

Harmonising the Legal Frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS Through Regional Integration Under the Abuja Treaty: An Analysis of the Similarities, Differences and Challenges

Associate professor Paul S. MASUMBE¹

Abstract

Regional integration is one of the main catalysts that fuels and drive development. Integrating all the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa is a fundamental aspect toward enhancing the economic development of the continent. Accordingly, the African Union (AU) through the Abuja Treaty encourages the establishment of the African Economic Community (AEC) regarded as the deepest form of economic regional integration. Consequently, beside the creation of RECs, the Abuja Treaty also encourages trade liberation and the abolitions of; Custom Duties (CD), levies on import and export goods, non-tariffs barriers and the establishment of Free Trade (FT), Common Market (CM) and special treatment among Member States. Despite some challenges regarding the different legal frameworks of the RECS, there are area of similarities and plenty of rooms for integration. Hence, harmonising the legal frameworks of Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Economic Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been made possible despite some challenges created by the various legal frameworks. Consequently, this article through a qualitative research method examines the various legal frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS through regional integration by looking into area of similarities and differences. The challenges posed by these legal frameworks through integration will further be examined before concluding with proposed solutions including recaps of legal frameworks thereby paving the way for further research in this area of the law.

Keywords: SADC, ECOWAS and EAC, regional integration and harmonisation, Africa Union, Abuja Treaty.

JEL Classification: K33

DOI: 10.62768/PLPA/2025/14/3/07

Please cite this article as: Masumbe, Paul S., „Harmonising the Legal Frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS Through Regional Integration Under the Abuja Treaty: An Analysis of the Similarities, Differences and Challenges”, <i>Perspectives of Law and Public Administration</i> 14, no. 3 (October 2025): 510-526.	Article History Received: 24 July 2025 Revised: 29 September 2025 Accepted: 12 October 2025
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1. Introduction

Trade cooperation within the African continent is very imperative in this time and age of globalisation and trade wars between superpowers such between United

¹ Paul S. Masumbe - Head of School of Law, Faculty of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Eastern Cape, South Africa, pmasumbe@wsu.ac.za, ORCID: 0000-0002-9997-4125.

States (US) and China on the one hand,² and global hiking of tariff prompted by the current US administration on the other hand.³ Inter African trade will strengthen and promote cooperation and economic development through the African Union (AU) integration treaties.⁴ The Abuja Treaty, formally known as the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (AEC),⁵ was adopted in 1991 at the OAU (Organisation of African Unity),⁶ summit in Abuja, Nigeria. It aims include: (i) to create a larger economic area through the integration of existing regional economic communities (RECs) across Africa, promoting intra-African trade and economic cooperation; (ii) to enhance economic and social development in African countries by fostering cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, industry, infrastructure, and energy; (iii) to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development through collective action, shared resources, and integration of economies; (iv) the treaty advocates for the harmonisation of policies among member states concerning trade, investment, and economic policies to facilitate regional integration; (v) also to promotes cooperation beyond economics by fostering cultural exchanges, social development, education, and technical collaboration among member states and finally; (iv) by encouraging economic cooperation and integration, the treaty aims to contribute to political stability and peace on the continent.⁷

In addition, RECs such as ECOWAS,⁸ SADC,⁹ and EAC,¹⁰ play a crucial role in the execution of the Abuja Treaty's objectives by:(i) facilitating trade and economic integration. In this regard, RECs are central to promoting intra-regional trade, reducing trade barriers, and establishing common markets among member states; (ii) they help implement policies and strategies aligned with the objectives of the Abuja Treaty,

² "US trade war with China and how the play out in Africa", <https://za.investing.com/news/economy-news/us-trade-wars-with-china--and-how-they-play-out-in-africa-3592151> (accessed 27-06-2025).

³ "The Contentious U.S.-China Trade Relationship" <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/contentious-us-china-trade-relationship> (accessed 27-06-2025).

⁴ Lennon Jambo Habeenzu. 2024. "Comparing and Contrasting ECOWAS and SADC: Successes, Failures, and Challenges". *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* 1289-1296, <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.7012097>.

⁵ "Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community" (Abuja Treaty) signed on 3 June 1991 and entered into force on 12 May 1994, <https://au.int/en/treaties/treaty-establishing-african-economic-community> (accessed 24-06-2025).

⁶ OAU which has now been replaced by the AU, existed from 1963 to 2002. It was created in 1963 to promote unity and cooperation among African nations and to support the liberation of remaining colonial territories.

⁷ Article 4(1) of the Abuja Treaty.

⁸ "Economic Community of West African States" (ECOWAS Treaty), Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), 24 July 1993, was signed in 1975 and entered into force on 28 May 1975 and later on revised as indicated <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/ecowas/1993/en/63993> (accessed 24-06-2025).

⁹ "Southern Africa Development Community" (SADC Treaty) signed on 17 August 1992 and entered into force on 30 September 1993 <https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/treaties/bit/3103/sadc-treaty-1992-> (accessed 24-06-2025).

¹⁰ "The Treaty for the Establishment of the East Africa Community" <https://www.eala.org/documents/view/the-treaty-for-the-establishment-of-the-east-africa-community-1999-2006> which was signed on 30 November 1999 and entered into force on 7 July 2000 (The EAC Treaty) (accessed 24-06-2025).

functioning as intermediaries between national governments and the AU; (iii) RECs coordinate development programmes that enhance economic growth, infrastructure development, and social welfare at the regional level; (iv) many RECs are involved in peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts, contributing to regional stability necessary for economic development and finally; (v) RECs further address specific sectoral concerns, such as health, education, and climate change, fostering collective approaches to challenges that affect member states.¹¹

In all, the Abuja Treaty and RECs are vital in forging a cohesive economic and political landscape in Africa, promoting development, stability, and integration across the continent.¹² Again, the main issue to examine in this article is whether it is possible to harmonise the legal frameworks of SADC, ECOWAS and EAC and if so, are they any difference, similarities and how could this be resolved to promote integration under the Abuja Treaty?

2. Legal Frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS

2.1. The Legal Framework of SADC

SADC is an international organisation with legal personality, capable of entering contract, acquiring, owning, or disposing of movable or immovable property and to sue and be sued.¹³ The Treaty set out the Community's objectives (development, economic growth, poverty alleviation, regional integration) and principles (sovereign equality, adherence to United Nations (UN) Charter, human rights) under Articles 4 to 5. By virtue of Article 4 of the SADC Treaty, SADC is governed by five principles such as sovereign equality of all Member States, solidarity peace and security, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, equity balance and mutual benefit and finally, peaceful settlement of disputes.¹⁴ Article 5 of the same Treaty on its part outlines the objectives to include promoting sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development through efficient and productive systems, deeper cooperation and integration, good governance and durable peace and security.¹⁵ These objectives guide SADC's initiatives and programme across the various sectors including trade, investment, infrastructure development and political cooperation. In other words, these objectives are consistent with some of the aims of ECOWAS and EAC, hence, cooperation and integration amongst them is guided by their common purpose as defined in their objectives which appears to be consistent.¹⁶ In addition, Article 5(2)

¹¹ Article 4(2) of the Abuja Treaty.

¹² Gerhard Erasmus. 2024. "Comparing the Abuja Treaty and the AfCFTA Agreement", *Tralac*, <https://www.tralac.org/blog/article/16331-comparing-the-abuja-treaty-and-the-afcfta-agreement.html>.

¹³ Article 3(1) of the SADC Treaty.

¹⁴ Article 4 of the SADC Treaty.

¹⁵ Article 5(1) of the SADC Treaty.

¹⁶ Theresa Reinold. 2019. "Civil society participation in regional integration in Africa: A comparative analysis of ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 26(1), 53–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2019.1595127>.

encourages SADC Member States to harmonise socio-economic and political policies, development of cultural ties, create mechanism for the mobilisation of resources for the implementation of its agenda and principles indicated in the objectives.¹⁷ They are also motivated to develop policies aimed at progressive elimination of obstacles to free movement of capital and labour, good and services, as well as people in that region.¹⁸

Finally, the Treaty urge Member States to adopt adequate measures to promote the objectives and avoid discrimination against any member or indulge in any activity that may jeopardise the principle and aims of the treaty.¹⁹ Moreover, Article 21 empowers SADC members to cooperate in areas necessary to foster development and integration on the basis of balance, equity and mutual benefit. Some of these areas include food and security, land and agriculture, trade, finance, investment and mining, science and technology, diplomacy, international relations including peace and security.²⁰

Legally binding instruments adopted under the Treaty framework include each protocol builds on one or more treaty objectives and contains detailed rules for specific sectors such as trade, finance, transport, health, justice.²¹ Accordingly, the entry into force requires signature by all Member States and ratification by at least two-thirds (10 of 16) of the Parties. Annexes to protocols (Rules of Origin, Dispute Settlement in the Trade Protocol) elaborate technical provisions and dispute-settlement procedures.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and Technical Agreements support cooperation in areas like agriculture, energy, and payment systems.²² However, some key areas of challenges are fragmented legal instruments leading to diverse protocols and annexes create complexity for national legislators and businesses seeking legal certainty. There is also slow ratification due to political priorities and legislative backlogs which stall domestic adoption, undermining regional integration goals.

2.2. The Legal Framework of EAC

The EAC came into force in 2000 and creates the EAC Treaty (the Community Treaty) with international legal personality, capacity to conclude treaties, own property, and sue or be sued.²³ Articles 5 to 15 set out objectives (economic integration, social development, political cooperation) and guiding principles (sovereign equality, good governance, human rights).²⁴ The objectives of the Community are to develop policies and programmes aimed at widening and deepening co-operation among the Partner

¹⁷ Ephrem Habtemichael Redda. 2021. "Convergence Criteria-guided Regional Economic Integration in SADC and EAC: Lessons from Europe's Experience", *Journal of African Union Studies (JoAUS)* 10(3): 39-65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27159922>.

¹⁸ Article 5(2) of the SADC Treaty.

¹⁹ Article 6 of the SADC Treaty.

²⁰ Article 21 of the SADC Treaty.

²¹ Article 22(1) of the SADC Treaty.

²² "Memorandum of Understanding in Microeconomic Convergence" <https://www.sadc.int/document-type/memoranda-understanding> (accessed 27-06-2025).

²³ Article 4 of the EAC Treaty.

²⁴ Article 5(1) of the EAC Treaty.

States in political, economic, social and cultural fields, research and technology, defence, security and legal and judicial affairs, for their mutual benefit.²⁵ In other words, detail analysis of these objectives include: (i) promoting economic, social, political, and cultural integration to deepen cooperation among partner states to achieve shared prosperity and stability; (ii) creating a Customs Union (CU) to facilitate free movement of goods, services, and factors of production within the region; (iii) establishing a Common Market (CM) to promote free movement of capital and labour to enhance economic efficiency; (iv) harmonising policies and laws to foster policy coherence and legal harmonisation across various sectors such as trade, agriculture, and infrastructure; (v) promoting sustainable development to ensure economic growth is environmentally sustainable and benefits all facets of society; (vi) peace and security to promote peace, stability, and good governance in the region; and (vii) regional infrastructure development to develop infrastructure that connects partner states, boosting trade and mobility.²⁶ In order to fully achieve these objectives, the EAC Treaty has established some fundamental and operational principles.²⁷

On the one hand the fundamental principles include: (i) sovereign equality of Partner States aimed at respecting the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of each Partner State; (ii) peace and security which calls for commitment to uphold peace, stability, and good governance within the region; (iii) peaceful settlement of disputes which encourages peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue, negotiation, and arbitration; (iv) promotion of sustainable development aimed at ensuring that integration efforts foster long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability; (v) promotion of Pan-Africanism and regional identity aimed at fostering unity, solidarity, and regional identity among Partner States; and (vi) freedom of movement that facilitates the free movement of persons, goods, services, labour and capital.²⁸

On the other hand, the operational principles include: (i) progressive integration that emphasises gradual and step-by-step integration, including creation of CU, CM, and monetary union; (ii) complementarity²⁹ which encourages Partner States to leverage their comparative advantages for mutual benefit; (iii) harmonisation and coordination which promotes harmonised policies, laws, and standards across member states; (iv)

²⁵ Article 4 of the EAC Treaty.

²⁶ Article 5(3) of the EAC Treaty.

²⁷ Articles 6 and 7 of the EAC Treaty.

²⁸ See generally Article 6 of the EAC Treaty.

²⁹ Complementarity together with other principles such as asymmetry, subsidiarity and variable geometry are fundamental principles under the EAC Treaty. Principle of complementarity means the principle which defines the extent to which economic variables support each other in economic activity; principle of subsidiarity means the principle which emphasises multi-level participation of a wide range of participants in the process of economic integration; principle of variable geometry means the principle of flexibility which allows for progression in co-operation among a sub-group of members in a larger integration scheme in a variety of areas and at different speeds; and finally principle of asymmetry means the principle which addresses variances in the implementation of measures in an economic integration process for purposes of achieving a common objective. These principles promote and facilitate in a broader view the harmonisation of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS.

economic and social cohesion aimed to reduce disparities and promote equitable development within the region; (v) participation and inclusiveness which ensures that all Partner States and sectors of society are involved in the integration process; and (vi) promotion of cooperation which encourages collaboration and partnership among Partner States regional organisations, and development partners.³⁰

Finally, all Partner States of the EAC Treaty undertakes to harmonising their national policies and laws to create a conducive environment for the Community's operations. Partner States also agrees not to discriminate against each other in the application of laws and regulations related to trade, investment, and other areas of cooperation.³¹ In addition, they will direct their policies and resources with a view to creating conditions favourable for the development and achievement of the objectives of the Community and the implementation of the provisions of EAC Treaty. Likewise, they are expected to co-ordinate, through the institutions of the Community, their economic and other policies to the extent necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaty; and abstain from any measures likely to jeopardise the achievement of those objectives or the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty.

Article 6 of the EAC Treaty further affirms the supremacy of EAC law and its direct applicability in Partner States once published in the Official Gazette. EAC also has three protocols as follow: (i) CU Protocol established in 2004 and came into force 2005. This protocol creates a common external tariff, rules of origin, and dispute-settlement procedures; (ii) CM Protocol created in 2009 and came into force in 2010 guarantees free movement of goods, persons, labour, services, capital and right of establishment; and (iii) Monetary Union Protocol established in 2013 and into force in 2014 masterminds the roadmap towards a single currency and convergence criteria. Finally, as far as disputes settlement is concern, direction action to EAC jurisdiction is available to individuals, companies, or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) alleging breach of Treaty or Community law by a Partner State. Partner State may also sort inter-state dispute over interpretation/application of EAC instruments. The judgments are final and binding, but enforcement relies on political will and peer pressure form Partner States. In cases where Partner States are not satisfied with the decision of EAC court, they may resort to arbitration or international courts in subject-matter areas where they have consented.

That notwithstanding, the EAC Partner States faces several challenges. The legal landscape is fragmented with more than 50 Protocols, Acts and Regulations which create a complex situation. National legislative delays stall new Protocols and Acts leading to slow ratification. Furthermore, lack of a standing enforcement unit means compliance often rests on diplomatic persuasion. Moreover, harmonising common law, civil law and customary law traditions complicates uniform application due to legal pluralism.

³⁰ See generally Article 7(1) of the EAC Treaty.

³¹ Article 7(2) of the EAC Treaty.

2.3. The Legal Framework of ECOWAS

Foundational to the treaty establishing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)³² is the notion that it would be international organisation with legal personality, capacity to conclude treaties, own property, and sue or be sued. The core objectives of ECOWAS include (economic integration, social development, peace, and security) and principles (sovereign equality, respect for human rights, non-interference).³³ In other words, while the aims of the Treaty are to promote co-operation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic union in West Africa to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations-among Member States, and contribute to the progress and development of the African Continent,³⁴ the objectives also include to create a large economic area with a common market and free movement of people, goods, and services, to establish a CU and harmonise macroeconomic policies, to develop infrastructure and diversify economies, to reduce dependence on a few commodities, promote good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights, to enhance security cooperation to prevent and resolve conflicts and to coordinate policies affecting economic, social, and political development across member states.³⁵

In other to accomplish its aims and objectives, the treaty creating ECOWAS has set up certain fundamental principles. These principles include:(i) legal equality and sovereign equality which entails that all member states are equal in rights and responsibilities regardless of size or economic power;(ii) non-interference in domestic affairs. In this regard, ECOWAS respects the sovereignty of its member states and does not interfere in their internal issues unless security or stability are threatened; (iii) preservation of the territorial integrity of Member States and respect for national borders and territorial sovereignty is fundamental; (iv) peaceful settlement of disputes principle encourages member states to resolve their conflicts through dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful means; (iv) promotion of democratic principles and good governance encourages democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law within Member States;(vi) consensus and cooperation in which decision-making is based on mutual understanding, consensus, and cooperation among members; (vii) promotion of economic integration enable ECOWAS to create a unified and prosperous West African community through economic collaboration with other regions such as the SADC and EAC and finally; (viii) respect for human and people's right enable Member States to upholds and promote fundamental human rights and freedoms in the region.³⁶

As usual, just like EAC, SADC, ECOWAS also faces challenges due to fragmentation of instruments with Over 60 protocols, annexes, and supplementary Acts

³² See Article 2 of the ECOWAS Treaty.

³³ See generally Articles 2 to 5 of the ECOWAS Treaty in this regard.

³⁴ Takehiko Ochiai and Daniel C. Bach. 2019. "Regional Economic Communities and Security Initiatives in Africa: The Cases of ECOWAS, ECCAS, and SADC", *Ryukoku Law Review* 51(4): 2315-2342, https://researchmap.jp/takehikoochiai/published_papers/22187472/attachment_file.pdf.

³⁵ See Article 3 of the ECOWAS Treaty for the aims and objective of the Treaty.

³⁶ See generally Article 4 of the ECOWAS Treaty.

create complexity ratification delays, and national legislative backlogs stall entry into force and domestication. Moreover, weak enforcement due to absence of ECOWAS police or coercive apparatus means rulings and decisions often go unimplemented. The issue of legal pluralism is also another concern. In other words, the process of harmonising civil-law, common-law and customary systems at national level remains difficult. Finally, resource constraints are also alarming. Inadequate budgetary commitments hamper commissions, courts, and standby force operations. Despite these challenges, the objective of harmonising the legal frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS for greater regional integration remains possible.

3. Harmonising the Legal Frameworks of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS

Harmonising the legal frameworks of the SADC, the EAC, and ECOWAS is a complex but crucial undertaking for boosting trade, investment, and overall integration across the African continent.³⁷ Accordingly, some major area for harmonisation includes the following: (i) trade and customs including tariffs and non-tariffs barriers.³⁸ In this regard, streamlining tariff structures and reducing non-tariff barriers (for example import licenses, quotas, customs procedures) is essential for facilitating intra-African trade. Moreover, harmonising rules of origin ensures that goods traded within the regions qualify for preferential treatment on the one hand, while simplifying and standardising customs procedures, documentation, and border crossing processes reduces delays and costs on the other hand; (ii) aligning investment codes to create a more predictable and transparent investment climate. This includes regulations related to foreign ownership, profit repatriation, and dispute resolution. Consequently, harmonising investment incentives will avoid unhealthy competition between member states and attract foreign direct investment (FDI); (iii) Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). In this regard, the harmonisation of IPR laws protects innovation and creativity, encourages technology transfer, and fosters a conducive environment for businesses; (iv) business registration and simplifying and standardising business registration procedures makes it easier for companies to operate across the regions. Moreover, harmonisation also promotes transparency and accountability in the business sector on the one hand and prevents anti-competitive practices such as monopolies and cartels, ensuring a level playing field for businesses on the other hand. In addition, harmonisation of regulations promotes financial stability and facilitates cross-border financial transactions and regulations also helps combat financial crimes and enhances regional security. Finally, establishing a harmonised dispute resolution mechanism provides a framework for resolving commercial disputes efficiently and effectively.

³⁷ Jana Riedel & Anja Slany. 2019. "The potential of African trade integration – Panel data evidence for the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite," *The Journal of International Trade & Economic Development*. Vol. 28, Issue 7: 843-872, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638199.2019.1575457>.

³⁸ Sylvanus Kwaku Afesorgbor, Peter A. G. van Bergeijk. 2014. "Measuring Multi-Membership in Economic Integration and Its Trade Impact: A Comparative Study of ECOWAS and SADC" *South African Journal of Economics* (SAJE), Vol. 82, Issue 4: 518-530; <https://doi.org/10.1111/saje.12045>.

However, this process of harmonisation is not without challenges.³⁹ Member states may be reluctant to cede sovereignty over certain legal matters. Differences in economic development and legal systems among member states can make harmonisation difficult.⁴⁰ Lack of political will and commitment from member states can hinder the harmonisation process. Insufficient technical expertise and resources can impede the development and implementation of harmonised legal frameworks and conflicting interests among member states can create obstacles to reaching consensus on harmonisation measures.⁴¹

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of harmonisation may never be underestimated. Harmonised legal frameworks reduce barriers to trade and investment, promoting economic growth and development. Harmonisation strengthens regional integration by fostering closer cooperation and coordination among member states.⁴² It facilitates a more predictable and transparent legal environment attracts both domestic and foreign investment. Better still, harmonisation reduces legal uncertainty and promotes the rule of law, creating a more stable and predictable environment for businesses and individuals. The fact that the legal system is simplified, it reduces transaction costs for businesses operating across the region, leading to more attractive to FDI and significantly contribute to the success of the AfCFTA by removing regulatory trade barriers.⁴³

3.1. Consistency of AfCFTA and Regional Integration of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to accelerate regional integration efforts across Africa,⁴⁴ including those of the SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS.⁴⁵ Accordingly, AfCFTA seeks to harmonise trade policies, reduce barriers, and create a

³⁹ Merran Hulse. 2014. "Actorness beyond the European Union: Comparing the International Trade Actorness of SADC and ECOWAS", *Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS)* Volume52, Issue 3: 547-565, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12111>.

⁴⁰ Levious Chuikira. 2022. "The Effectiveness of AfCFTA Rules of Origin as a Build-up from Different Existing RECs in Africa", <https://onpolicy.org/the-effectiveness-of-afcfta-rules-of-origin-as-a-build-up-from-different-existing-recs-in-africa/> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴¹ Elina Fargin. 2011. *Tangled up in a spaghetti bowl – trade effects of overlapping preferential trade agreements in Africa*, Bachelor Thesis in Economics, Lund University, <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=2296032&fileId=2296033> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴² Betsy M. Oloyede, Evans S. Osabuohien, Jeremiah O. Ejemeyovwi. 2021. "Trade openness and economic growth in Africa's regional economic communities: empirical evidence from ECOWAS and SADC", *Heliyon* Vol. 7, Issue 5: e06996, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06996>.

⁴³ Bruce Byiers, Sean Woolfrey, Alfonso Medinilla and Jan Vanheukelom. 2019. *Synthesis Report: The political Economy of Africa's Regional Spaghetti Bowl*, Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations in Africa, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/2716/5546/8685/ECDPM-synthesis-report-political-economy-Africas-regional-spaghetti-bowl.pdf> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴⁴ "AfCFTA boosting regional integration through trade".2023. Available at <https://www.uneca.org/stories/the-afcfta%2C-boosting-regional-integration-through-trade> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴⁵ Stephen Kingah, Andrea Cofelice. 2012. "EU's Engagement with African (Sub)Regional Parliaments of ECOWAS, SADC, the EAC and the AU", *UNU-CRIS Working Papers*, Bruges, pp. 8,9, <https://cris.unu.edu/eus-engagement-african-subregional-parliaments-ecowas-sadc-eac-and-au>

single market for goods and services across the African continent.⁴⁶ These includes aligning with and building upon the existing integration efforts of SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS. Consequently, RECs such as SADC, EAC, ECOWAS are recognised as building blocks for the AfCFTA.⁴⁷ AfCFTA is designed to build upon the progress they've already made in areas like tariff reduction, customs cooperation, and free movement of people. Moreover, AfCFTA allows for "variable geometry," meaning that countries can move at different paces in implementing the agreement, considering their existing commitments within their respective RECs.⁴⁸ Furthermore, AfCFTA negotiations have considered the existing trade regimes within each REC to ensure that the continental agreement is compatible and builds upon them and to streamline these overlapping memberships by providing a single, continent-wide framework for trade.⁴⁹ Consequently, AfCFTA have specific considerations for these regional organisations.

To begin with, SADC has made progress in tariff liberalization and customs cooperation, and AfCFTA aims to deepen this integration by addressing non-tariff barriers and promoting value chain development across the continent. The EAC on its part has a customs union and a common market protocol in place.⁵⁰ AfCFTA seeks to extend these benefits to the entire continent, creating a larger market for EAC goods and services. While ECOWAS has made strides in free movement of people and goods, AfCFTA aims to reinforce these achievements by promoting cross-border investment and infrastructure development.

4. Similarities and Differences Between SADC, EAC and ECOWAS

The SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS are three key RECs in Africa and their objectives are consistent with the Abuja Treaty.⁵¹ While they share some similarities in their goals and structures, they also have distinct characteristics. In this regard, a comparison highlighting both their similarities and differences.⁵² With regard to

⁴⁶ "Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)" available at <https://www.eac.int/trade/international-trade/trade-agreements/african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-agreement> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴⁷ Gerhard Erasmus, Trudi Hartzenberg. 2022. "The meaning of building blocks for African integration is defined by the applicable legal instruments and subsequent practice" available at <https://www.tralac.org/blog/article/15546-the-meaning-of-building-blocks-for-african-integration-is-defined-by-the-applicable-legal-instruments-and-subsequent-practice.html> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴⁸ See Sékou Falil Doumbouya. 2023, *Regional integration of trade in services in Africa: overview and leveraging regulatory survey results*. Available at https://www.wto.org/library/events/event_resources/serv_2702202310/80_353.pdf (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁴⁹ See "Regional Economic Communities" available at <https://archive.uneca.org/oria/pages/regional-economic-communities> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁵⁰ Prudence Sebahizi. *Fast-tracking the Continental Free Trade Area: Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as Building Blocks*. Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/31409-wd-fasttracking_the_cfta_-_recs_as_building_blocks.pdf (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁵¹ Malebakeng Forere. 2012. "Is Discussion of the United States of Africa Premature? Analysis of ECOWAS and SADC Integration Efforts", *Journal of African Law*, Vol. 56 (1), pp. 29-54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855311000234>.

⁵² Sylvanus Kwaku Afesorgbor, Peter A.G van Bergeijk. 2011. "Multi-membership and the effectiveness of regional trade agreements in Western and Southern Africa: a comparative study of ECOWAS and

similarities, the purpose of economic integration to promote economic integration, cooperation, and development among member states to enhance regional stability and growth and all three aimed to be working toward this purpose.⁵³ In addition, they all focus on reducing trade barriers, promoting intra-regional trade, and establishing common markets among member states for economic cooperation.⁵⁴ Furthermore, these organisations place importance on achieving political stability and fostering peace within their respective regions, often involving conflict resolution and peacekeeping efforts and are committed to advancing social and economic development, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development initiatives across their member countries. Finally, they coordinate policies on various issues, including infrastructure development, health, education, and environment, to support the holistic development of the region.⁵⁵

As far as their differences are concerned, SADC comprises countries from Southern Africa (for example South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia), EAC focuses on East African countries (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania), and ECOWAS, includes West African nations (Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast).⁵⁶ In addition, Member States of SADC consists of 16 member countries and has evolved from the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC) founded in 1980, initially focused on coordinating development in the context of liberation from colonial rule, EAC has 7 member states and originally established in 1967, dissolved in 1977, and re-established in 2000, focusing on efforts to promote regional solidarity and socio-economic development, while ECOWAS comprises 15 member states and was established in 1975 to promote economic integration and cooperation, it has a significant emphasis on political stability and conflict resolution.⁵⁷ Similarly, their institutional structures are different. For example, ECOWAS has a Commission that drives its initiatives and policies, while SADC has a Secretariat that coordinates its activities.

The economic priorities and policies may differ based on regional resources, political contexts, and economic conditions. For instance, ECOWAS has a focus on monetary integration with the West African Monetary Zone. Finally, while there is overlap, each REC may emphasise different sectors. For example, SADC has a strong focus on natural resources and energy, while ECOWAS emphasises peace and security, and EAC has focused on infrastructure and trade facilitation.⁵⁸ In all, while SADC,

SADC”, Proceedings of the German Development Economics Conference, Berlin, No. 1, Econstor, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/48295/1/1_afesorgbor.pdf (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁵³ Süleyman Dal. 2023 “Regional Integration in Africa: EAC and ECOWAS” 2023 *Aralık* 7(2), p. 489-515, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3398346>.

⁵⁴ Marie Daniel. 2021. “Regional Economic Communities in Africa” <https://tradeunionsinafcfta.org/regional-economic-communities-in-africa/> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁵⁵ Lennon Jambo Habeenzu, *op. cit.* (2024), p. 1290.

⁵⁶ Isabelle Ramdoo. 2014. “Comparing EAC, SADC and ECOWAS”, <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/comparing-eac-sadc-and-ecowas-epas-what-can-esa-epa-draw-from-them/42392611> (30-06-2025).

⁵⁷ See “Africa's Regional and Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation Frameworks: A Summary” <https://www.afronomicslaw.org/category/repository/africas-regional-and-sub-regional-economic-cooperation-frameworks-summary> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁵⁸ Friday Aworaro. 2015. “Regional integration and development in Africa: Between the present realities

EAC, and ECOWAS share objectives related to economic integration, trade facilitation, and development, they differ in their geographical focus, historical backgrounds, member compositions, institutional structures, and specific areas of emphasis. Their unique characteristics reflect the diverse contexts and needs of the regions they serve within Africa.

5. Challenges Faced by SADC, EAC and ECOWAS Through Integration

The integration of regional organisations such as the SADC,⁵⁹ EAC,⁶⁰ and ECOWAS,⁶¹ faces several challenges. Some of the key challenges include: (i) economic disparities. Member states within each organisation often have significantly different levels of economic development, which can hinder cooperation and create imbalances in trade, investment, and resource allocation; (ii) political will. The success of regional integration heavily depends on the political commitment of member states.⁶² Varying political agendas, governance structures, and instability in certain countries can impede cohesive action and policy implementation; (iii) infrastructure deficiencies.⁶³ Poor infrastructure in terms of transportation, communication, and energy can limit trade and movement among member states, making integration less effective; (iv) policy harmonisation. Divergent policies and regulatory frameworks among member countries can create barriers to trade and investment.⁶⁴ Achieving policy alignment across different regional organizations is complex and slow; (v) security concerns.⁶⁵ Issues

and overcoming future challenges”. *African Journal of Governance and Development*, Vol 4 No 2 (December): 5-16, <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC-52d704b2d>.

⁵⁹ For example, SADC experiences low levels of intra-regional trade, (trade more with China and the Western countries than in Africa) overlapping mandates with other regional bodies such as SACU and COMESA, and persistent political instability. These factors weaken policy implementation and complicate cooperative efforts.

⁶⁰ With regard to the EAC, despite progress toward integration, the EAC confronts border disputes, divergent national policies, and uneven infrastructural development, which hinder the seamless movement of goods, services, and people.

⁶¹ ECOWAS on its part, faces additional layers of complexity in the form of linguistic, cultural, and colonial legacies, most notably, the divide between Anglophone and Francophone countries which challenge unified policy design and implementation.

⁶² John Stuart. 2019. “How Similar are Africa’s Trade Regimes? Implications for the AfCFTA” <https://www.tralac.org/blog/article/14277-how-similar-are-africa-s-trade-regimes-implications-for-the-afcfta.html> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁶³ Owa Egbara, Celestina Ekene Chukwudi, Chiazor Simeon Elumelu, Olubunmi David Apelo. 2024. „Comparative Study of Southern Africa Development Commission (sadc) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Conflict Management: The Case of Southern and Western Africa Sub-Regions”, *Migration Letters* Vol. 21. No. 5: 795–841. Retrieved from <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/9173>.

⁶⁴ Bella Malcolm. 2025. “Africa Regional Blocs: Can ECOWAS, EAC and SADC Deliver?”, *African Leadership Magazine*, <https://www.africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk/africas-regional-blocs-can-ecowas-eac-and-sadc-deliver/> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁶⁵ See R. Omotayo Olaniyan. 2008. “Challenges in Achieving Regional integration in Africa” https://archives.au.int/bitstream/handle/123456789/1382/CHALLENGES_IN_ACHIEVING_REGIONAL_INTEGRATION_IN_AFRICA_E.pdf (accessed 30-06-2025).

such as political instability, terrorism, and cross-border crime can threaten cooperative efforts and create a climate of distrust among member states, complicating integration efforts; (vi) socio-cultural differences. Cultural and social diversity among member states can lead to misunderstandings and affect collaborative efforts. Language barriers and differing educational systems also play a role; (vii) institutional challenges. The effectiveness of regional organisations is often affected by bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of resources, and inadequate institutional capacity to implement and manage integration policies; (viii) global economic pressures. External factors such as international trade dynamics, global economic downturns, and competition from larger economies can pose challenges to regional integration efforts; (ix) grassroots engagement. Lack of awareness and involvement at the grassroots level may hinder the support and legitimacy of integration initiatives. Engaging citizens and local communities is crucial for successful regional integration; and (x) exit strategies. The uncertainty regarding the benefits of integration and fears of losing national sovereignty can lead to reluctance among member states to fully commit to regional agreements.⁶⁶

In addition, vast economic differences among member states, combined with insufficient joint investment in infrastructure (both physical and digital), restrict the pace of meaningful economic integration across the three blocs.⁶⁷

Similarly, the issue of national interests, combined with overlapping memberships in multiple RECs, contribute to what some academics have termed a “spaghetti bowl” of regional agreements.⁶⁸ This layering complicates policy alignment and resource allocation.⁶⁹ Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach among member states, careful planning, and the establishment of robust frameworks that facilitate cooperation and mutual benefits among SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS.

6. Conclusion

Members of SADC, EAC and ECOWAS must strengthen institutional capacity and policy on harmonisation. There is a need to develop clear mandates and coordination mechanisms. SADC for example must realign and refine institutional frameworks to reduce overlaps with other regional organisations on the one hand and establish a centralised agency or a coordinating secretariat with the authority to streamline policies across overlapping memberships on the other hand. EAC and

⁶⁶ Enoch Ndem Okon. 2020. “Power and Regional Security: A Comparative Discourse on ECOWAS and SADC”, *African Social Science and Humanities Journal (ASSHJ)*, Vol. 1, No. 1, <https://doi.org/10.57040/asshj.v1i1.15>.

⁶⁷ “The Future of RECS” <https://sihma.org.za/online-resources/understanding-human-mobility-in-africa-the-future-of-recs-and-human-mobility-in-the-african-union> (accessed 30-06-2025).

⁶⁸ Barbara Kolbeck. 2014. *Legal analysis on the relationship between the AU/AEC and RECs: Africa lost in a “spaghetti bowl” of legal relations?*, LLM Thesis., University of Cape Town, Faculty of Law, Department of Commercial Law, pp. 6, 7.

⁶⁹ Dimas Garba & Wancelous Avong Alexander. 2023. “The Challenges of Regional Integration and Effective Implementation of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Policy in Africa”, *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies (AJPAS)*16(2): 712-734, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajpas.v1i6.2.37>

ECOWAS on their part must enhance cross-border institutional coordination by harmonising legal and trade regulations. This may include establishing integrated committees that ensure policies in areas like customs, labour and security are consistent and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, creating a common standards and dispute resolution mechanisms that respect national sovereignty while fostering greater policy convergence. This could be supported by regular inter-governmental forums that enable continuous dialogue and review on the one hand, and by making use of the AU systems that are already existing such as the AU courts and other dispute resolution mechanisms of the AU.

Regarding infrastructure investment and economic convergence, SADC and EAC should prioritise large-scale infrastructural projects that facilitate trade such as upgrading transportation networks (roads, rail, and ports) and energy grids to reduce logistical bottlenecks. While ECOWAS on its part should overcome regional disparities by not just focusing on physical infrastructure but also enhancing digital connectivity, which can bridge regional gaps and stimulate intra-bloc trade. The issue of socio-cultural and political divide should be addressed by fostering inclusivity through multilingual and culturally sensitive policies. ECOWAS for instance must overcome the Anglophone/Francophone divide by creating integration frameworks that support bilingual or even multilingual working groups. This encourages more inclusive policymaking and diminishes language barriers that have historically hampered unified economic strategies. SADC and EAC on their part must integrate local and indigenous principles such as *Ubuntu* into governance frameworks. Approaches grounded in community values can build trust and encourage collaborative regionalism that respects both modern state structures and traditional social norms.

Finally, across all three blocs, there must be investment in training and capacity building for regional administrative bodies. Enhanced technical expertise is key to implementing sophisticated integration agendas and managing the demands of modern economic policy. Each regional bloc's pathway to a deeper and more effective integration is unique but interconnected. Successful integration will depend on a commitment to structural reforms, coordinated policies, and bold investment initiatives that span beyond traditional economic or political considerations. Long-term success will also hinge on efforts to decolonise integration frameworks honouring indigenous values like *Ubuntu* to create a developmental model that is both inclusive and reflective of regional histories.

These proposed solutions do not exist in isolation; they are complementary dimensions that, when pursued together, can propel SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS toward a future of robust and equitable integration. The challenge lies not only in policy design but also in the political will, commitment from Member States, and effective coordination among various stakeholders. This sustained collaboration of Member States to implement these reforms effectively together with regular monitoring and evaluation are crucial to ensure progress and address emerging challenges. Hence, harmonising ECOWAS, SADC and EAC is possible despite the challenges discussed above.

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