



## THIRTY THREE (33) YEARS ON: AN ASSESSMENT OF ECOWAS TRADE LIBERALIZATION SCHEME AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION

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### Abstract:

The ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS) is the main ECOWAS Operational tool in bringing a free trade area and economic interaction for the West African Sub-region. Although there are few minimal achievements of the scheme, there are a lot more obstacles bedevilled the full implementation of the scheme after 44 years it had been drawn up, and 33 years after it became fully operational. Therefore, the crux of this study was an assessment of whether the scheme has succeeded in the creation of a free trade area, customs union and economic integration in the West African sub-region. The study adopted the custom Union theory as the theoretical framework of analysis. The major finding of the work was that there cannot be a free trade area without any products to trade as the lack of export diversification has been one of the major obstacles to attaining a free trade area and economic integration in West Africa. Other findings included but were not limited to, the inadequacies of laid-down policies coupled with the constant circumvention of such policies, the absence of harmonization of policies and standards and much more. In the final analysis, the study recommended among others, the improvement in levels of production in individual member states through policies and programmes, eliminating of all forms of trade barriers as well as the private sector involvement in the decision-making and the implementation process of ECOWAS protocols and schemes for a fair representation of their interest.

**Keywords:** ECOWAS, trade liberalization, economic integration, custom union, free trade, private sector

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## 1. Introduction

It is pertinent to note that as the world becomes more globalized, many new challenges also arise. Most of these challenges can best be addressed globally than internally. Global warming, global hunger, terrorism, poverty, trade challenges, and recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and many more are issues that have become the crux of many international organizations as well as regional and sub-regional organizations to deal with. Through bilateral and multilateral corporations, agreements, and policies, the state attempt to solve its challenges collectively.

Integration has been a widely recognized and acceptable way for states to address some of their challenges and problems. From its lowest to its highest forms, integration has been said to progress through the freeing of the barriers to trade, the liberalization of factor movements, the harmonization of national economic policies, and the complete unification of these policies (Asante K. B., 2016).

ECOWAS was therefore, established with the objective of liberalizing trade among member states through the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers and the ultimate achievement of an economic and monetary union, after successfully going through the process of a free trade area, customs union and a common market. Specifically, the aim is to remove tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade in the region; establish a common external tariff (CET) for trade relations with third countries; remove all obstacles to the movement of the factors of production, including people and capital; and harmonize trade policies across its member states to improve trade in the region. The creation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme was the policy move to begin the achievement of the objective of the ECOWAS (Okuntilla, 2001).

West Africa's Trade liberalization policy, "*the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is the main ECOWAS operational tool for promoting the West African region as a free trade area*" (Echols, 1997). It officially started operating in 1990, even though it was formulated in 1979. Sixteen (16) West African States under ECOWAS are signatories to the scheme. The ETLS is meant to create opportunities by creating new markets for goods and services outside the signatory countries, to increase investment opportunities for third countries and corporations, to cheapen trade by removing all customs duties; and to facilitate the movement of goods through customs to make trade faster, while harmonizing technical and sanitary standard (ECOWAS, 2013).

However, thirty three (33) years down the line there is a slow progress on the actual implementation of the scheme in the sub-region. This is a result of the knowing-doing gap which refers to the disconnection between policy design and policy execution. The ELTS is poorly respected by ECOWAS member states. This implies that, despite longstanding and strong commitments to "*the removal of obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, service and capital, as worded in the ECOWAS treaty, there are still many barriers to trade.*"

Some ECOWAS member states lack the capacity to implement regional commitment which requires strong administrative structures, while private sector operators are not always in form about their rights and line of action.

The problem, then, is whether ECOWAS, through the ETLS, has accomplished its goal of removing the technical and physical barriers to trade within the sub-region. Consequently, it becomes necessary for this work to assess:

- 1) What progress has been made by ETLS in establishing West Africa as a free trade area and a customs union?
- 2) What are the obstacles to achieving the ETLS goal of establishing free trade in the sub-region?
- 3) How can ECOWAS improve upon its methods of achieving its goal of a free trade area and economic integration of the sub-region?

## **2. Conceptual Clarification**

### **2.1 Concept of Free Trade Area (FTA)**

European integration has been a continuous process during which both geographical spread and depth have gradually expanded over time. The first stage started in 1960 when a custom Union was created and integration took the form of free trade arrangement which focused on promoting intra-regional trade in goods and some services, the second stage involved the free movement of money and people, the third state was the introduction of a common currency with the adoption of the euro that encouraged and offer three other possible models of regional integration (Lee and Kin, 2013:5). Its features include no tariff on quotas against member countries and individual quotas against third countries (Bolanos, 2016: 17).

Tariff barriers to the trade of goods between member states are eliminated but each member states control over its own commercial policy. It refers to a special region where a group of countries within the region signs an agreement that seals the cooperation among them. Its aims are to bring down barriers in trading, specifically tariffs and import quotas and encourage the free trade of goods and services among its member countries. The impetus for regional integration draws its rationale from the standard trade theory which states that free trade is superior to all other trade policies as free trade among two or more states will improve the welfare of the member countries as long as the arrangement leads to net trade creation (Cedar and Kilbert, 2002:4).

### **2.2 Concept of Monetary Union**

It involves the establishment of fixed exchange rates between the countries of member states along with the harmonization of monetary and fiscal policies. It connotes the acceptance of common policies administered by a supranational authority. It is an economic region in which a single currency is used or two or more currencies are joined together in value as optimal currency area (OCA). It affords the most efficient adjustment process in response to both internal and external disturbances, other properties like price

wage flexibility, economic openness, diversification in production, consumption and similarly in inflation rates, fiscal and political integration. It implies a forfeiture thereby the degree of cooperation needed for the successful operation of a full economic union both financial and political institutions representing the entire union would have to be established (Mongelli, 2005:651; Hodgson and Herander, (1983:14)).

### **2.3 Concept of Preferential Trade Arrangements (PTA)**

It entails lower tariffs among participating States than with non-member nations. It is described as an arrangement between two or more countries in which goods produced within the union are subject to lower trade barriers than the goods produced outside the union (Horny, 2013:2) while at least two countries committed each other to mutually granted preferential conditions for trade in specific goods (James, 2016:7).

According to Madyo (2008),

*“Preferential Trade Arrangement is an agreement in which members apply lower tariffs to imports produced by other members than to imports produced by non-members. It means that the participants in a preferential trading agreement reduce restrictions to trade between themselves, while maintaining a higher level of restrictions on imports from nations outside the agreement... an example was the case of the non-reciprocal lame agreement which was replaced by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement between EU and Caribbean and the pacific countries. It provides agreement for negotiations on a new trade agreement that would be compatible with the world trade organization rules on reciprocity.”* (Madyo, 2008:15)

It entails broad cooperation over policies extending far beyond trade barriers (Limao, 2016:1). It is designed to cut trade tariffs between member states. Tariffs are a form of tax that is placed on goods coming into a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and removes all border taxes or trade barriers on goods. It makes a country's exports cheaper and gives easier entry to other markets. It comes in all sorts of forms and with different rules but in short, it makes trade between different countries as liberal as possible and allows for more rules-based competition (Jones, 2019:1).

### **3. Empirical Literature**

Onyekwema and Oloko (2016) examined the potential of regional trade in facilitating the achievement of inclusive development in the African region. The study employed descriptive analysis to examine the nature composition and dimension of ECOWAS trade within the group and with the rest of the world vis-à-vis three other Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), from the preliminary study, it can be observed that the growth rate of West African Economics is increasing but the rising economic growth does not translate to improvement in inclusive development, as there was no significant reduction in poverty levels in the region. It further reveals that extra-

regional trade of the region is increasing at a very high rate, and also at a disproportionate rate with intra-regional trade, compared with SADC. This indicates the existence of an opportunity to boost regional trade for inclusive development through the conversion of part of the extra-regional trade into regional trade. However, the study further finds that the region's exports are dominated by mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials and imports are dominated by machinery, transport equipment, manufactured goods and chemicals, which implies that skilled technical manpower in the manufacturing sector must be available to effectively exploit the opportunity of trade for inclusive employment in west Africa through regional trade might be difficult however recommended that West African countries should intensify investment in human capital development and re-invigorate their commitment towards a regional industrial policy to foster higher regional trade and enhance development in the region.

Asante (2008) explores whether the ELTS has succeeded in the creation of a free trade area in the West African Sub-region. The study gathered data through interviews and secondary sources like textbooks, journal articles and official documents and reports from ECOWAS, UNDO and the EU, the study has been able to access the ELTS and its implementation and offered a conclusion on whether the performance of the scheme has been good so far. In the end, the conclusion is that, even though the scheme has achieved some heights in its implementation of such provisions like the national treatment provisions, transparency mechanisms, and competition policies, harmonization models, amongst others, the scheme has mainly failed in bringing about a free trade area and customs union for West Africa Sub-region.

Hadjiyiannis, Heracleous and Tabakis (2016) investigated the implications of preferential trade agreements (PTAs) for in-state conflict. Their study set up a two-stage game with three competing importers, where first, two of the countries decide on whether to initiate war against each other and subsequently, all three countries select their import tariffs. The results showed that PTAs produce both a "peace-creation" effect and a peace-diversion effect, whereby there reduces the likelihood of conflict between member and non-member countries more likely "peace diversion".

Dury, Okafor, Adikwu and Njoko (2020) studied the association between today's liberalization and economic growth in Nigeria from 1981 to 2018 using the Autoregressive Distributed Lag Bounds technique to co-integration. The result showed that trade liberalization does not support economic growth in Nigeria. Hence, the genuineness of the extensive trade liberalization campaign in developing countries through the bright ideas of international organization in the late 1980s and 1990s was not validated. Furthermore, the result showed the presence of unidirectional causality from real Gross Domestic Product to trade liberalization in Nigeria. The study therefore, recommends that policymakers of the economy to absorb the adverse shocks from foreign trade, appropriate fiscal and monetary policies should be deployed by the government for the protection of the economy against foreign influences and the diversification of the structure of export is necessary to ensure that manufactured products are exported more. Also, the Central Bank of Nigeria and policymakers of the government should prescribe

sound macroeconomic policies that will ensure price stability to reduce the uncertainties associated with investment in the economy to boost economic growth. The government should also provide incentives to investors and a conducive environment for investment. Moreover, the government should initiate policies of growth for the promotion of trade.

Umoh and Onye (2013) empirically investigated the growth implication of trade liberalization in West African (WA) countries using time series data for the period of 1970-2011. Relying on a Vector Error correction model (VECM), the indicates that trade orientation (trade policy variable) investment rate and exports Shocks have a significant positive impact on growth in 8 out of 12 West African countries through an outward-looking strategy of export expansion. Thus, conclude that WA Economies can vigorously pursue trade liberalization in order to enhance their growth performance. The caveat is that this would require a refocusing of domestic production capacity to commodity lines that overlap those of the trading partners; especially those of the OECD nations, so as to be able to garner the benefits derivable from liberal trade policy.

### **3.1 Review of Related Literature**

#### **3.1.1 The Origin of ECOWAS Trade Integration**

ECOWAS was established by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975 representing the outgrowth of a movement for West African self-reliance (Goodridge 2006:33). Its origin lies in the reaction of the countries in the region of their former colonial power following independence. For such as political movement to be effective, it needed to be supported by a strong economic project. Additionally, due to the small size of most West African States, only a regional approach would provide an economically viable path.

The Treaty of Lagos (1975) set out several provisions aiming at creating an ECOWAS Free Trade Area (FTA), Customs Union, Common Market and Economic and Monetary Union (ECOWAS, 2008). It is inspired by the EU regional integration model and the same linear logic of progression from trade to customs and common market. While the first two steps are about trade integration, the last step goes further by including political integration (Aka-Anghi, 2014). In practice, however, it was only after the revision of the ECOWAS treaty in 1993 that steps were taken toward the implementation of these ambitions (Endacacid, 2012).

Economic integration through ECOWAS was heavily pushed for by Nigeria, which aimed to promote its own development and industrialization. The idea was to use ECOWAS to facilitate its access to a captive market in West Africa for its finished products as well as raw materials to feed its booming industries. However, Nigeria's interest in ECOWAS also had a strong cultural component as it reflected a willingness to counterbalance France's influence on the francophone states, themselves already, somewhat integrated through UEMOA (Hartmann, 2013).

#### **3.2 Trade and Trade Facilitation**

As in many African regions, the ECOWAS countries are characterized by a lack of trade complementariness. Similar economic structures in the large majority of member states -

based on the export of primary products and the import of manufactured goods result in low levels of intra-ECOWAS trade but also reduce the incentive for countries to implement regional commitments. As pointed out by Bossuyt (2016), weaker and more protected economies fear the economic bulldozer power of the more Solid economies (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana). This in turn weakens the political traction of the ECOWAS, as it would represent an incentive for States to approach trade issues from a national rather than regional perspective.

Beyond these structural factors, trade is highly dependent on the context in which it takes place, ECOWAS trade is impeded by Severe political instability, fueled by climate change, lack of social inclusion and systemic poverty. Terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram are spreading in the region, leading to attacks in recent years in Mali and Nigeria (Signe L. and Van D., 2019).

With regard to trade facilitation, regional transport is of key concern. The transport system in the ECOWAS region is largely based on obsolete colonial-era transport infrastructure, which was developed with a view to facilitating the extraction and export of raw materials out of the sub-region (FAD 2015). The road transport sector has thus been described as higher proceed less efficient and less reliable than transport in other regions of Africa and the World (USAID, 2012). In fact, the average cost to transport a container within West Africa and the United States is abysmally high. For Landlocked countries, transport cost represents an average of 45% of the value of imports and 35% of exports, in comparison to global averages of 5.4% (of imports) and 8.8% (of exports). This creates disincentives for ECOWAS member states to trade regionally and impedes the political traction of ECOWAS in promoting the ETLs and CET implementation (Saana, 2016).

### **3.3 ECOWAS Agenda on Trade**

The main tool of the ECOWAS FTA is the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) aimed at liberalizing trade within the ECOWAS region. This aims to address the ECOWAS treaty objectives to: (a) eliminate between member states customs duties and other charges of an equivalent effect on imports and exports and (b) eliminate qualitative and administrative restrictions on trade among members (Treaty of Lagos, 1975). This was adopted by ECOWAS, in 1983 and entered into force in 1990 with the strong support of Ghana and Nigeria, who both aimed at removing internal tariffs on unprocessed goods and handcraft products (expanded to industrial products in 1990). However, for industrial and artisanal manufactured goods as well as for agricultural products, livestock, mining and fishery, the ETLs holds strict rules of origin, favouring local production (GIZ, 2012). Although it was not accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation mechanism, it provided a compensation mechanism right at the outset to offset some of the tariff revenue losses member states would face.

The ETLs was meant to be implemented progressively over a ten-year period, with a zero rate of duty and tariff in all member states by December 2000 (Barry P. et al., 2010). In practice, however, the implementation of the ETLs was rather disappointing, as

recognized also by the ECOWAS Commission. The implementation also strongly depended on the availability of facilitating measures, the above-described compensation mechanism strongly benefited ETLS implementation, but when the mechanism stopped; the ETLS progress stagnated. The ECOWAS, in its efforts to overcome this situation, initiates the National Approval Committee (NAC). Through this mechanism, the approval for ETLS products is not made at the regional but at the national level, generating ownership among the member states. As a result, the ETLS implementation picked up again, to finally drop (De Roguefeuil, 2010).

### **3.4 Free Movement of Goods and Trade Liberation in ECOWAS**

An empirical evaluation of the free movement of goods and trade liberalization, in ECOWAS by Okon, Otu and Lloyed (2017) concluded that ECOWAS still has ways to go to accomplish this goal. This evaluation is very necessary as it presents the problems in the region as it is, without Sugar-coating. Most of the problems in this evaluation are given much deeper focus and context in this study. According to this evaluation, cross-border trade in the sub-region is still plagued by customs barriers, which result in earnings loss to individual member states in the region and the ECOWAS body as a whole.

### **3.5 The Ecowas Trade Liberalisation Scheme**

Ukuoha and Ukpe (2013) in their work titled “The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme Genesis, Condition and Appraisal” highlights the elements of the liberalization scheme to include some of the aim of the scheme, the coverage of the scheme and the defined conditions for the importer. The scheme is meant to create opportunities by creating new markets for goods and Services within the West African Sub-region, increasing investment opportunities and making track cheaper and faster. They also addressed some of the implementations of the ETLS. Some issues of political commitment to regional programmes were revealed, which undermined the main purpose of the ETLS.

### **3.6 ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Policy**

Based on the preamble of Chapter 8, Articles 35, and 38 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, the process of eliminating tariffs and other obstructions to trade between member States and the institutionalization of a common external tariff structure on non-members should proceed gradually and be completed over a transitional period of 15 years from 1979 within the period, the organization sought to:

- a) remove all tariff barriers to trade;
- b) establish a common customs union;
- c) establish a common external tariff; and
- d) abolish all customs duties and taxes of similar effect.

The first two years of the implementation of ECOWAS trade liberalization policy south to maintain existing customs tariffs on goods within member states, and then gradually eliminated over a period of 8 years. All quotas and other quantitative



restrictions of similar effect are to be eliminated within 10 years, while differences in external tariffs between member states are to be harmonized in the remaining 5 years.

ECOWAS's first step was to direct efforts at forming a free trade area by lifting barriers to mutual trade within the region on the three groups of products originating from the community from 1981:

- a) unprocessed agricultural commodities,
- b) industrial products, and
- c) traditional handicrafts.

Though implementation had long commenced, the process seems problematic as there was no clear-cut identification of the industrial product involved, and the failure of some member states to apply the preferential regime on other exports from the community. There is also the problem of compensation for losses incurred by member states in the course of applying the regime. As such, the sub-region is far from actualizing its trade liberalization scheme.

### **3.7 Theoretical Framework**

Lipsey (1987) argues that in relation to economic integration or trade liberalization, the customs union has always been historically concerned with the welfare gains and losses which succeed the establishment of the customs union. These gains and losses could occur because of specialization, the economic scale, changing the terms of trade, changes in efficiency through an increase in competition and on account of changes in the rate of economic growth. Custom Union define as the process of "*elimination of intra-trade barriers and the equalization of tariffs on imports, from non-member countries*" (Viner, 1950) "Viner conceptualizes the condition under which trade is created within an integrating area; that this occurs when the output of inefficient producers is replaced after the elimination of tariffs by the cheaper import of more efficient producers within the region to the benefit of both producers and consumers.

According to Dalimov (2009), trade creation and trade diversion occur as a result of the economic unification of states changing the direction of the goods from one to the other state supplying the goods to a third country. He further argues that although these concepts provide better prices and facilitate the cancellation of tariffs, they differ significantly. This difference is explained in the sense that while trade creation provides, a net improvement of the price, trade diversion comes at the moment when trade from the cheapest supplier state is diverted to the state inside the union which became cheaper as a result of a decrease in tariffs.

Viner therefore reaches a conclusion that although the aim of custom unions is to enhance political and socio-economic development that is not always the achieved outcome because this would only occur when trade creation is promoted through the abolishment of obstructions to free trade between member states. On the contrary, if trade flow is diverted from efficient non-member states to less efficient member States in a bid to promote more cooperation between member states, there would be a decrease in

welfare and because the state is presumed to be in search of ways to maximize returns and increase welfare, more trade creating customs unions should be encouraged.

The wholesale application of the customs union basic framework in understanding the case of ECOWAS in relation to the ECOWAS trade liberalization scheme (ETLS) and its shortcomings is difficult, as there is no assured success in moving from one State of the integration process to the other. Moreover, its success is essentially hinged on the conditions that the proportion of intra-community trade is high; that member states economies are complementary and that member states GNP comprise a low percentage of foreign trade.

So far ECOWAS intra-community trade remains largely insignificant due to the non-complementarity of the economies of member States and even unilateral border closure amongst themselves. The economies are largely competitive rather than complementary as they produce similar or mono-products with a high percentage of their trade outside the union. Therefore, the envisaged economic gain from the adaptation of the customs union would not fully materialize in the case of ECOWAS as the basic conditions for the success of the framework are largely non-existent within the region.

Even expectations of economic gains from integration will only come if full liberalization and harmonization of the diverse economic policies of member States are attained. The full economic gains of its trade creation effect would be minimal in ECOWAS as there are virtually no efficient industries to supply cheaper goods within the sub-region. On the contrary trade diversion effect is most prevalent as member states' economies are largely dependent on the export of one or two agricultural commodities to other regions in exchange for the much-needed industrial goods that are non-existent within the region. In addition, the customs union concentrated so much on markets, goods and factors of production without due regard to the importance of underlying political intricacies and supra-national institutions in the process of integration. Also, deepening of integration and joint coordination of fiscal and monetary policies could enhance economic gains from integration and balance trade, but membership alone does not guarantee better economic performance.

On the whole, these theories posit that states forming cooperation is a mechanism for promoting their collective interest, welfare and solving the collective problems. This postulation is also a major reason for the formation of ECOWAS and the establishment of ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) to serve a sub-regional integrative mechanism that will collectively pursue and solve economic problems bedeviling West Africa. ECOWAS was designed to serve as a catalyst for the promotion of economic growth and development of the sub-region, hence the pertinent these theories.

### **3.8 Progress Made by ETLS in Establishing West Africa as a Free Trade Area and a Custom Union**

In order to enhance the trade relations under (ETLS), Fagbayibo (2019) revealed that ECOWAS has set out to pursue an agenda for the implementation of the protocols that have been long established on free movement and goods by seeking to eliminate all non-

tariff barriers, simplification of custom and transit procedures and drastic reduction of control post on international roads.

To further enhance transportation and Communication, ECOWAS developed a programme of integrated regional network road railways. ECOWAS programme on telecommunication is implemented under the framework of INTELCOM I linking Member States with telephone, telex and fax facilities INTELCOM II intends to update and expand the existing network as well as the envisaged trans-coastal gas pipeline linking Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana.

Akinkugbe (2019) stressed that the community agricultural policy is articulated in Chapter iv Article 25 of the ECOWAS revised treaty and hinged on the promotion of joint agricultural projects in member states in the area of production, research, training, processing, marketing and distribution, which has been boasted and triggered to enhance ECOWAS advantage in the trading under ETLs.

Hence, the main thrust of the policy is to ensure food security by ensuring increased production and productivity in agriculture, livestock, fisheries and forestry, as well as improve conditions for the region's farmers and the protection of prices of export commodities in the African or international market. In order to achieve this ECOWAS is designed to enable the institutional structure to harmonize and integrate production structures, strategies and policies in pricing and price support policies in the production, trade and marketing of major agricultural products and inputs (Akinkugbe, 2019).

Fasan (2019) maintains that strategic industrial policy is often justified on the assumption of ensuring continuity of supply, unlike elsewhere in which numerous internal instruments influence the consumption, production and storage of agricultural products. ECOWAS has not effectively applied any specific workable arrangement in terms of price support or production-tied aid, to enhance producer incomes, which is desperately required to stimulate internal agricultural production and reduced imports.

As building blocks for the ETLs, the ECOWAS Free Trade Area (FTAs) and its common external tariffs have provided experiences that have formed the basis of negotiating tariff concession of the ETLs for the ECOWAS member states. It is therefore expected that ECOWAS will facilitate a common tariff concession for the region as it has to continue to provide a guide to its member states to aid negotiation and coherence of position. Moreover, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission has unveiled a Trade Promotion Organisation (TPO) Network to facilitate and increase the volume of trade in the region and maximize the opportunities presented by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

### **3.9 The Obstacles to Achieving the ETLs Goal of Establishing a Free Trade Area in the West African Sub-Region**

The integration of the people of the ECOWAS sub-region remains the most laudable goal of the ECOWAS even before the introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). As laudable as it is, it is being threatened by insecurity occasioned by trans-border banditry (Miles, 2005; Willet, 2005). Even though the sole objective of ECOWAS is

to enable economic activities and trade within the sub-region, criminals have taken the platform to perpetrate their criminal activities and cause obstacles to legitimate economic activities within the sub-region. These in turn have numerous implications for the security of the sub-region. The uncontrollable movement of people across national borders has raised security concerns among ECOWAS member states. In this area of globalization as well as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), it is suggested that the incentive for cross-border crime has increased as criminals have identified the ways provided by poor border control to gain greater rewards from criminal activities outside their traditional boundaries.

Cross-border trade in the sub-region is still plagued by customs barriers, which results in earnings loss to individual member states in the sub-region and the ECOWAS body as a whole. Some challenges or obstacles identified in the sub-region include the inadequate diversification of production which causes States to repackage goods from outside the region to export to other members of the regional community, the inadequacies of laid-down policies coupled with the constant circumvention of such policies, the absence of harmonization of policies and standards and so on. These obstacles contribute to the failure of the community to implement the free movement of goods protocols and achieve true trade liberalization in the sub-region (Okon and Lloyd, 2017).

Another major obstacle that the beneficiaries of the scheme highlighted has to do with the unavailability of information on the scheme and other trade-related information. For the ECOWAS goals of attaining a free trade area in West Africa to be successful, States within the region have to embark on a sensitization tour, where people, businesses, and the various industries in their individual countries know about the scheme, its benefits and other trade-related information under the ECOWAS.

### **3.10 How ECOWAS Can Improve upon Its Methods of Achieving its Goals of a Free Trade Area and Economic Integration of the Sub-region**

The acceleration and localization of public education on the ETLs and its benefits to the socio-economic development of the sub-regional organization and its member countries. This will address the obstacle of lack of awareness of the ETLs and further educate businesses and individuals who already know about the ETLs on how to benefit much more from the scheme. The more people and businesses know about the scheme, the further the increased utilization of the scheme will much more lead to deeper and larger intra-ECOWAS trade and development.

Governments of the various West African States can contribute to the increase in trade and improve their gains from the ETLs while further aiding ECOWAS in its bid to establish a free trade area in West Africa, by improving production within their individual countries through policies and programmes and the provision of financial and technical support to local production industries. The government of both Ghana's and Nigeria's provision of fertilizers and other incentives to local farmers can be considered an example of the support that member states can provide to their private production

base to boost production in their individual countries. It can increase exports for the countries in the region to other countries in the region. Without goods to trade, the scheme will fail, as it is the case already.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The findings of this study revealed that the sub-regional body has mainly failed in the creation of a free trade area for West Africa. This is as a result of the inability of the regional body to implement many of the different indicators which indicate that a free trade scheme is successful. Such indicators the sub-regional body failed to implement among others include a proper harmonization of standards, the national treatment clauses, dispute resolution and review mechanism, competition policies and transparency mechanism. Although, the sub-regional body has had success, though limited, in the implementation of the mutual recognition of standards and accreditation and the reduction of regulatory discretion, ECOWAS through the ETLS is far from implementing the scheme with the aforementioned indicators.

It is possible for the scheme to improve; however, ECOWAS has made very little progress in the implementation of the scheme after 33 years of the scheme in operation. Hence, a rethink is needed by the West African heads of state and governments on the possible way forward.

#### **5. Recommendations**

In view of the above, the study recommended the following:

- 1) ECOWAS leaders should have the political will of implementing the scheme into action rather than compromising the scheme goal for selfish interest, by creating and enhancing cross-border infrastructure corridors, such as telecommunications, the internet, highways, railroads, canals and airways to effectively enhance intra-trade within the sub-region.
- 2) ECOWAS should establish research centres in the various universities across the sub-regional, fully funded to conduct research into how to improve the implementation of ECOWAS protocols and programmes including the ETLS. And again, research can even be conducted to determine what kind of regulations would be more favourable for the sub-region.
- 3) ECOWAS member states should prioritize the diversification of products for intra-trade relations, as the lack of export diversification has been one of the major obstacles to attaining a free trade area and economic integration in West Africa. Since most ECOWAS countries produce similar products, intra-ECOWAS trade is low.
- 4) Member states of the ECOWAS economic block should deliberately as a matter of policy strengthen sub-regional and national security systems if effective free trade and economic integration must be attained.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author whose names are listed immediately below, certify that apart from submitting this manuscript to European Journal of Political Science Studies for publication, there are no other affiliations with or involvement in any other organization or entity with a financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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