naysayers* may have transitioned or transported to the alternatives found in regionalism, neoliberalism, and intergovernmentalism. Indeed, ECOWAS is not alone in this developing trajectory, as we have witnessed from experiences in Europe (Brexit) and the renegotiated NAFTA—with U.S. President Trump building walls to keep Mexico out.

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