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The African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs): Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the independence of African states, the heads of state of these countries recognized the necessity of establishing a continental organization capable of enabling Africa to assert its presence and influence on the international stage. It was in this context that the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was created on May 25, 1963, later evolving into the African Union (AU) in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa. Between 1975 and 2000, African leaders also developed regional integration frameworks aimed at facilitating the free movement of people and goods, promoting trade, and fostering the harmonious development of the continent. This led to the establishment of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).However, more than fifty years after the creation of the RECs, their overall performance presents a mixed picture. While some RECs have achieved significant progress toward their objectives, major challenges remain. As key pillars of the African Union's integration agenda, African RECs have recorded notable achievements in areas such as the free movement of persons and goods, particularly within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and financial integration, notably within the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU/UEMOA) through institutions such as the Regional Stock Exchange (BRVM).Despite these accomplishments, substantial obstacles continue to hinder deeper regional integration, including inadequate infrastructure, political instability, limited industrialization, and low levels of intra-African trade. Addressing these challenges requires stronger institutional capacities, improved regional governance, greater investment in infrastructure, and renewed political commitment from member states. Such efforts are essential for accelerating economic transformation, enhancing regional competitiveness, and achieving the broader objectives of African integration and sustainable development. It is therefore essential to strengthen and accelerate the operational implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and to enhance infrastructure development aimed at transforming the continent into a single market. African Heads of State must demonstrate strong commitment and make bold decisions with the full participation of their populations. To achieve this, several actions should be undertaken, including the acceleration of economic and trade integration; the development of infrastructure and connectivity; political and institutional reforms; and the strengthening of human capital and the private sector. This study, based on documentary and academic research, has as its primary objective to provide a progress assessment and a comprehensive evaluation of the African Union's integration instruments, with a view to proposing appropriate recommendations capable of enabling Africa to accelerate its economic, commercial, and regional integration for the benefit and well-being of the African people. This study therefore serves as a decision-making support tool for African leaders, the international community, and all stakeholders committed to supporting Africa, enabling them to take concrete actions toward the continent's sustainable development.

Keywords: African Union, Regional Economic Community, Regional Integration, Free Movement, Economy and Trade, Development.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of their independence, African states, under the leadership of thirty-two African heads of state, including charismatic leaders such as Ghanaian pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah, Ivorian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, founded the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on May 25, 1963, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The OAU, the first continental African institution, embodied the Pan-African vision of a united and free Africa fully in control of its own destiny. This vision was solemnly enshrined in the Charter of the Organization, in which the founding fathers recognized freedom, equality, justice, and dignity as fundamental principles necessary for achieving the legitimate aspirations of African peoples. They also emphasized the promotion of solidarity among African nations and the strengthening of intra-African cooperation.

At that time, two major visions of African integration emerged, represented by two political blocs: the Casablanca Group, led by Kwame Nkrumah, then President of the Republic of Ghana, and the Monrovia Group, led by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, then President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire.

The leaders of the Casablanca Group shared a strong conviction regarding the necessity of political unity for Africa and even advocated the establishment of a continental federation. They believed that deep integration would enable Africa to overcome the legacy of colonialism, promote peace, encourage intercultural dialogue, enhance the continent's geopolitical influence, and accelerate economic development. In essence, they supported the transfer of significant powers from national governments to a supranational Pan-African authority.

Conversely, the Monrovia Group also embraced Pan-African ideals but not at the expense of national sovereignty and state development. Officially known as the Conference of Independent African States, the Monrovia Bloc favored harmonious coexistence and cooperation among independent African states without the need for political federation or extensive supranational integration. Its leaders emphasized that newly independent African countries should preserve their autonomy while strengthening their institutions, defense capabilities, and national economies.

Ultimately, African leaders agreed on a strategy of gradual integration, reflecting more closely the nationalist principles of the Monrovia Group than the supranational aspirations of the Casablanca Group. It was within this framework that eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) were established: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU); the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); the East African Community (EAC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the

Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Subsequently, the OAU was transformed into the African Union (AU) in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa, following a decision adopted in September 1999 to establish a new continental organization capable of consolidating and expanding the achievements of its predecessor. Today, the African Union comprises 55 member states representing all countries on the African continent.

The Regional Economic Communities (RECs) constitute the main pillars of the African Union's integration agenda. They are recognized as essential building blocks for regional development, economic integration, and the promotion of trade across Africa.

Despite these efforts, more than fifty years after their establishment, Africa continues to face numerous and complex challenges in the socio-political, economic, and integration spheres, including barriers to the free movement of persons and goods. Consequently, important questions remain: Have the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities achieved their objectives? What has been the actual impact of the RECs on Africa's development and integration process?

This study is structured around one general objective and three specific objectives.

The general objective is to assess the results achieved by the African Union, through the Regional Economic Communities, in promoting Africa's development and economic and trade integration.

The specific objectives are:

- To evaluate the performance of the African Union through the achievements of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs);
- To identify and analyze the weaknesses affecting the functioning of the RECs;
- To propose practical solutions aimed at strengthening and revitalizing the RECs.

In other words, this article seeks to highlight the critical importance of completing Africa's integration process through its Regional Economic Communities and to demonstrate their strategic role in fostering sustainable development, economic transformation, and continental unity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Materials and Methods

This study is based on a documentary analysis of the African Union (AU), its institutions and organs, as well as the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Academic research articles and publications by various scholars and experts in the field were extensively reviewed and analyzed. These sources enabled us to examine a wide range of literature relating to international relations, sub-regional and continental organizations, international law, geopolitics, international economics, international trade, and political science in order to better understand the organization, structure, and functioning of the African Union and its subsidiary and specialized institutions, particularly the Regional Economic Communities.

In addition, digital data available on the Internet and information obtained from specialized online journals and magazines provided valuable insights for this research.

After collecting the relevant information, the data were carefully selected, classified, and organized into thematic categories and subcategories. This process facilitated the structuring of the study around three major analytical axes:

- **Axis 1:** Assessment of the African Union through the achievements of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs);
- **Axis 2:** Challenges facing the Regional Economic Communities;
- **Axis 3:** Future prospects and strategic directions for strengthening regional integration in Africa.

Following these methodological steps, it becomes possible to undertake a theoretical assessment of the achievements, challenges, and future prospects of the African Union through the performance and evolution of the Regional Economic Communities. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the contribution of the RECs to Africa's political, economic, and commercial integration and for identifying pathways toward a more effective and sustainable continental integration process.

Theoretical Framework

Map of the AU Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are regional groupings of African states and constitute the pillars of the African Union (AU). All of them were established before the launch of the AU, have developed independently, and have different roles and structures.

The RECs aim to facilitate regional economic integration among member states within each region and within the broader African Economic Community (AEC), created under the Abuja Treaty (1991). This treaty, which entered into force in 1994, ultimately aspires to establish a common African market, using the RECs as building blocks. More than 50 years after their creation, how should their overall performance be assessed? What challenges do they face, and what are the prospects for the future?

Assessment of Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

The eight RECs and their assessment are presented as follows:

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) was established on February 17, 1989, in Marrakech, Morocco, by five countries: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia.

Three main objectives were assigned to this union:

- Strengthening the fraternal relations that bind member states and their peoples, promoting progress and well-being within their communities, and defending their rights;
- Gradual implementation of the free movement of people, services, goods, and capital among member states;
- Adoption of a common policy in all fields. In economic terms, this common policy aims to ensure industrial, agricultural, commercial, and social development among member states.

The AMU has significant economic potential, with a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 499.561 billion USD in 2026. Indeed, three of the five member states rank among Africa's leading economies: Algeria (the leading economic power in the Maghreb), Morocco, and Tunisia.

Bilateral cooperation, particularly economic diplomacy, remains strong between some members. Thus, the AMU has sometimes served as a catalyst for bilateral projects, such as between Tunisia and Libya, whose trade exchanges have significantly increased.

Unfortunately, the overall assessment remains mixed, as the Union is paralyzed by weak integration, limited intra-regional trade, and persistent political divergences—particularly the Western Sahara conflict and tensions between Algeria and Morocco—which are the main factors blocking the union, rendering it largely inactive for years.

Economic integration remains very low, with less than 3% intra-Maghreb trade.

The AMU remains an existing institutional structure, but its effectiveness is structurally hindered by geopolitical tensions.

In summary, the AMU is an unfinished project that has failed to achieve the Maghreb integration envisioned at its creation.

Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) is a regional African organization comprising 21 member states (about 560 million people), created in 1994 to promote economic integration through trade and investment. Based in Lusaka, Zambia, it promotes the free movement of goods, services, and capital.

Its main objective is to establish a free trade area and a common market by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers.

Member states include: Burundi, Comoros, DRC, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Uganda, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

It has established a free trade area comprising 16 member states, reducing tariffs to zero.

COMESA is one of the pillars of the African Economic Community and participates in the Tripartite Free Trade Area (with EAC and SADC).

In 2024–2025, COMESA shows a mixed performance. There was a record increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of +154% (USD 65 billion) and a rise in intra-regional trade, contrasting with a decline in global trade and commodity exports. The bloc is strengthening despite structural challenges.

Trade among member states increased significantly, reaching USD 14 billion in 2024 (compared to USD 2 billion in 2000). The use of digital tools to facilitate trade has also expanded significantly. The introduction of a simplified trade regime to support small traders, especially women and youth, has been very beneficial.The COMESA bloc accounted for about one-third of Africa's exports and 39% of total imports in 2024.Although notable progress has been made, challenges remain. Total exports and imports have declined in value compared to 2022, due to weakening global demand and supply chain disruptions.Moreover, despite its potential, intra-African trade still represents only 16% of the region's total exports, with most trade directed outside the continent.In addition, some member states (e.g., Tunisia) struggle to increase their market share within the bloc, with less than 5% of exports directed to Sub-Saharan Africa in 2025.

Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN–SAD)

The Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) was created in 1998 and brings together many member states. This community positions itself as a pillar of the African Union.

In terms of security, the organization reaffirms its role in stabilization, with a project for a counter-terrorism center.

At the level of integration, the revised treaty of 2013, which entered into force in 2019, reorients its action toward integrated development strategies.

Its record is mixed, as it struggles to achieve deep integration and is now seeking a new momentum by focusing on regional security, sustainable development, and the fight against terrorism.

East African Community (EAC)

The East African Community (EAC) was created in … and now comprises eight member states, including Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, the DRC, and Somalia. It stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic with the accession of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia. It is experiencing successful and dynamic regional integration, marked by its expansion to Somalia in early 2024.Its combined GDP is approximately USD 193 billion, and progress toward a monetary union is being observed.Despite financial crises and security challenges, it remains a resilient zone with strong economic growth. The economy, trade, and services are driven by three countries: Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.The EAC is among the most open RECs, ranked 4th out of 8 in Africa in terms of visa policy and openness to the outside world.Although the overall assessment is positive, challenges remain. The organization faces irregular financial contributions from member states and internal political tensions that still need to be managed.

Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) was created on 18 October 1983 in Libreville (Gabon) and has been operational since 1985. It comprises eleven member states, namely: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Chad.

ECCAS presents a mixed record, long marked by inactivity due to regional conflicts, before experiencing an institutional revival.In terms of Peace and Security (COPAX), the most concrete achievement of ECCAS is the creation in February 2000 of the Central African Peace and Security Council (COPAX), thereby improving political stability, contributing to conflict resolution, and enabling the deployment of peacekeeping forces.Furthermore, after a period of paralysis from 1992 to 1998, the organization undertook a deep reform starting in 2015. This led to the transformation of the General Secretariat into an ECCAS Commission, aimed at increasing efficiency in regional integration.Regarding sectoral cooperation, ECCAS has made progress in natural resource management, particularly in forest conservation, as well as in the development of transport infrastructure, although these efforts remain limited.The Community serves as a platform for political dialogue among the eleven member states.ECCAS is characterized by significant weaknesses in economic integration. Indeed, the main objective of creating a common market has been only very weakly achieved. Intra-regional trade remains low due to insufficient infrastructure and tariff barriers. Economic dependence is a reality, as the economies of member states rely heavily on oil and mineral resources, making the region vulnerable to external shocks and limiting diversification.Moreover, the organization was paralyzed for nearly six years from 1992 to 1998 due to sociopolitical conflicts in the sub-region, delaying the implementation of its objectives. Many decisions and reforms take a long time to be effectively implemented on the ground.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was created on 28 May 1975 in Lagos, Nigeria, and originally comprised 15 member states. However, with the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States, three countries are no longer part of it, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The 12 remaining member states are: Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

ECOWAS remains by far the main engine of economic integration in West Africa, with a combined GDP exceeding 700 billion US dollars.

The organization is a leading force in Africa for the free movement of people and goods, facilitating trade. Major infrastructure projects, such as the Abidjan–Lagos highway corridor, are a source of pride for ECOWAS.Regional growth has slowed and is affected by inflation and sanctions. However, growth is projected at 5.4% in 2026.It can therefore be concluded that ECOWAS has an overall satisfactory track record, characterized by successful regional integration, but weakened by serious political crises.Furthermore, the major challenges remain strengthening security in the face of terrorism, finalizing the single currency, and reforming political governance in order to restore public trust.

In summary, ECOWAS is at a turning point, required to balance its original economic mission with the imperatives of security and political stability.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was created on 21 March 1986 and comprises eight member states located in the Horn of Africa and the Nile Valley, namely: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan.

The organization, headquartered in Djibouti, aims to promote regional cooperation, security, and development. Eritrea rejoined the bloc in 2023 after suspending its participation in 2007.

IGAD's record is mixed, marked by progress in climate resilience and migration management, but limited by political and financial challenges. It plays an active role in food security and regional integration.

Regarding food security and climate, the organization implemented resilience strategies for the 2020–2022 period as well as an action plan on climate change.

In terms of peace and security, IGAD has established itself as a key actor in conflict resolution and the management of displaced populations, although its dedicated department remains underfunded.

As for political challenges and divergences among member states, in 2025 the organization continues to be affected by persistent regional tensions, particularly involving

Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. These tensions led to Eritrea's withdrawal from the organization before later rejoining it.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC)

Since its creation in 1980 (under the name SADCC) and its transformation into SADC in 1992, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has grown to include 16 member states, namely: South Africa, Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Seychelles, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.These countries cooperate for economic integration, peace, and security in the region, with a Secretariat based in Gaborone, Botswana.SADC has achieved notable progress in regional integration, political cooperation, and peacekeeping, despite ongoing economic challenges. It has succeeded in strengthening shared infrastructure and promoting an industrialization vision known as "Vision 2050."The organization's main achievements are diverse and can be observed in integration and infrastructure, including the facilitation of trade and the development of shared infrastructure in the fields of digital technology and energy.There have also been advances in peace and security, as SADC plays an active role in regional stabilization, particularly through missions in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), despite cohesion challenges.Progress has also been made in industrialization, with a strong focus on agro-industry and skills development to modernize the economy and reduce poverty.In summary, SADC has evolved from an economic liberation coordination mechanism into a development community, with a mixed record combining diplomatic successes and the need to accelerate industrial development.

CHALLENGES OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES (RECs)

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) face enormous, multifaceted and multidimensional challenges, particularly related to political instability, weak infrastructure, and low economic diversification.

These obstacles subsequently limit trade integration, the implementation of common policies, and economic specialization, which is often dominated by the primary sector.

Regarding political instability and conflicts of all kinds, political crises and insecurity in some member states hinder integration and obstruct the free movement of people and goods.

As for overlapping memberships, the fact that many countries belong simultaneously to several RECs—such as ECOWAS, COMESA, SADC, and EAC—creates regulatory conflicts and administrative burdens.

Concerning deficient infrastructure, the lack of cross-border transport and energy networks limits physical connectivity and increases transaction costs, thereby restricting regional trade.

In addition to these challenges, weak economic diversification, the limited financial resources of community institutions, and delays in transposing regional protocols into national law slow down integration. External trade agreements, such as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with other powers like the EU, also constitute a challenge to the coherence of regional tariff policies.

PROSPECTS OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

Promising prospects remain for the African Union (AU) through the RECs, which in the long term are expected to disappear to make way for full economic integration of Africa. To achieve this, several actions must be undertaken, notably: accelerating economic and trade integration; developing infrastructure and connectivity; political and institutional reforms; and strengthening human capital and the private sector.

Regarding the acceleration of economic and trade integration, three aspects must be addressed. First, African leaders must make the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) operational, moving from the ratification phase to concrete implementation by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers (customs procedures, corruption) that hinder trade. Second, intra-African trade should be promoted through export diversification and the strengthening of regional value chains in order to reach the target of 230 billion USD in trade exchanges.

Finally, financial institutions should be created through the establishment of credible continental financial institutions to facilitate resource mobilization and financial sector management.

Regarding the development of infrastructure and connectivity, the AU should prioritize cross-border infrastructure through massive investment in transport corridors (roads, railways) to connect landlocked countries and facilitate the movement of goods. It should also emphasize energy and digital development by implementing renewable energy projects (solar) and improving digital infrastructure to support e-commerce and e-health. Water management should also be a priority, ensuring sustainable access to water and sanitation—an issue that was the central theme of the AU Summit in 2026.

Regarding political and institutional reforms, the AU must undertake three key actions: harmonizing economic, customs, and trade policies in short, regulations (customs, accounting standards, finance) to facilitate the movement of production factors; and strengthening peace and security in order to reduce investor risk perceptions and secure trade flows.

All these actions must be supported by genuine political will and increased ownership of the project by member states.

Regarding the strengthening of human capital and the private sector, the AU must, on one hand, support SMEs by facilitating access to financing for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are essential to the African economy, and on the other hand promote structural transformation through industrialization and the valorization of local raw materials. The AU should also encourage and support the mobility of people by promoting the free movement of persons in order to deepen integration.

In conclusion, the African Union should emphasize “pan-African economic integration” that goes beyond simple trade and requires strong political will to connect the continent and increase its economic sovereignty.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, it emerges that Africa possesses significant growth potential, with considerable business opportunities and assets.

The African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which are the pillars of the African Union, present an overall mixed performance, with notable progress in free movement (ECOWAS) and financial integration (WAEMU, with the BRVM), while challenges related to infrastructure, political instability, and low intra-regional trade remain persistent. These challenges require strengthened institutional capacities and renewed political commitment to transform African economies.Overall, the Regional Economic Communities have achieved their objectives, although concrete actions are still required to ensure a successful and harmonious integration of Africa. It is therefore essential to strengthen and accelerate the operational implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as well as infrastructure development, with the aim of transforming the continent into a single market of over 1.3 billion consumers.

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