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Inter-regionalism as a Mechanism for the Harmonization of Africa's Regional Integration Projects

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Introduction

'Multiple regionalisms' are a problem in Africa's integration process. It refers to the existence of several sub-regional groupings whose objectives and programmes in many instances conflict, thereby complicating the processes of integration on the continent. Most countries in Africa hold membership in at least two different regional groupings (ARIA 2002). There are currently fourteen regional groupings in Africa, with eight recognized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the African Union (AU) as the building blocks of the African Economic Community (AEC). These recognized groupings are collectively referred to as regional economic communities (RECs). They are: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); the East African Community (EAC); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD); and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Tadesse 2009). The others, such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Indian Ocean Commission (OIC) exist alongside, and compete with, the recognized regional groups on the continent. The multiplicity of these sub-regional groupings has caused operational problems in the governance and administration of the African integration processes. There is, firstly, the issue of dispersal of scarce diplomatic, economic and human resources. The mostly poor member states have had to contend with making commitments to these organizations. Secondly, the multiplicity of the groupings has created an environment for high

politicization of the African integration process. Effective regional governance for integration is hampered by clashes between leading members within the different regional groupings. On the whole, the performance of these regional groupings has been dismal (ARIA 2002). Thus, this paper argues that *inter-regionalism*, i.e., the institutionalization of relations between regional groupings, is a mechanism that can help overcome the challenges of multiple regionalisms, and accelerate the integration of the continent. A case has been made by the ECA for rationalization of the regional groupings in Africa; and some principles were outlined as a general framework for dealing with multiple regionalisms in Africa (ECA 2006). These efforts, however, lack any theoretical and methodological support. *Inter-regionalism*, offers both a theoretical framework and a methodological support for overcoming the challenges of multiple regionalism in Africa. But before we explore that, it is important to begin with an examination of the concept as expounded by scholars.

Inter-regionalism: A New Dimension of Global Governance

The international system is a galaxy of multiple levels of decision-making, all of which have a bearing on states. Decision-making takes place across different strata of human organization, that is local, national, sub-regional, regional, inter-regional and global levels. Among these levels, the inter-regional level is fairly recent and has enjoyed less academic expositions. However, this level of governance is developing across different regions. Its importance is in filling the gap in governance on issues which are clearly outside the exclusive purview of sub-regional or regional authorities and beyond the capacity of multilateral institutions to handle.

The concept of *inter-regionalism* was developed to describe the institutionalization of relations between world regions (Hänggi, Rollof and Rüländ 2006). It is a new structure of governance, developed to manage the manifold challenges caused by the growing incongruence between the border-crossing nature of policy matters and territorially-defined political authority (Rüländ 2002:1). The transcending nature of policy matters beyond limits imposed by territoriality of political authority necessitates collaboration between regions to manage their common affairs. Just as the limits imposed by territoriality and sovereignty make states incapable of self-fulfillment and self-sustenance, and compel them to enter into relations with one another, so also do regions seek to interrelate to overcome their inadequacies.

The concept of *inter-regionalism* was developed to explain the proliferation of, and interactions between, regional groupings across the globe (Hänggi 2000). The emergence and proliferation of regional groupings in the post-cold war era created an anxiety that such regional groupings may constitute closed entities, thereby hampering global free trade and investment. That, however, did not happen as regional groups opened up to each other and engaged in mutual interactions. This is what came to be referred to as 'open regionalism', which is a policy matter concerning how to achieve compatibility between the explosion of regional trading arrangements around the world and the global trading system as embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Bergsten 2010). The concept of open regionalism assures

that regional arrangements will, in practice, be building blocks for further global liberalization rather than stumbling blocks that deter such progress (Bergsten 2010). The debate about the role of regional groupings in global economy was, therefore, put to the test with the emergence of this new form of relations, *inter-regionalism*. Thus, *inter-regionalism* evolved among regional groupings as a means of managing relations among them in the post-Cold War period.

Interregional relations, generally, involve regional groupings interacting on the bases of more or less regular high-level meetings and engaging in the implementation of a number of joint projects or programmes (Hänggi 2000:4). It may also involve sharing or exchange of information and cooperation in specific issue-areas, usually in the economic sphere such as in trade and investment. In some cases a political dimension could be added to such interactions, two common examples being human rights and democracy. This is especially true with the EU's discussions on such values as human rights and fundamental freedoms with other regional groupings (Hänggi 2000). A common feature of international politics today is the discussion of many issues of national and international concern on regional, interregional and global levels. For example, tax cuts or increases within a given country or in relation to another country are discussed at the regional level. This is because most states are now involved in some forms of regional economic association. States' interests are thus aggregated within regional organizations.

Inter-regionalism has captured the attention of some scholars of international relations (Hänggi 2000; Rüländ 2001 & 2002; Aggarwal and Fogarty 2003; Rollof 2006; Gilson 2005). Hänggi (2000) has developed a typology of interregional relations which identified three types: (a) relations between regional groupings; (b) bi-regional and trans-regional arrangements; and (c) hybrids, such as relations between regional groupings and the super powers. He describes relations between regions as group-to-group dialogues traditionally practised by the EU in its external relations with other regions. Examples of such relations are the EU-SADC (South Africa Development Community) dialogue partnership and the EU-Mercado Commun del Sur; while bi-regional and transnational arrangements designate the triangular structure of relations between the major three world economic regions, the Triad: North America, Western Europe and East Asia. Membership in these arrangements is more diffuse than in group-to-group dialogues. Membership is thus drawn from more than two regions, but there is some form of regional coordination. An example of bi-regional arrangement is where membership is drawn from states in two different geographic regions, such as Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), which includes 10 East Asian countries and the 15 member-states of the EU. Trans-regional arrangements involve membership from more than two geographical regions – for example, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation involving 21 Pacific Rim countries including 15 East Asian economies, three North American and two South American countries (Chile and Peru). Hybrid or relations between regional groupings and single powers denotes relations that involve a super power, whose dominant position in its own region is an equivalent of a region, such as the United States in North America, and India in

South Asia. Thus, we have EU-Russia relations, EU-India, China-Africa, etc, as examples of hybrid interregional relations (Hänggi 2000).

Hänggi's (2000) typology, however, sees region strictly in terms of geography. He posits that relations between sub-regional groupings existing in the same (geographical) region, such as the Mercosur-Andean Community link, are not considered as interregional relations (Hänggi 2000). However, region does not necessarily have to be defined territorially or geographically. A region can be seen in terms of function, where boundaries do not reflect geographical particularities, but a result of the organization of social and economic relations. Looking at function rather than geography will lead us to the opinion that the relation between such regional groupings is interregional. This is particularly so in that the notion of 'region' may be seen as a social construction of 'self' vs an 'other', which provides a basis for identification and differentiation (Gilson 2005). This conception thus enables us to adopt a broader conception of *inter-regionalism* to cover relations between regional groupings existing within the same geographical location but differentiated by the construction of self-other identity or socio-economic organization of relations between the groupings.

Systemic Functions of *Inter-regionalism*

In his study of inter-regionalism in international relations, Rüländ (2002) extrapolates a number of systemic functions of *inter-regionalism*, eclectically using perspectives from neo-realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism. These are *balancing*, *bandwagoning*, *institution-building*, *rationalizing*, *agenda-setting*, *stability projection* and *development promotion* (Rüländ 2002:3). The balancing function of *inter-regionalism* is further classified into *power balancing* and *institutional balancing*. This function is based on the realist perspective of balance of power in international relations; that *inter-regionalism* serves as a means of attaining balance in power relations between nation states and, or, a group of nation states, while institutional balancing is the development of institutions to exert influence in international relations (Rüländ 2002:4). *Inter-regionalism* also creates bandwagon opportunity, *bandwagoning*, where actors in international relations can get involved in ventures that will bring benefits to them. *Institution-building* is the creation of new level of policy-making in a multi-layered international system and subsidiary institutions, such as regular summits, ministerial and senior officials' rounds, business dialogues, based on the need to harmonize and develop common positions by regional groupings (Rüländ 2002:5). Another function of *inter-regionalism* is *rationalizing* complex and technical interests of different actors representing diverse interests in global multilateral relations (Rüländ 2002:7). For instance, through *inter-regionalism*, the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries can develop a common position in their relations with the EU. *Inter-regionalism* thus serves as a clearing house for the decision-making process involving diverse groups and interests. The *agenda-setting* function of *inter-regionalism* is closely related to rationalizing. It entails identification and projection of issues for discussion in multilateral relations (Rüländ 2002:8). The *identity-building* function of *inter-regionalism*,

developed based on the constructivist perspective, is considered capable of fostering a sense of identity in regional groupings and thereby enhancing intra-regional integration. This is promoted by the sense or idea of self versus others, which is created in the process of inter-regionalism (Rüland 2002:8). Other aspects of the function of *inter-regionalism* identified by Rüland (2002) are *stability projection* and *development promotion*. The two functions are considered inter-related, based on the argument that economic development and prosperity are related to security. Hence, regional groupings use inter-regional relations to enhance their security by extending assistance to other regions. For instance, through a comprehensive reconstruction package for the war-torn states in the Balkans, the provision of development aid and the conclusion of free trade arrangements with southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, the EU seeks to create political stability in its immediate perimeter (Rüland 2002:9).

Although not all these functions of *inter-regionalism* are empirically determined, they are theoretically tenable. We have here further surmised another function of *inter-regionalism*, which can be added to the list of functions developed by Rüland (2002) – that is, *inter-regionalism* as a *problem-solving mechanism* to the challenges of multiplicity of regional integration projects in Africa. We argue here that it is capable of solving some of the problems associated with Africa's integration by promoting the harmonization and coordination of multiple sub-integration schemes on the continent. The problem of multiple regionalisms poses a huge challenge to the realization of the African Economic Community (AEC), which is expected to materialize by 2029.

'Multiple Regionalisms' in Africa: A Challenge to the Creation of African Economic Community (AEC)

Regionalism in Africa is a matter of strategic policy drive to fulfil the ambition of harnessing the continent's peoples and resources, and managing its developmental challenges by enhancing its prospects for growth and development. However, the continent faces a crisis of management of regional integration schemes. The African Economic Community (AEC) Treaty (also known as the Abuja Treaty), which came into force in May 1994, is the crystallization of the African leaderships' commitment to cooperation and integration in economic, social and cultural fields, as contained in the past development strategies such as the Lagos Plan of Action (1980-200) and The Final Act (1980). The Treaty provided for the AEC to be established through a gradual process, which would be achieved by coordination, harmonization and progressive integration of the activities of existing and future regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa (AEC) (AU 1991). The six-stage implementation process of the Abuja Treaty, which started in 1994, envisages the creation of the Union over a period of 34 years, i.e., by 2028, as follows: STAGE 1: Strengthening existing RECs and creating new ones where needed (5 years); STAGE 2: Stabilization of tariff and other barriers to regional trade and the strengthening of sectoral integration, particularly in the field of trade, agriculture, finance, transport and communication,

industry and energy, as well as coordination and harmonization of the activities of the RECs (8 years); STAGE 3: Establishment of a free trade area and a Customs Union at the level of each REC (10 years); STAGE 4: Coordination and harmonization of tariff and non-tariff systems among RECs, with a view to establishing a Continental Customs Union (2 years); STAGE 5: Establishment of an African Common Market and the adoption of common policies (4 years) and; STAGE 6: Integration of all sectors, establishment of an African Central Bank and a single African currency, setting up of an African Economic and Monetary Union and creating and electing the first Pan-African Parliament (5 years) (AEC 2003). Although these stages are not discretely pursued and with less than 17 years to the targeted date the implementation process is fraught with some challenges. A major obstacle in the way is the existence of multiple regional groupings pursuing the similar goals of integration, often in conflict with the focal points/building blocks of the continental union. That has created multiple centres of authority demanding cooperation, support and compliance with their agenda of integration. The problem has invariably become one of regional governance, where there is absence of one strong centre for building solid blocks. A number of examples can be cited here.

In the West African context, for instance, ECOWAS and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (known by its French acronym as L'UEMOA) are two rival regional groupings competing with each other to build economic and monetary community among their members. These organizations have separate but interestingly similar organizational and governance structure. They have overlapping membership. Eight members of UEMOA (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) are also members of ECOWAS. They also have similar organs and specialized institutions: they both have Authorities of Heads of State and Government, Council of Ministers, Commissions, Parliaments and Courts of Justice. In addition they each have special agencies such as Banks, e.g., the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development and the UEMOA's West African Development Bank and Central Bank for West African States, and so on. This existence of myriad integration institutions has no doubt caused difficulties in the administration of the sub-region's integration process, as both ECOWAS and UEMOA pursue economic integration.

Although ECOWAS is recognized by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) as the building block for its wider membership coverage, the activities of UEMOA cannot be overlooked. UEMOA has surpassed ECOWAS in building a monetary union and a customs union. The eight member states of UEMOA, with the assistance of France, have an established single currency, the Franc CFA (Franc of the African Financial Community), managed by a Central Bank of West Africa (BCEAO). The UEMOA member states also have a unified external tariff regime and are working towards greater regional integration by pursuing the creation of a common market that is based on free mobility of persons, goods, services and capital. ECOWAS has not yet established a single currency, but it is working towards that. It is working towards a common market as well, with its protocol on free movement of persons,

residence, and establishment at various levels of implementation by the member states. Differences in the technical application of the programmes on common market pursued by the two organizations compelled their leadership to harmonize and coordinate their policies (ECOWAS 2011). At present, the trade liberalization programmes are being harmonized. ECOWAS has adopted the UEMOA Common External Tariff (CET); it is also working towards establishing a second monetary zone, the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ), which will later be merged with the Franc CFA Zone of the UEMOA to form an all West African currency, called the ECO.

In addition, there is crisis of representation of the region in relation to the outside world. Although ECOWAS is the recognized building block for African Economic Community, it has had to coordinate its external relations with that of UEMOA. For instance, in negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the European Union both the ECOWAS Commission and the UEMOA Commission are involved. The process of the negotiations was complicated by the lack of clarity as to the role of the two different institutions. The two organizations needed to work on common positions, as they are on different footing on some of the matters under negotiation. For example, the ECOWAS regional economic community has had to agree to work towards adopting the UEMOA common external tariff, so that the two communities can negotiate the EPA from a common standpoint on customs duties (Mangeni 2007). The West African scenario also obtains in other sub-regions of Africa.

In the Central African sub-region, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) are the major contending regional organizations. Although ECCAS is recognized as the pillar of the African Economic Community (AEC) from that locus, it nevertheless faces contention from another equally influential player in the regional economic integration of the sub region, i.e. CEMAC. The two organizations have overlapping membership as well. Members of CEMAC (Chad, CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tomé and Príncipe) are also members of ECCAS. ECCAS has a broader membership, however, with Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda as members in addition to all the members of CEMAC. Some of these countries are, additionally, members of other regional economic groupings, such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), *Communauté Economique des Pays des Grands Lacs* (CEPGL) and the East African Community (EAC). Thus, it becomes difficult to delimit the Central African region, and to have a cohesive regional economic block for the eventual establishment of an African Economic Union (Awoumou 2008). Co-ordinating the activities of ECCAS and CEMAC is one the main issues of the integration process of Central Africa.

CEMAC, which replaced UDEAC (the Customs and Economic Union of Central Africa), Africa's oldest integration body, has outpaced ECCAS on economic and monetary integration (Awoumou 2008:113). CEMAC has established a monetary union and a customs union, while ECCAS is pursuing the same. Furthermore, CEMAC

started playing a political and diplomatic role in the sub-region through its fight against transnational crime, with the CEMAC Executive Secretariat providing assistance to the Central Africa Police Chiefs Committee from its creation in April 1997; the deployment of the CEMAC Multi-National Force to the Central African Republic (CAR) – FOMUC; and, the recognition of General François Bozizé's government, which came to power through coup, in June 2003 in clear contravention of the AU's doctrine of non-recognition of any regime which overthrows a democratically-elected government (Awoumou 2008:115). Within the sub-region, therefore, CEMAC has established itself as a strong regional organization.

ECCAS, on the other hand, has popular support and recognition from its international partners as the pillar of the African Economic Community (AEC) in Central Africa. ECCAS signed the Protocol on relations between United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and African RECs in October 1999; and in January 2001, Resolution 55/22 on cooperation between the UN and ECCAS was adopted by the UN General Assembly (Awoumou 2008:130). In July 2002, ECCAS was granted observer status at the UN. Moreover, as a result of its recognition by the AU as the pillar of ECA, ECCAS was made a focal point for the implementation and monitoring of New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in Central Africa; in addition, in May 2003 ECCAS received institutional support from the African Development Bank (ADB) to the tune of 2.59 million unit of account (UA) to help in building the institutional capacities of the general secretariat of ECCAS (Awoumou 2008:131). However, despite this external support enjoyed by ECCAS, CEMAC was recognized by the European Union in their regional economic partnership agreements – the EPAs. This confusion as to the real representative of Central Africa vis-à-vis other regions and the wider world has no doubt created a crisis of identity for the sub-region.

Furthermore, both ECCAS and CEMAC maintain different sub-regional organs and institutions undertaking similar responsibilities, which add to the duplications in the integration process. ECCAS has a Conference of Heads of State and Government, Council of Ministers, Secretariat General, Court of Justice, Consultative Commission (AfDevInfo 2006). Similarly, CEMAC has an Executive Secretariat, Commission, Council of Ministers, Court of Justice, Community Parliament and other related specialized agencies. Given the multiplicity of institutions, overlapping membership, which contributes to an amorphous geographical region called Central Africa, and competing regional agendas between the two leading Central African regional groupings, there is undoubtedly little prospect for the emergence of a single sub-regional building block in Central Africa for the AEC.

A similar situation also exists in southern African sub-region. Here, the South Africa Development Community (SADC) and South African Customs Union (SACU) exist irreconcilably side-by-side. They also have overlapping memberships. Five member states of SADC (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland) are also members of SACU. SACU is the oldest customs union in the world (SACU 2011). Its aim is to maintain the free interchange of goods between member countries and

establish a common external tariff and excise tariff in the customs area (SACU 2011). Similarly, the goal of SADC is to further socio-economic cooperation and integration as well as political and security cooperation among its 15 member states (SADC 2011a). In terms of institutional structures, SADC and SACU have established and maintained similar organs. SADC has eight institutional bodies, namely: The Summit, comprising Heads of State and Government at the top; Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS); the Council of Ministers; the Tribunal; National Committees (SNCs); and the Secretariat. SACU has four institutional organs: the Council of Ministers; Commission; Tribunal; and a Secretariat. Therefore, within the Southern African sub-region there are 13 different institutions belonging to the two organizations that are involved in one form of integration programmes or the other. That constitutes a huge challenge to the integration of the sub-region considering the demands these institutions make on the member states.

Another dimension of the challenge posed by multiple regionalisms in the southern African integration process is that some of the member states also participate in other regional economic political and security groupings that extend beyond its geographical location. These groupings also join in the competition for the attention of the member states and therefore help in undermining the objectives of those regional groupings in the sub-region. For example, South Africa and Botswana both belong to the Southern African Customs Union; Zambia is a part of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); and Tanzania is a member of the East African Community (EAC). Thus in an attempt to harmonize the duplications in October 2008, the leadership of SADC joined with that of COMESA and the EAC to form the African Free Trade Zone. The leaders of the three trading blocs agreed to create a single free trade zone, consisting of 26 countries with a GDP of an estimated \$624bn (£382.9bn). It is hoped the African Free Trade Zone agreement would ease access to markets within the zone and end problems arising from the fact that several of the member countries belong to multiple groups (BBC 2008). With all these complications, SADC is the recognized pillar for the AEC and also the platform for negotiations of the EU-APC partnerships for the southern African region. The challenge here, as in the other sub-regional communities analysed above, is to find a workable solution to the problem of duplications and scope delimitation in the integration process of southern Africa. Here, again, *inter-regionalism* can be a panacea. Creating, expanding and deepening synergy between competing economic groupings will help in building a solid block, in that the best resources of the sub-region can be harnessed under an interregional arrangement to advance a broader vision and agenda for the sub-region.

The situation is not different in eastern Africa. The East African Community (EAC) is supposed to be the pillar of the AEC in the east African sub-region. The member states (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda) are working towards the establishment of Common Market, Monetary Union and a Political Federation of the east African States (EAC 2011). These member states are also working towards achieving similar objectives as members of the Common Market for Eastern and

Southern Africa (COMESA). COMESA's main focus is the formation of a large economic and trading unit. The EAC has seven institutions (the Summit, the Council of Ministers, the Coordinating Committee, the Sectoral Committee, the East African Court of Justice, the East African Legislative Assembly and the Secretariat) working to achieve its objectives. Similarly, the decision-making structure of COMESA has at its top the Heads of State, the Council of Ministers, 12 technical committees, and a series of advisory bodies. The duplication of programmes, overlapping memberships and multiplicity of institutions is further complicated by the presence of IGAD. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is another designated pillar of the AEC, with headquarters in Kenya. Established initially to overcome the issues of drought and desertification, its mandate has expanded to include Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution and Humanitarian Affairs; Infrastructure Development (Transport and Communications); Food Security and Environment Protection. However, IGAD has collaborated with COMESA and the East African Community to divide projects among themselves so that there is no duplication and to avoid approaching the same donors with the same projects (IGDA 2011). This effort is a demonstration of ad hoc measures taken by the regional groupings in the face of multiple regionalisms.

In the north African context, the largely moribund Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) exists alongside the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN SAD). Although AMU is the main pillar of the AEC, it has not been functioning effectively. The Treaty establishing the Union was signed in 1989, after two decades of efforts by the member states – Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia (AMU 2011). The main objectives of the AMU Treaty are to strengthen all forms of ties among member states (in order to ensure regional stability and enhance policy coordination), as well as to gradually introduce free circulation of goods, services, and factors of production among them (AMU 2011). Although the AMU has no relations with the African Economic Community (AEC), and has not yet signed the Protocol on Relations with the AEC, it has, however, been designated a pillar of the AEC. The AMU is currently dormant, but attempts are under way to revive it.

In the absence of an effective AMU, CEN SAD has become a role player in the north African sub-region. Established in February 1998, with a Secretariat office based in Tripoli, Libya, CEN SAD has among its objectives the promotion of market integration of its member states through the adoption of necessary measures to ensure – a) free movement of persons, capital and interests of nationals of member states; b) right of establishment, ownership and exercise of economic activity; c) free trade and movement of goods, commodities and services from Member States and the promotion of external trade through an investment policy in Member States (CEN SAD 2011). With the exception of Algeria, all the member states of AMU are members of CEN SAD. However, the major challenge facing CEN SAD is the overlap of its agenda with the envisioned market integration schemes of ECOWAS, ECCAS and COMESA and other trade blocs more advanced in their integration (Ncube 2009). Therefore, given the situational analysis of the regional integration

groupings in the continent of Africa, there is a need to have a theoretical and methodological framework within which the problem of multiple regionalisms can be overcome. In the next section, we argue that *inter-regionalism* offers a solution to the problem of multiple regionalisms.

Inter-regionalism: A Mechanism for Resolving Multiple Regionalisms in Africa

Inter-regionalism can be seen as both an approach and a mechanism for resolving regional governance and integration problems in Africa. As an approach, it gives theoretical support for a direction, already pursued by some of the RECs in the continent, of building new levels of relationship and governance structure in order to pursue a common agenda and avoid duplications. *Inter-regionalism* therefore provides the theoretical support that a new governance structure can emerge between the RECs when it is evident that there are gains to be made from jointly pursuing a common agenda. Furthermore, as a mechanism, *inter-regionalism* provides a framework for the rationalization of multiple RECs in Africa. This framework will involve gradual institutionalization of relations between the RECs, through regular exchanges, establishment of joint committees or secretariat, harmonization of economic and monetary projects and programmes, mandating joint institutions to implement and monitor common projects and programmes, meetings of Chief Executives of the RECs and Heads of State and Government of the RECs. Exigencies and possibly pressures to succeed may provide impetus for further expansion and deepening of relations, invariably increasing reliance on, and expansion of authority of, these new interregional institutions.

There are a number of structures and legal frameworks already in place, which constitute a basis for *inter-regionalism* in Africa. For instance, UNECA and AU have been supporting the rationalization of the RECs on the continent. Chapter IV of the Abuja Treaty carries the commitment of the member states of the AU to strengthen the existing RECs. However, it failed to specify how that can be done. At the same time, the Protocol on Relations between the AEC and the RECs, which was signed and entered into force on 25 February 1998, provides a legal structure upon which interregional relations can be developed and strengthened. One of the objectives of the protocol on relations between the AEC and the RECs is to strengthen the existing RECs in accordance with the provisions of the Abuja Treaty; to promote the coordination and harmonization of the policies, measures, programmes and activities of RECs; and, to promote closer cooperation among the RECs (Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of South Africa 2003). Article 15 (1) of the Protocol provides for joint programmes and closer cooperation between the RECs. It says that RECs may enter into cooperation arrangements under which they undertake joint programmes or activities or more closely coordinate their policies, measures, and programmes (AU 1998). Taking the Abuja Treaty and the Protocol, a legal-political base therefore exists for advocating *inter-regionalism* in policy circles within the states and RECs.

Further, the treaties of some of the RECs provide legal basis for furthering *inter-regionalism*. Chapter XVIII of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty on Relations between the Community and other Regional Economic Communities provides that 'the Community may enter into co-operation agreements with other regional economic communities' (ECOWAS Revised Treaty 1993:44). Similarly, the very opening of the revised treaty of UEMOA expresses the loyalty of the members to the objectives of ECOWAS (L'UEMOA 2003). Moreover, Chapter II, Article 2 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty on Establishment and Composition carries the high contracting parties' affirmation and decision that ECOWAS 'shall ultimately be the sole economic community in the region for the purpose of economic integration and the realization of the objectives of the African Economic Community' (ECOWAS Revised Treaty 1993:4). Therefore, some structures exist for *inter-regionalism* to be pursued and advanced in order to solve the problem of multiple regionalisms in Africa.

There are some efforts on the part of some of the African RECs to pursue *inter-regionalism*. These RECs have also established some interregional structures which need to be brought forward and clearly articulated. For instance, in the West African sub-region, ECOWAS and UEMOA, based on the advice of leaders in the sub-region, signed a general agreement in 2004 to enhance the coordination and harmonization of their programmes. A joint technical secretariat entrusted with the responsibility of enhancing the coordination of their joint activities was created by the two organizations. To function effectively, the two organizations would have to cede more powers to the inter-regional secretariat (GNA 2004). This joint secretariat now serves as the centre of gravity of authority toward an inter-regional governance structure in the sub-region. This form of interregional arrangement is helping to overcome the administrative challenges related to the implementation of the community programmes in West Africa. It is also helping to pool the resources of the two organizations, and to streamline their common activities. ECOWAS/UEMOA partnership is presently building around such issue-areas as the creation of West African Common Market. In this regard, a Joint Border Post (JBP) Programme is being implemented (Sanankoua 2011). There is also the convergence of economic and financial policies, particularly the sub-region's project of establishing a single currency, the ECO, on the existing UEMOA CFA zone and the non-CFA Anglophone West African Monetary Zone. Other areas of cooperation are statistical harmonization, harmonization of sectoral policies (agriculture, transportation and energy) towards preparing one of Africa's regional building blocks (ECOWAS Bulletin 2011). The joint secretariat is facilitating the cooperation programmes and projects. It can be argued that the strong understanding between the two organizations produced the political decision to sanction the former President of Ivory Coast, Laurent Gbagbo, effective when ECOWAS directed Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO) to freeze financial deals with his regime.

Similarly, within central, southern and eastern Africa an interregional collaboration is crystallizing. The leaderships of COMESA-EAC-SADC have also realized the need to chart the course of *inter-regionalism* through the framework of a Tripartite Task

Force (SADC 2011b). The framework is aimed at addressing the problems of duplication and competition in the pursuit of regional economic integration. The Tripartite Task Force thus seeks to forge collaboration and harmonize their programmes in the area of trade, customs, civil aviation, free movement of people and infrastructure development. The efforts of the Task Force saw the draft of a Tripartite Free Trade Area (FTA) by the chief executives of the three REC Secretariats; and a Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Tripartite RECs in Kampala, Uganda in 2008 resulted in far-reaching decisions in the areas of trade and customs (FTA); Joint Competition Authority (JCA) for air transport; infrastructure development; legal and institutional framework and; merger of the RECs. Progress is currently being made in the agreed areas (SADC 2011b). The FTA document has been considered for ratification by member states and it is hoped to take off in 2012 (Mwapachu 2010). The fact that the Task Force is managing the process implies that some powers will be delegated to it by the states to make it function. As it performs its functions, more power and authority may eventually be accorded to it on the bases of need and exigencies. The Task Force could ultimately be the umbilical cord that will usher in the fusion of the different regional institutions. Already, the Task Force is establishing relations with outsiders, such as development partners of the RECs. It has signed MOUs with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), for the establishment of the North-South (Trade) Corridor (NSC), and with Development Bank for Southern Africa. The DFID has contributed UK£ 67 million to the NSC project account (COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite 2010). An investment committee was established by the MOU to consider and approve financing of proposals of the tripartite projects. In its first sitting, the Committee considered and approved a budget amounting to US\$ 10 million for 2010 (Mwapachu 2010). This power of allocation of resources, if it is sustained, will no doubt enhance supra-regional institutions to take up the global administration of harmonized programmes and projects of the RECs.

Inter-regionalism as an approach will no doubt provide a theoretical support for the ECA, AU and the RECs – ECOWAS-UEMAO and COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Task Force – to mobilize resources and support for their actions. It also suggests a procedure for attaining their goal of building stronger, effective and efficient RECs/ building blocks for the African Economic Community (AEC).

Conclusion

'Multiple regionalisms' constitute an obstacle to the integration of Africa. They have caused disruption in Africa's quest for an economic community. The solution to this problem lies in adopting and promoting *inter-regionalism*. As a policy tool, *inter-regionalism* can be used to develop and transform existing mechanisms put in place to address the problem of multiple regionalisms in Africa. Some of these mechanisms are the legal and institutional structures contrived by the AU and some of the RECs to overcome challenges posed by multiple regional groupings. These are, for instance, the Abuja Treaty, the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the

RECs, and treaties and initiatives in some of the RECs, such as the ECOWAS/UEMOA Joint Secretariat and the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area (FTA) project. These structures may provide the foundations for the adoption and implementation of *inter-regionalism*, both as a strategy and a mechanism for effective regional governance and integration of Africa. Our position is that pursuing *inter-regionalism* will help promote the integration of Africa. This is important in view of the fact that the consensus within Africa is that integration is a strategy for pooling resources to overcome the problems of economic *dysfunctionalism*, security challenges and political instability facing the continent.

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