

# West Africa And The Challenges Of Regional Integration: Lessons From The Brexit

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## **Abstract**

*The study examined regional integration in West Africa: lessons from the Brexit experience. The notion that deeper regional integration in the West African sub-region can bring lasting development and stability to the region has become a staple idea shared by many regionalists and scholars. The success of the European Union tends to give credence to this notion. Despite the success recorded by the EU, Britain a strong member left the Union. The major assumption of this study is that there are some veritable lessons that a sub-regional organization like ECOWAS can learn from the European integration and Brexit in its effort to achieve deeper integration. The study adopted functionalism as the theoretical framework. The study employed a secondary method of data collection and a qualitative descriptive analysis method was used to conclude the relations between variables. Findings from the study revealed that factors like corruption, armed conflicts, colonial experience, language barrier, and debt crisis in the region have hindered both development and integration in the West African sub-region. The study also showed that ECOWAS has a lesson to learn from the concerns raised by Britons which made Britain leave the EU. The factors that necessitated Brexit include the issue of unabated mass migration into the union, over assertiveness of Germany, insecurity, loss of border control and sovereignty, and economic hardship. The study recommended that ECOWAS should endeavour to arrest the challenges that have hindered its development and integration before considering deeper integration. This is because the current condition of the region may not favour deeper integration. It must among other things fashion out means to curb the poverty in the region so that the community will not be a mere conglomeration of weak nations in alliance.*

**Keyword:** Regional Integration, Brexit, ECOWAS, European Union

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## **I. Background**

The debate on regional integration in Africa has been age-long, producing a multiplicity of efforts geared towards integrating Africa for economic, geographical, and socio-political benefits (Bischoff, 2021). However, there have been several efforts in this direction but it can hardly be said that these efforts have been completely successful. There have been numerous sub-regional efforts to pursue overall integration in Africa. These include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), one of the West African sub-regional efforts. Ogbuabor et al. (2019) asserted that the processes of integration in Europe, and Latin America largely influenced the integration of West African States into the ECOWAS. The rationale was both political and economic: to enhance state unity and stimulate economic growth. The process of economic integration is inherently political for two primary reasons: first, it necessitates the relinquishment of significant national economic tools to a supranational entity, and second, it compels the governments of member states to adopt sub-regional policies. Simultaneously, numerous West African nations sought to preserve their political autonomy.

According to Fisher and Oludemi (2022), the most extensive regional project in Africa is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975. Onuoha and Akogwu (2022) asserted that Nigeria, representing over fifty percent of the region's population and a substantial share of its GDP, has been a pivotal factor in ECOWAS. ECOWAS has attained a significant political stature mostly due to Nigerian influence and initiatives (Oshewolo et al., 2024). This has also allowed ECOWAS to assume a credible and successful role in regional peacekeeping operations, through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group's (ECOMOG's) operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Folarin, 2024).

Another area of its relative success is the cross-border movement of persons among member countries. Conversely, ECOWAS has achieved limited progress in trade integration. Substantial tariff and non-tariff barriers persist within the region (Ogbuabor et al., 2019). The West Africa sub-region has dared to attain economic

development and maintenance of peace in the region through the instrumentalities of ECOWAS but with the changing nature of the international politics, ECOWAS cannot afford to be reckless. There is no gainsaying that regional integration promises to bring all-round development but the activities of some regional bodies like the European Union have brought them under excessive scrutiny. No doubt the EU is a global model for regional integration but over time as a result of the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 the Union became a political integration that oversees almost the entire activities of member-states (Rourke, 2009). This to a large extent led to the awakening of nationalism in the region that manifested itself in the vote by Britons in a referendum to leave the union. This they called 'Brexit'. Brexit has become one of the most discussed issues in international politics since 2016. It is perceived to be a lesson to regional organizations in their quest to achieve deeper integration inter alia. It presents a veritable lesson to ECOWAS especially as it hopes to achieve further integration in the region. It is therefore important to analyse regional integration in West Africa holistically to show how Brexit poses a lesson to regional integration in Africa. This is the general background of this study, although we take exceptional interest in ECOWAS because it closely resembles the European Union in its structure and the main focus of the study.

## **II. Statement Of The Problem**

A successful regional integration must meet basic expectations and serve the regional, sub-regional and national interests of member states. It must seek to answer the economic, socio-political and general welfare of prospective participants of such a regional integration arrangement. Such definitions must encompass gains in areas of trade; increased investments that run beyond national and regional borders, and impressive returns on such investments; environmental policies and actions; collective security; cross-border movements of people, goods, services and capital and many more advancements which will create regionalism that is people-centric. Sideri (2020) stated that financial integration must also form an indispensable component of a functional regional integration structure. In a 2014 report, the World Bank notes that;

“Financial infrastructure integration supports the expansion of trade and investment flows and ultimately contributes to the deepening and broadening of regional financial and capital markets.” (World Bank, 2014, p. 10).

West Africa has since the post-colonial era made conscious efforts towards regional integration. These efforts have ranged from treaties, sub-regional policies, trade liberalization, and common currency. Numerous institutions, commissions and policies have been set up in pursuit of this goal the loudest and most encompassing of which is the ECOWAS. However, these efforts have not yielded the expected outcomes and results. This inability to achieve expected results is largely due to the absence of an effectively orchestrated trade integration, clear political will, visionary and transparent regional leadership, strong sub-regional economic and immigration policies, peace, security and stability, etc. These impediments are seen both at country and sub-regional levels.

Tembo and Makina (2020) stated that enhanced trade among member countries is a fundamental aspect of integration. Nevertheless, intra-regional trade, or trade within West African integration groupings, has scarcely expanded, currently constituting approximately 10 percent of total trade.

The minimal intra-sub-regional trade in West Africa starkly contrasts with the European Union, where, at the inception of the common market established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, trade among the original six members constituted approximately 35 percent of their total trade, subsequently increasing to an average of nearly 70 percent in recent years. In integration schemes including more advanced developing countries, intra-sub-regional commerce markedly exceeds the West African average.

Consequently, regarding peace, security, stability, and inclusion, they persist in that it is crucial to address conflicts and guarantee the sustained preservation of peace and security both within individual nations and throughout the geographical region of an integration group. Given that the fundamental reasons for instability are often linked to political exclusion and inadequate governance, it is imperative to also tackle matters concerning political transparency, engagement, and inclusivity. Internal integration within each member nation, founded on political stability, inclusiveness, and equity, is essential for establishing effective regional integration (Wapmuk, 2021).

Regional integration professes to bring rapid development to a region but because of the structure and activities of some of these bodies' member states are becoming dispassionate about these unions (Danquah et al., 2013). An example that readily comes to mind is the European Union. The EU may have enjoyed a level of success as a regional body. It has to a large extent achieved the ambitions of the founding fathers but some critical concerns raised by its members are yet to be met; this has brought the union to one of its darkest stages since its formation. The activities of the union have reawakened nationalist resentment towards the union. These critical issues bedeviling the union and how the union has handled the challenges are responsible for the calls by some member states that the union's powers be whittled down. In contrast, a strong member has voted to leave the union. Countries like Hungary, Britain, Slovakia, Czech, Romania and Slovenia have shown strong resentment towards the union (Frej, 2017). The United Kingdom pushed their resentment towards the establishment to the

point of voting to leave the union in a referendum. This they dubbed Brexit. In the wake of the referendum, Britain raised some concerns that made them push for an exit.

The following were highlighted as the challenges that brought about the impending exit of the UK from the union (Clarke et al., 2017). First on the list and the most critical of them all is mass migration. This has to do with the influx of people from Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East into the EU. How the EU has handled this critical issue has brought it under scrutiny. Some members claim that the EU is not adopting an inclusive approach to resolve the problem. Frej (2017) observed that some members feel that the position and policies on immigration run counter to their national policies. Member states want to play a crucial role in resolving this crisis facing the EU. This is the major argument put forward by Britain in its bid to leave the union.

Again, British people have raised arguments against the EU based on the following grounds, first over the assertiveness of Germany in the union: that is Germany is accused of pursuing a hegemonic tendency in the union which they believe that Angela Merkel is trying to realise the ambitions of Imperial Kaiser and Adolf Hitler which is to control the continent of Europe (Junker, 2023; Specter, 2022). Second, the economic hardship that hit the Eurozone in 2008 affected the UK because of the influx of people from the Eurozone countries into the UK in search of jobs. Third, the insecurity arising from the free movement of people in and out of the region poses a threat to the corporate existence of the UK. Fourth, the loss of border control and sovereignty of member states have deepened the displeasure towards the union.

The above issues are considered as the reasons for Brexit which should pose as lessons to ECOWAS in its desire to deepen its integration. ECOWAS is currently looking for ways to put an end to the nagging problems facing the region. In doing this the organization must critically consider the reasons for the sentiment against the EU that was once considered to be the driver for economic development in a war-torn region at the time of its formation. Unarguably, the union is facing its most critical time as the third largest member has left the union. To this end, the questions that one is tempted to ask are thus; what lessons can ECOWAS learn from Brexit? Has ECOWAS attained the capacity to handle the reasons for Brexit? What are the lessons to learn from the failure of the EU to meet the concerns of Britons? This study aims to examine regional integration and development in West Africa and the lessons from the Brexit experience. That is to critically examine reasons for Brexit and how they are lessons for ECOWAS in the quest for its deeper integration. In a bid to achieve the aim of the study, the study will assess the challenges confronting ECOWAS efforts towards a successful integration and how they can be surmounted, analyse the reasons for Brexit and examine the lessons that can be learnt by ECOWAS from the integration of the E.U and Brexit.

### **III. Aim And Objectives Of The Study**

The aim of this study is to examine regional integration in West Africa and the lessons from the Brexit experience. In a bid to achieve the aim of the study, the following specific objectives were formulated to guide the study:

1. To assess the challenges confronting ECOWAS efforts towards a successful integration.
2. To analyse the reasons for Brexit and the possible lessons for ECOWAS.

### **IV. Research Questions**

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study.

1. What are the challenges facing ECOWAS efforts towards a successful integration and how can the challenges be resolved?
2. What are the reasons for Brexit and the possible lessons for ECOWAS?

### **V. Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts functionalism as its theoretical framework. Many scholars widely view functionalism as a philosophy that can bring about peace, unity and cooperation among States and regions (Golit & Adamu, 2014). Functionalists believe in the gradual approach towards regional and or global unity. Nwaorgu (2006) observed correctly that functionalist theory encourages the development of piecemeal non-political co-operational organizations. He went further to add that such organizations are more likely to be established in the following areas thus economic, technical, scientific, social and functional areas. Functionalism is a theory of international relations that began during the inter-war period basically to fashion out an alternative to the original interstate relations which gave birth to many deadly wars in human history. Rosemond (2000) posits that, in contrast to the self-interest of nation-states emphasised by realists, functionalists prioritise the shared interests and needs of states, which, in the context of global integration, have led to the erosion of state sovereignty and the growing influence of knowledge, particularly that of scientists and experts, in policy-making processes. The genesis of functionalism may be traced to the liberal idealist tradition initiated by Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, extending to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Address (Hosny, 2013). Functionalism posits that society has interrelated components that collaboratively function to sustain

balance and social stability for the entirety (Marinov, 2014). In the words of Aybet, (1997) as cited by Gómez-Diago (2020), stated that;

“Functionalism developed as an alternative to nationalism, on the premise that the development of international organisations performing human welfare tasks would erode popular support for nation states and thus diminish the threat to world peace posed by nationalism”. (P.24).

The whole idea of functionalism is based on the belief that if nation-states cooperate on non-political functional areas, soon they will build trust within themselves as such they will be willing to surrender their political sovereignty. It is on this note that Rourke (2009) opined that functionalism springs from the idea that the way to global cooperation is through a “bottom-up”, evolutionary approach that begins with limited, pragmatic cooperation on narrow, non-political issues. The example that readily comes to mind is the problem of the delivery of mail internationally. To solve this problem countries cooperated to found the Universal Postal Union in 1894 (Rourke, 2009). Plato’s view of “necessity as the mother of invention” in *The Republic* (Ca.380 B.C) can be said to be the unspoken background of functionalism (Tuluy, 2017).

This theory became necessary for the study of regional integration in Africa. Recall that when countries mix, and mingle, they do that for the promotion of their national interest. Regional integration has proven to be a good channel through which a region can achieve its full potential. The EU came on board when the continent was war-torn and needed an urgent strategy to ensure speedy economic recovery and prevention of future wars. The EU started with economic integration. What this means to Africa is that Africa in its quest to achieve development through regional integration must take cognizance of the developmental stages of the EU. Functionalists will advise that Africa must put in place a system that will engineer the economic development of the region before considering political integration. This is because member-states will not have the feeling that the integration arrangement may likely pose a threat to their national sovereignty.

## **VI. The Concept Of Regional Integration**

Regional integration refers to the collaboration of states within a certain geographical area. This collaboration is continuously directed towards mutual benefits. Nwaorgu (2006: 147) observed that “regional integration is considered to be a key to self-sustainability and self-reliance of a region”. It may be accurately stated that it is fundamentally conceived as the aggregation and pooling of resources for the advantage of the region through trade and various socio-economic and political endeavours. The primary objective of integration is to foster the economic development of countries within a region. Typically, integration entails one or more formal agreements that delineate the specific areas of collaboration, along with coordinating entities representing the participating nations (Umulisa, 2016).

This collaboration typically commences with economic integration and subsequently evolves to encompass political integration. Integration can be characterised as a continuum, with 0 denoting the absence of integration between two or more nations. Ten would signify total integration among two or more nations. This indicates that the integrating nations would become a new nation, signifying complete integration (Golit & Adamu, 2014).

Regional integration implies collaboration that extends beyond just socio-political cooperation. Integration agreements frequently encompass common accord, shared resources, and infrastructure integration. Hailu (2014) confirmed that regional integration entails the elimination of barriers separating nearby countries through mutual agreement and the collaborative management of shared resources and assets. It is a process through which nations liberalise trade, establishing a common market for commodities, individuals, capital, and services. The European Union promotes regional integration as a viable strategy for attaining prosperity, peace, and security (Jacopy & Meunier, 2010).

At this point, it is necessary to succinctly explain the concept of 'region,' which underlies integration. A region, as defined by Nwaorgu (2006), is a distinct and recognisable geographic entity characterised by particular topographic attributes. Nwaorgu's (2006) definition unequivocally indicates that the term 'region' pertains to geographical terminology characterised by unique qualities. Consequently, there exist five regions globally. They encompass Africa, Asia, America, Oceania, and Europe. The characteristics of regions encompass weather and climate (temperatures ranging from hot to cold), soil topography, and geographical position. Hailu (2014) stated that regions are defined as locations that may be distinguished based on the similarity of specific topographical characteristics. In this sense, regions refer to individuals and their actions inside a shared territory or geographical area, fostering a collective resolve to maintain their society's unique culture and social structure (Nwaorgu, 2006).

Having established that regions consist of individuals sharing a common geographical location, it is accurate to assert that this collective may choose to collaborate in addressing a problem specific to their territory. Cooperation in international politics typically arises as a response to a challenge. No nation can endure in isolation; therefore, collaboration among nation-states is vital. This collaboration results in interdependence among nations. This reliance and collaboration gradually culminate in regional integration or entities that oversee inter-

actions among states. This collaboration is typically accompanied by the expectation that it will assist the integrating nation in achieving a degree of self-sufficiency across several aspects of life. For numerous tiny and impoverished nations, particularly in Africa, regional integration is perceived as a means to alleviate poverty and address region-specific challenges. Numerous tiny states saw membership in regional organisations as a means to attain significance in global matters. The highly expected advantages of regional organisations as expedient means to sever ties with colonial powers and accelerate development prompted numerous African, Asian, and Latin American nations to adopt this emerging trend (Rourke, 2009). Regional integration often seeks to promote economic development. It entails the collaboration of two or more nations to consolidate their resources in pursuit of a shared objective. Nwaorgu (2006; p. 172) noted that;

“regional integration is aimed at meeting the following economic aims, thus; food self-sufficiency, industrialization, infrastructural development and environmental control.”

It is evident that each region aspires to achieve self-sufficiency in food production, generate employment, facilitate the free flow of products and services, and provide a favourable climate for foreign investment by upholding peace and order. These aspects are the fundamental causes that resulted in the spread of regional organisations in developing nations throughout the 1960s. Currently, the EU is a significant economic power on the global stage. This is due to its capacity to leverage the resources of its member states to achieve economic stability in Europe. Due to the efforts of the regional organisation, the Union has established one of the largest single markets globally (Cabral et al., 2021; McNamara, 2024).

## **VII. Results And Discussions**

### **Challenges of Regional Integration in West Africa**

The impediments to enhanced regional integration within ECOWAS are apparent. Economic challenges, including barriers to trade expansion and monetary issues, and political challenges that reveal the fragility and absence of political will among member states. Despite the existence of over twenty multilateral cooperation schemes and sub-groupings in West Africa, excluding numerous bilateral arrangements among West African States (Basse et al., 2024), and the evident benefits of economic collaboration among Member States, the challenges which stand as impediments to achieving the objectives of ECOWAS remain notable. Among these challenges are:

#### **Poor Infrastructure**

The presence of good infrastructure is a major push to achieving a proper regional integration agreement while the absence of same can frustrate the realization of regional integration. This is why Chuku et al. (2023) noted that infrastructure is the catalyst for regional integration. Infrastructures such as good transportation and communication networks are critical for integration. They also noted that infrastructure is essential in the realization of the region’s goal of accelerated economic transformation and wealth creation (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2023).

The most critical infrastructures for regional integration are transportation and communication networks. Recall that the regional bodies are usually made up of countries located in the same geographical location (Nwaogu, 2006). These neighbouring countries sometimes share land and water borders. To enhance integration, there must be adequate means of moving people from one location to another. The EU has enjoyed so much success over the years because it has been able to move goods and services easily, especially through railways and roads. This has given room for proper integration because people move freely with a relatively cheaper and reliable means of transportation. The same is not the fate of ECOWAS which has been bedeviled by the problem of lack of social infrastructures. It is almost suicidal to attempt to travel to ECOWAS member states by road. These roads are heavily blighted by the presence of armed criminals. This has affected regional integration in the region because the free movement of goods and services and people which fosters economic development has hindered economic development.

Again, Ekpo et al. (2019) considered what they called infrastructural integration. To them, infrastructural integration is the major driver of economic integration. They highlighted some challenges that have impeded infrastructural integration in the region. They include;

- Geographical and topographical diversity which often implies insignificant differences in the appropriate types and specifications of infrastructure for different areas.
- Different initial conditions. Different countries are at levels of infrastructure and economic development.
- Lack of unifying standards in regulatory policies, legal frameworks, and administrative procedures.
- Lack of proper assessment of financial implications of cross-border projects; and weak capital markets that could be used to mobilize financing for infrastructure projects, especially by private sector participation through public-private partnerships.
- Lack of adequate cost-benefit analysis that would show the potential benefits and costs for participating countries. For example, a cost-benefit analysis would show estimates of changes in trade flows, transport costs,

tourism, the standard of living, agglomeration effects, scale of economics and labour mobility (Ekpo et al., 2019).

The formation of regional bodies comes with its anticipated gains, if ECOWAS genuinely want to enjoy the dividends of regional bodies, it must address its infrastructural deficit.

### **Political Instability and Corruption**

Another major challenge that has proven to be a clog in the wheel of ECOWAS is political instability. Adegboye et al. (2023) noted that ECOWAS has struggled to advance its development agenda because of the extreme political volatility and perpetual civil wars experienced by its member states. Again, member states of ECOWAS have had sit-tight leaders who refuse to relinquish power. Onapajo and Babalola (2024) observed that the body's failure to introduce strict term limits for its member states' presidents has led to political violence in the region. This has hindered the bloc's aspiration of improving stability and economic integration among member states.

This is further exacerbated by the resurgence of political coups in recent times. These coups orchestrated by the unwillingness of member states' leaders to leave office have affected the blocs. For example, in 2020, Guinean President Alpha Conde amended the constitution for the sole aim of tenure elongation after serving two tenures. He was later re-elected for another six years (Akubueze, 2024). In the same vein, in 2019, Togo passed constitutional amendments to allow President Faure Gnassingbe to elongate his tenure by two tenures. Also, Alassana Ouattara refused not to stand for an unconstitutional third term in 2020. His move to stand for the election was greeted by political violence (Mhaka, 2023). Rosenje, et al. (2022) noted that the activities of these sit-tight leaders amount to constitutional coups and that ECOWAS has done little or nothing to address this challenge.

The failure of the regional body to confront the undemocratic moves of this democratic leader led to coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger consequently. Mhaka (2023) stated that the failure of ECOWAS to do much to prevent the constitutional coups and flagrant violations of democratic norms sent a message reverberating across the region that democracy was there to be challenged. To make matters worse, these countries have decided to leave ECOWAS thereby weakening the organization further.

Corruption among West African leaders is so alarming that one is tempted to think that Africa is the birthplace of corruption. Hardly is there any West African leader that is free from corruption. These leaders see power as the means to an end and or money-making venture. No wonder Joseph Richard described the African style of politics as 'politics of prebendalism' (Sodaro, 2001).

Corruption constitutes a significant developmental barrier for many nations in West Africa which further highlights the deficiency in quality of leadership in the region. Owusu (2024) clearly articulates the severity of the issue in the region, noting that West African states have encountered corruption as a significant challenge since their establishment. In many instances, it has reached levels of blatant and reprehensible mismanagement of resources, for which no moral or historical justification can be provided, significantly contributing to the overall impoverishment of the region and the estrangement of its populace from its leaders. The detrimental effects of corruption on development are extensively documented. Jooji (2011) and others assert that it constrains economic growth by diminishing public resources, deterring private investment and savings, and obstructing the effective utilisation of government revenue and development assistance money. In West Africa, corruption and misappropriation of public finances are frequently identified as contributing factors to military coups.

### **Economic Dependence**

It is no secret the members of ECOWAS are largely third-world countries that are struggling to pursue economic advancement. These countries are poor and depend on aid from advanced Western countries. Most of the member states are heavily tied to their colonial masters.

The enduring colonial connections, varied administrative frameworks, and the continued influence of domestic and international stakeholders in maintaining the status quo have significantly impeded the realisation of West African Economic Integration. The meddling by former colonial powers in the socio-political affairs of West African nations, aimed at maintaining Africa's reliance on European traditions and elements of international relations, presents a significant problem. Efforts at sub-regional consolidation often provoke responses from former colonial administrations, which may employ incentives and/or coercion to dissuade potential members from committing to accords. Consequently, each actor views the threats or incentives as more advantageous than the costs or benefits of complying with regional agreements (Adetula et al., 2016). Recall that ECOWAS is made up of Francophone and Anglophone countries as such decisions of the body will be affected by the positions of their colonial masters. For example, the francophone countries have very strong ties with France as such their positions will be a reflection of the French agenda. This over-dependence on external aids has affected the decision-making process of the body.

The region is majorly run with loans from external sources; these loans have further weakened the quest for the achievement of strong regional integration. The situation is also a significant worry for African politicians. The debt crisis and externally enforced Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) impeded Africa's ability to achieve economic unity. The debt crisis has led to a significant escalation of underdevelopment in the region (Carin, 2014). The African Development Bank Group (2023) estimates that Africa's total external debt, which stood at \$1.12 trillion in 2022, had risen to \$1.152 trillion by end-2023. With global interest rates at their highest level for 40 years and as multiple bond debt securities issued by African countries reach maturity, there is no shortage of challenges in 2024. According to Africa Development Bank Group (2023), Africa will pay out \$163 billion to settle loans in 2024, up substantially from \$61 billion in 2010. The increased burden of debt repayments has the potential to endanger the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals on the continent, particularly in health, education and infrastructure.

Consequently, African nations use their limited resources to service loans rather than invest in development and social sectors. The current reality is that, although domestic macroeconomic mismanagement and political instability may not solely hinder economic integration, the formidable challenges posed by external debt and the accompanying IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programs are likely to inflict severe damage on the already weakened economies of West Africa, thereby obstructing both regional and economic development in Africa. These aids and loans from developed countries especially their former colonial master do not come without conditionalities which must be met by these countries. These conditions most times are detrimental to the regions. Again, the integration of the economics of these nations into the world capitalist system rendering them exporters of raw materials and importers of furnished goods have made them perpetually dependent on the global North (Rourke, 2009). In the face of this, ECOWAS has done little to address this situation, and this is responsible for the alarming poverty in the region which has hampered regional integration.

### **Armed Conflicts**

West Africa has been embroiled in numerous conflicts over the decades, ranging from civil wars to insurgencies, ethnic violence, and political crises. Beginning with Liberia, the terrible struggle known as the Liberian Civil War (1989–2003) claimed the lives of around 250,000 people and displaced almost 1 million (World Bank, 2005). Under rebel groups like Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), this war caused extensive destruction and had spill-over effects into neighbouring nations like Sierra Leone, where Taylor backed the brutal civil war the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) started from 1991 to 2002. Over 50,000 deaths and almost 2 million displaced people came as a result of this battle (Keen, 2005). The instability affected Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire as well since refugees from both wars swamped their borders and raised tensions inside these countries. Later, Côte d'Ivoire itself became caught in both a post-electoral crisis in 2010–2011 claiming 3,000 deaths and displaced thousands more, as well as its civil war in 2002 (International Crisis Group, 2011). Along with political disputes, ethnic differences between the northern and southern sections of Côte d'Ivoire heightened the war; places like Abidjan saw great violence.

More recently, the Sahel—which comprises Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—has developed into a hotspot for terrorism and unrest. Since the 2012 coup and the emergence of Islamist organisations like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Mali, for example, has struggled with insecurity that has resulted in thousands of deaths and displaced over 450,000 people as of 2023 (UNHCR, 2023). External players such as the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary group, have further exacerbated Mali's security situation and resulted in rising civilian casualties and a declining human rights environment. Similar effects have been seen in Burkina Faso, where Islamist violence and communal strife have killed over 10,000 people since 2015 and displaced about 2 million others (OCHA, 2023). With schools, markets, and other civilian facilities sometimes targeted, the border towns of Djibo and Kaya have seen some of the worst violence. Rising violence in Niger has been attributed to Islamist groups including Boko Haram and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), who have displaced around 330,000 people and caused a humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, 2023).

With the Boko Haram conflict destroying the northeast, Nigeria has been among the hardest-hit nations in West Africa. Starting in 2009 Particularly in Borno State and places like Maidugiri (UNDP, 2021), Boko Haram together with its breakaway group, Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), has been blamed for over 350,000 killings and displaced about 3 million people. Mass abductions, bombings, and attacks on both military and civilian targets among Boko Haram's terror strategies have leaked into neighbouring nations such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, therefore posing a regional security challenge. Food insecurity and more displacement among these countries have resulted from the more general Lake Chad Basin issue. Furthermore, aggravating the already precarious security situation in Nigeria is ethnic conflicts between farmers and herders, especially in the Middle Belt, which have resulted in thousands of deaths and displaced millions. Though very calm, Ghana and Senegal have nevertheless seen intermittent internal strife like the Casamance conflict in Senegal, which, although low-intensity, has lasted for decades and displaced thousands (Perry, 2020).

### **Reasons for Brexit and Lessons for ECOWAS**

The resentment towards the EU was brought to the climax in Britain where the citizens voted on Thursday 23 June 2016 to leave the EU. The leaving group won the referendum by 51.9% against the 48.1% that voted to remain (Hunt & Wheeler, 2017). Britain may have enjoyed some benefits accruing from being a member of the Union; however, some critical issues that have been raised by the British people have been greeted with little or no attention by the EU. It is on the heels of these issues that the UK opted to leave the Union. Issues such as mass migration, over assertiveness of Germany, Insecurity, loss of border control and sovereignty, and economic hardship to mention but five are at the base of Britain's vote to leave the EU.

### **Mass Migration**

Mass migration is one of the major issues discussed before and after the 2016 referendum in the UK. It is the most critical issue facing the union. Ramos (2024) defined migration as the movement of people from a particular country into another country for the sole purpose of residing in the country. Note that migration in itself is not the bone of contention here but rather the mass movement of people into the EU. The EU member states have been the final destination of migrants running away from their homeland as a result of war, economic hardship and ambivalent governments in Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Britons were not satisfied with how the EU has handled the issue of mass immigration in the union. Theresa May once said that one important thing that the British people want to see is a reduction in immigration (Hunter & Wheeler, 2017).

Britons started feeling the impact of this since the 2008 financial crisis that caused the eurozone to be in economic hardship (Lee, 2016). Workers from the EU countries such as Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Spain flocked to the UK in search of jobs. Lee (2016; p.34) observed that "in recent years, hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans have come to Britain to do the job". The implication is that it will lead to structural unemployment among the native working population. Recall that immigrants render relatively cheap services when compared to native nationals. The argument is that immigrants are ready to take pay cuts just to have something to ensure their existence.

The UK has absorbed about 333,000 new people in 2015 (Lee, 2016). These people enter the UK under the EU free movement policy. The issue of immigration is one of the most critical issues in the UK. Despite its salient merits, UK nationals especially the youth are largely against it. Britons argue that immigrants overburden their social services. It is on the heels of Britons accusing immigrants of being responsible for the shortage of housing in the UK (Hintjens, 2022). Britons also blamed immigrants for putting pressure on the National Health Service (NHS) and educational services.

Furthermore, the insecurity in Europe is viewed to have been orchestrated by the activities of these immigrants. Through the free movement of people agreement, there are chances that Islamic Jihadists (terrorists) can find their way into the UK and carry out attacks on their home soil (Archick, 2017). To Britons, these jihadists also enter into the UK with the hope of radicalizing youths and young adults. This underlies the many lone attacks on European soil with its national as the culprits (Archick, 2017).

In line with the above situation, the UK has decided to leave the EU for the better management of their borders and adequate regulation of the movement of people. This goes to show that regional integration no matter the lofty gains it presents to nations, if it does not properly guide against some issues there will be resentment towards it. This presents a good lesson for ECOWAS in its effort to ensure a deeper integration. The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA) which was inaugurated by the commission of ECOWAS claim that the community cannot reach its acme with restrictions on goods, services and people's movement. It therefore called for the constant assessment of member states' willingness to accept immigrants (Fakhry, 2023; Yayboke & Gallego, 2019).

Migration in the West Africa sub-region in the face of critical challenges if not managed properly will have a serious impact on the member states. In the event of economic hardship just like the EU faced in 2008 stable countries like Germany, the UK and France were made to play a big brother role to the smaller countries in the union. In West Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal will be looked upon to bear the brunt of any eventuality within the region. Turner and Teague (2019) in their study examined factors that cause emigration in Niger Republic to include climatic factors, environmental factors and economic factors. Nigeriens attempt to migrate at a particular season of the year. This is called 'seasonal migration' (Turner & Teague, 2019). In the face of these seasonal migrations big countries especially Nigeria are meant to absorb immigrants from Niger and other parts of the sub-region because of the climatic condition of Nigeria. Therefore, these migrant herders enter the country for the sole purpose of feeding their cattle.

As a result of the free movement of people and goods, some ECOWAS member states have allowed their countries to be routed for smuggling activities into other parts of the sub-region. The example that readily comes to mind is the Benin-Nigeria border through which illegal goods come into the later. This has raised so much concern on the side of the Nigerian government thereby leading to the closure of the Nigerian border against the



normal directive of the organization (Unah, 2019). Nigeria has lost so much foreign exchange as a result of the activities of smugglers. The announcement of the border closure came as a shock to ECOWAS and AU because Nigeria reluctantly signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA) which was aimed at removing trade barriers and promoting the free movement of goods, services and people across the continent. The announcement is considered a breach of the ECOWAS protocol (Unah, 2019). Before this, Nigeria has stepped up their efforts to ensure the adequate policing of its borders. This development has been welcomed by a cross-section of the Nigerian public who condemned the activities of these smugglers. This goes to show that a country like Nigeria may be reluctant to abide completely with the policies of the establishment especially when it does not furnish its national interest. However, in the face of deeper sub-regional integration in West Africa, countries like Nigeria may not find it reasonable if their borders are turned into hubs of illegal activities. It should be noted that the closure of the border came into place because of the effort of the federal government to ensure the consumption and patronage of locally produced rice.

Again, within the ECOWAS there are some silent struggles between immigrants and the nationals of their host countries. These struggles have been created by the nationals who believe that immigrants from other parts of the sub-region threaten their chances of getting good jobs and business opportunities. There is an increasing attack on Nigerians in Ghana, Togo and Mali which are member states of the ECOWAS (Aniche et al., 2021). This situation tends to make a mockery of the free movement of people in and out of the region. Based on the xenophobic attacks on Nigerians, Nigerians have started calling on the government to revisit its position as a big brother in the region and Africa as the centrepiece of Nigeria's foreign policy (Aniche et al., 2021). In 2019, a Nigerian Professor was sacked, in the person of Prof. Augustine Nwagbara of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana over a conversation in a viral video where he was seen urging Nigerians to stand up against Ghanaians who are mistreating them. The Professor was on sabbatical in Ghana (Sahara Reporters, 2019). This goes to show that deeper integration of the region may not be welcomed. In light of today, ECOWAS are relatively poor, and allowing immigrants from nearby countries will further impoverish this country.

### **Assertiveness of Germany**

British people are weary of the role of Germany in the union. No doubt Germany is the biggest member of the union with the highest financial responsibility therefore they should sit in the driver's seat of the union. However, how Germany goes about the provision of this leadership has left people wondering if Germany has hijacked the Union. Schäfer et al. (2020) believe that Germany is imposing its vision on the members of the EU. Some have even accused Germany of moral imperialism. Some far-right party leaders claim that the Maastricht Treaty that completed the integration process of the EU is a reflection of Germany's economic plans (Geppert et al. 2022). Kaya (2019) postulated that Angela Merkel is pursuing the ambition of Kaiser and Hitler which is to control Europe. On this note, Britons do not want to be controlled by Germany.

Within the ECOWAS context, unarguably Nigeria is the biggest member of ECOWAS in terms of population and size. Statistics on payment of the ECOWAS levy obtained by a punch correspondent showed that between 2003 and 2015, Nigeria paid \$710,497,352, equivalent to \$480,355,205 West African units of Account. The West Africa UA is the official nominal monetary unit of measurement or currency used to represent the real value of contributions. In the same period under review, Nigeria contributed more than the cumulative amount of 697.947 million dollars paid by 13 member-states. (Punch, 2018). This goes to show that in all ramifications the leadership of the sub-region naturally falls on Nigeria. Nigeria has provided the much-needed leadership that a sub-regional body like ECOWAS requires to function. Nigeria has contributed almost the highest number of military contingents in ECOMOG peacekeeping in the region. The country was on the ground to quell the situation in Cote D'Ivoire (2002-2004) (Obi, 2009). The Nigerian government worked very hard to arrest the coups in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali even though it failed to restore civilian rule there. At this juncture, it is only fair that Nigeria is given a special status in the union because of its role in the union.

Just like Germany, very soon some big member-states of the union may likely tend to move towards animosity against Nigeria because of the role Nigeria played in the establishment of ECOWAS. There is no gainsaying that Nigeria will go the way of Germany. This is because Nigeria will be accused of imposing its ideology on the establishment. A mere condemnation of any act of any member state by Nigeria will mean that other small nations who enjoy patronage from Nigeria will quickly take sides with Nigeria.

Nigeria as a regional hegemon may be tempted to pursue regional policy that will be considered detrimental to the sovereignty of other members and the integrity of the union. The refusal of Nigeria to release Sambo Dasuki after the ECOWAS court granted him bail shows that Nigeria may be over-assertive in the union thereby being selective on the directives it will adhere to (Premium Times, 2016). To the dismay of Nigerians, no African state condemned Nigeria's action. The actualization of a deeper political integration will bring such deviant behaviours from big nations under scrutiny by small nations; hence it will breed the feeling of resentment towards the big nations. This will have a serious effect on the union, especially from the relatively strong nations in the union.

### **Insecurity**

One of the issues that have brought the EU under scrutiny is insecurity. To a large extent, it is believed that the insecurity is orchestrated by the influx of people into the EU. It is said that Jihadists and terrorists enter the union either to attack them or radicalize their youths and young adults (Archick, 2017). Britain has long contended that the free movement of people in and out of the region has put them in so much danger. Again, the resurgence of Russia poses a security threat to the EU. Theresa May, the then Prime Minister of the UK considers Russia an enemy to the British People. Recall that a Russian double agent Sergei Skripal was attacked in Salisbury with a chemical weapon made in Russia (Gioe et al., 2019). According to Allan (2018), this is not in conformity with international norms

Trans-border crime is not indigenous to the EU. It is a global crisis. The EU with its level of development in terms of technology and manpower has not been spared in the transnational security problems rampaging the globe. The free movement of people in and out of the sub-region has played a role in the security challenges facing the region. The vast ungoverned spaces especially those around the porous borders present a fertile ground for international terrorist organizations such as Al'Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to thrive in their activities in West Africa. There are speculations that the Boko Haram insurgent group in Nigeria has connections with the Al'Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Operational bases in Niger Republic, the Republic of Chad and Cameroon (Opanike and Aduloju, 2015). The free movement of people in and out of the region has made this easy.

The free movement of people has encouraged insecurity in the region, which is the reason it seems that the allied forces of the region are making little or no progress in the fight against insurgence. Again, the peculiar challenges of the sub-region such as poverty, hunger, corruption, inequality, and unemployment can easily make the region a hub of insurgence. The complete elimination of border control has enhanced the spread of the activities of terrorists. Furthermore, the free movement has given individuals with gory ambitions to enter the region unchecked and carry out their activities unnoticed.

The perceived insecurity aided by the free movement brought the EU under excessive scrutiny and criticism. One is tempted to ask, if a union as sophisticated as the EU cannot detect terrorists when they enter their region what will happen to a near unsophisticated ECOWAS? This begs the question if gold rusts what will happen to iron? The ECOWAS must ensure that it improves its border control so as not to make member-states especially those that have experienced first-hand devastating effects of terrorists like Nigeria and Mali to entertain the feeling of wanting to leave the union. As in the case of Brexit, it will also be big states that will nurse the desire to leave the union. ECOWAS must put mechanisms for tackling trans-border insecurity before aspiring for deeper integration.

### **Loss of Border Control and Sovereignty**

The majority of voters during the referendum felt that the EU was blocking their plans to reduce immigrants. This made them to be sceptical about the union and their continued membership. In light of this, they contend that the EU can no longer be trusted for the policing of their borders. Boris Johnson (Former UK Prime Minister) made a strong case against the EU using loss of sovereignty. He alleged that so much power is concentrated in Brussels and that the power is being exercised by unelected Bureaucrats. He noted thus;

“The more the EU does the less room there is for national decision making, sometimes these EU rules sound simply ludicrous like the rule that you can't recycle a tea bag, or that children under eight cannot blow up balloons, or the limits on the power of vacuum cleaners. Sometimes they can be truly infuriating like the time I discovered in 2013 that there was nothing we could do to bring in better-designed lab windows for trucks to stop cyclists being crushed. It had to be done at a European level, and the French opposed it” (Lee, 2016).

Again, the EU is considered meddlesome in the affairs of the British people. At a point, the question of who governs the UK became common in the UK. It is thought that leaving the EU will allow them to return power to the people. Britain emphatically noted that they do not want the EU because the EU touches the fundamental attributes of their sovereignty, and it does not allow them to police their borders as needed. Hence they believe that they can do better outside the EU.

With the activities of terrorists and the influx of nationals from other parts of the sub-region who compete with nationals in the labour force, and the compulsory implementation of ECOWAS Directives which may be inimical to the national interest of member-states as seen in the case of the EU. Deeper integration for ECOWAS will lead to the partial erosion of the sovereignty of member states. The loss of border control and sovereignty alone can lead to member-states clamouring to leave the union. Notwithstanding the economic benefits of the free movement of goods and services and people, the inability of member-states to ascertain who enters and leaves their countries will be viewed as an affront to their national sovereignty. Morgenthau (1946) as cited by Nte (2015) observed that sovereignty can neither be divided nor shared in piecemeal. He averred that any attempt to divide the unlimited power of the state amounts to a loss of sovereignty. Again, sovereignty is the unlimited powers of a

state over its territory; the free movement of people casts doubt on the ability of the states to have absolute control of their state.

Regional integration could be a likely panacea or tool for economic development especially when it is economically based as opposed to political. The deeper integration of ECOWAS will ensure the total removal of national boundaries that is the boundaries of nations will only exist on the map. If this is achieved, the establishment will quickly come under scrutiny just like the EU. The nationals of the member states will blame them for their misfortune and hardships. ECOWAS must ensure that it puts this into consideration in its bid to wear the look of a supranational body like the EU. Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Cote D'Ivoire will likely express their dissatisfaction by going against the establishment's directive where they believe it contradicts their national interest. The claims of Brexiteers should be a pointer for ECOWAS in its quest to achieve deeper integration. Political integration comes with demands and commitments which may be a threat to the survival of member-states. Member-states especially those that can exist outside the body will dare to leave the establishment. To this end, ECOWAS must consider the consequences of deeper integration before dreaming to achieve it so as not to invest heavily in a project that will barely survive.

### **Economic Hardship**

Until 2008, the EU enjoyed favourable economic fortune. Benczúr et al. (2017) noted that member states of the EU were experiencing upward movement in the EU until it was brought to a halt by the financial and economic crisis in 2008. British people were not comfortable with how the EU handled the crisis which allowed countries like Greece to nose-dive into full-blown recession. Although the UK was not directly hit because it is not a member of the Eurozone, they felt that EU membership was too dangerous (Hadfield et al., 2017). This is because shortly if this happens again, the UK will face the pressure of bailing out countries whose economies were wrecked by bad eurozone economic policies (Lee, 2016).

One continues to wonder how a union as strong as the EU was able to allow its members to experience such a devastating economic hardship. Brexiteers blame it on the single currency (Euro) and the reluctance of Germany to help save them. ECOWAS is a conglomeration of weak nations in alliance. The members all fall into the category of underdeveloped countries. These countries are largely poor economically, and technologically backward, exporters of raw materials and importers of finished goods. These countries still have ties with their colonial masters just to get aid and grants from them. If the ECOWAS whose economic situation closely resembles recession finds itself in a state of economic quagmire who will save them and how will they come out from it? It would be laughable for a whole sub-regional body to go out seeking succour from other countries. The ECOWAS whose leader is Nigeria and unarguably the largest economy in the union cannot pull out a nation from economic distress and financial crisis. The union will be left with a few fairly strong nations who may be reluctant to assume such responsibility. ECOWAS should examine critically the concerns of Britons and the role of the EU during the economic recession and financial crisis.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

This study concludes that there are candid lessons ECOWAS can learn from the most discussed issues of Brexit which is the exit of the UK from the EU. The study showed that the EU is a model for regional integration arising from the success the union has enjoyed especially in the development and maintenance of peace in the region. However, despite the gains of the union the UK left the union. This goes to show that regional integration has a penchant for bringing about resentment towards itself if it is deemed to have overstepped its boundaries.

The West African sub-region has its peculiar challenges that have hindered it from achieving development and stronger integration; notwithstanding, regional integration is largely considered as the route to the development of the sub-region. To this end, the sub-region aspires to achieve deeper integration that wears the look of a supranational body. But in doing this ECOWAS must critically examine the issues raised by Brexiteers which engineered their desire to leave the establishment. Among the issues raised by Britons which made the UK leave the union are the issues of Mass migration insecurity, and the over-assertiveness of Germany are at the front burner. Ordinarily, ECOWAS closely resembles the EU the chances that if it achieves deeper integration it will soon experience these issues if they do not guard against it from the inception is quite high.

## **IX. Recommendations**

Having looked at the lessons ECOWAS can learn from the EU and Brexit, the study therefore recommends the following.

1. ECOWAS should put in place modalities to deal with economic hardship in the event of its occurrence as they look forward to achieving deeper integration. The case of the EU clearly shows that economic challenges in the region can easily lead to high politics among big member states. Recall that Germany was accused of not being responsive to the plight of Greece which made Greece suffer the most. Again, big member states may not

- welcome the idea of accommodating nationals from smaller countries who will enter their countries in search of jobs. These modalities will help bring in timely interventions when the need arises.
2. The biggest member of the ECOWAS will be saddled with the responsibility of leading the establishment. Unarguably Nigeria is the biggest nation in the sub-region therefore; it is only fair and ideal that the leadership falls on Nigeria naturally just like Germany in the EU. In providing this leadership role, Nigeria must be careful so as not to be considered to be too powerful in the union. This is because Nigeria must not be seen to be pursuing a hegemonic agenda. The implication for this is that relatively big nations like Ghana, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire may feel threatened. It is among these nations that resentments towards the Union and Nigeria will gather momentum.
  3. ECOWAS should endeavour to ensure that the member-states are not cut off in the mainstream decision-making process like the regulation of border control. The community in its quest to achieve deeper integration must welcome an inclusive decision-making process which must be a reflection of the yearnings and aspirations of member states. It will be self-destructive if the small member states nurse the feelings that they are not an integral part of the decision-making process or consider the union as a tool through which the big nations impose their ideals on them. The result of this will be the claim of loss of sovereignty which shall be dangerous to the community.
  4. ECOWAS should endeavour to arrest the challenges that have hindered its development and integration before considering deeper integration. This is because the current condition of the region may not favour deeper integration. It must among other things fashion out means to curb the poverty in the region so that the community will not be a mere conglomeration of weak nations in alliance.
  5. ECOWAS needs to put in place policies and strategies to control cross-border migration within the sub-region. These policies shall curtail migration from the poorer countries to the relatively rich ones in search of greener pastures. There should also be a standard for checking illegal migration in order not to bring about disapproval from the destination states of these migrants like the EU. Furthermore, ECOWAS must adopt an inclusive approach when making the policies.
  6. ECOWAS is characterized by the existence of porous borders which have made it easy for transnational criminal activities and terrorism. ECOWAS needs to strongly police its borders especially now that the region is witnessing recurrent terrorist activities. In doing this, all member states of the community must be on the table when discussing the possibility of ensuring that the free movement of people in and out of the region and the porous and almost unchecked borders do not turn the community into a hive of terrorists and criminals.

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