Political Challenges Militating Against Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Development in the Sub-Region

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Abstract: *ECOWAS is a regional group of fifteen countries that was founded on May 28, 1975 and the treaty was signed in Lagos. It was conceived as a means towards economic cooperation and development intended to lead to the eventual establishment of an economic union in the region. Since the dawn of ECOWAS Member States independence, development has been far from the region, and this has been a major concern hence this paper was set out to examine the political challenges that have affected the general development of the region. The paper utilized the secondary sources of data collection and adopted descriptive method of data analysis. It was discovered from the study that political problems such as political corruption, inept political leadership, external political influence, political ideological differences amongst others have affected the general development of ECOWAS region. It has become obvious that after forty five (45) years of ECOWAS its mission to promote economic development across the region have not been achieved, rather the region is faced with myriad of political challenges. To curbed these menaces, recommendations were made which included, promotion of transparency and access to information, reformation of public administration, the need for exceptional character for ECOWAS leaders, commitment on the part of leaders and so on.*

Keywords: *Development, ECOWAS, Corruption, Governance, Democracy*

INTRODUCTION

ECOWAS as a region comprises the heterogeneous Anglophone and Francophone nations. These two different groups of nations are however related in terms of race and sharing the same environmental condition (Senior and Okunrotifa, 1991:59).

The present Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) came in into existence as an idea muted by Gen. Gowon (the then Nigeria's Head of State) and President Eyadema of Togo as far back as 1972. The aim was to form an economic union that will challenge and free all forms of imperialist exploitation and domination of ECOWAS and their economies.

ECOWAS is a regional group of fifteen countries that was founded on May 28, 1975 and the Treaty was signed in Lagos. It was conceived as a means towards economic cooperation and development intended to lead to the eventual establishment of an economic union in West Africa, enhancing economic stability and relations between member states.

The Member States of ECOWAS are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea–Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. The treaty was however revised in Cotonou on July 24, 1993 (Umar, 2014:119). Out of these, the Anglophone countries are eight, Francophone countries five, while lusophone-Portuguese nations are two. This economic integration may be viewed as the legal and institutional relationship within the region in which economic transactions take place. However, the homogeneity of each of these groups of countries can be seen from the perspective of their colonization.

While the Anglophone countries were colonized by Britain, hence having all their orientation, training and development within the context of imperialism, the Francophone nations were colonized by France, their orientation training and development being based on the French policy of assimilation.

ECOWAS was introduced with the cleared mission to promote economic cooperation and development across the region. After forty-five (45) years of ECOWAS existence these objectives have not been achieved, rather the region is faced with myriad of political challenges. ECOWAS have all it takes to develop the region but it has not worked out because the region has missed it politically.

In the light of the above, this paper is set out to examine the political challenges militating against the region's development and make recommendations that would enhance development in the region. These challenges include: political corruption, inept political leadership, prevalence of external political influence, ideological political differences, undemocratic nature of Governance, multiplicity of organizations and so on. All these have affected in no small measure the general development of ECOWAS region. For easy understanding, this paper is split into four parts. Part one deals with the introduction. Part two focuses on explanation of development. Part three examines the political challenges facing ECOWAS development. While the fourth part presents the possible solutions that would enhance development of the ECOWAS region.

EXPLICATION OF DEVELOPMENT

According to Gboyega (2003:6-7), opined that development as an idea that connotes all attempt to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. It implies improvement in material wellbeing of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, but everybody in the society. It demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. It seeks to improve personal physical security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances.

Stiglitz (1998) penned that development is "a transformation of society, a movement from traditional relations, traditional ways of thinking, traditional ways of dealing with health and education, traditional methods of production, to more modern ways. For instance, a characteristic of traditional societies is the acceptance of the world as it is; the modern perspective recognizes change, it recognizes that we as individuals and societies can take actions that, for instance, reduce infant mortality, extend life span and increase productivity". Iyoha & Idada (2016:22) described development as a term generally connoting the transformation of the society economically, politically and socially, such that the inhabitants of a particular enclave have substantially improve welfare and living conditions.

In a simple term, Agbebaku et. al. (2018:108) opined that development means improvement in country's economic and social conditions", more specifically, it refers to improvement in way of managing an area's natural and human resources, in order to create wealth and improve people's live.

Mabogunje (1995) pointed out that two ideas underline the notion of development. The first is that development is about wealth creation for the use of the citizens and the second is that every society succeeds best when in this direction, if it is able to adapt and transform its own institution as well as its mores and the general attitude of its people towards the attachment of these goals. Ojo (1998) sees development as the manifestation of change in the distinctive character of a phenomenon, resulting in qualitative and quantitative improvement in the nature and conditions of the phenomenon, occasioned by changes in the character of and feature of society.

Agagu (1995) posited that development is the ability of a community to indigenously tame and manipulate the resources at its disposal to ensure a good standard of living, thus eliminating abject poverty and creating a well deserved respect for itself among comity of nations. For Ugwu (2003), the concept of development includes not only social, economic and political changes, but a broad and all embracing transformation of the society. It connotes the totality of societal improvement, which of course starts in man himself. Development involves the structuring of society in such a way that will improve the quality of live as well as the satisfaction of psychological wants of members of any given society. In nutshell, development is the general improvement that impact on the society on a positive note.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on structural functional approach. Structural functionalism or simply functionalism is a framework for building a theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability (Macionis: 2010:14). This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape as a whole and believe that society has evolved like organisms. (De Rosso: 2003) This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole, in terms of the function of its constituent element; namely norms, customs, tradition and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), presents those parts of society as "organism that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole (Urry, 2000).

The structural functionalism viewed the society as system comprises of divergent sub-system, functioning 'symbiotically' in order to meet the needs of all its members. The sub-systems (individual state) in this context are seen as cohesive element of the whole (ECOWAS body) and not as isolated units. Moreover, for the sub-system to effectively subsist and survive, these sub-systems as parts of a whole, must work dedicatedly towards attaining the goal for which they are formed or established. From the theory point of view, all societies are seen as exercise what is viewed as normative control, specifying behaviour, which considered as appropriate, in addition to erecting role structure and function for members, to closely adhere to. Functionalism also view society as a system made up of interrelated parts, all interacting based on a common value system consensus about basic value and common goals. Every social custom and institution is seen as having a function in ensuring that society works efficiently.

In this regard, the ECOWAS represents the system and the states as sub-systems who must work together to promote solidarity, stability and economic development of the region. When the sub-systems are integrated and cooperative by carrying out their functions as stipulated there is every tendency that they would have a common fronts in addressing rising issues in the ECOWAS region. Functionalism views society as a system made up of interrelated parts, all based on a common value system or consensus about basic values and common goals. Every social custom and institution is seen as having a function in ensuring that society works efficiently. This study is also in agreement with the position of functionalist approach that "no state is capable of maintaining its economic needs of its people, if it does not cooperate with other countries" (Alemayehu & Haile, 2002). This emphasized that one nation cannot do it all alone, hence the need to cooperate with one another so as to develop the region.

POLITICAL CHALLENGES MILITATING AGAINST ECOWAS DEVELOPMENT

i. Political Corruption: Political corruption is also known as government corruption, has been defined in different perspectives. Nye (1967:417-42) defined it as an abuse of public office for personal enrichment. Such abuse occurs in many forms. The most common include bribery, extortion, embezzlement of government resources, violation of campaign law and electoral fraud. Aristotle, the third century Greek philosopher, defined it as the practice of leaders who rule with a view to their private advantage rather than the pursuit of the public interest. It has also been seen as behaviour by government agencies that violate publicly sanctioned moral standards. Political corruption is often associated with regimes that are described as neopatrimonial or kleptocratic. In this regard, the ruler abuse public office by behaving as though all property in the country is his or her personal property (www.enclopedia.com/international/legal-and-political-magazines/political-corruption). Good example, Sanni Abacha, former Nigerian Military Head of State and many others regimes in this category across the ECOWAS region. It also takes place when policy formulation and legislation is tailored to benefit politicians and other government officials (Gberevbie & Iyoha, 2007).

The term corruption exists everywhere in both developed and developing nations, but mostly prevalent in developing nations. Recently, there has been significant increase in the attention paid to corruption due to series of high level of corruption cases. It is as old as society itself and cut across nations, cultures, races and classes of people. Corruption is unquestionably one of the greatest political challenges of our time, a challenge that is not only leading impoverishment and loss of lives but also threatening the stability of the society. The only difference is that prevalence, gravity and persistence of the corruption menace vary from one place to the other. The effects of corruption are always negative. They block and frustrate genuine efforts at development. Corruption also leaves its victim literally gasping for breath (Ogonnaya, 2013).

The World Bank (1997) sees corruption as "The abuse of public office for private gains". Public office is abused for private gain when officials accept gratification or extorts a bribe. It is also abuse when private agents actively offer bribe to circumvent public policies and processes for competition advantage and profit. Public office can also be abused for the personal benefits even if no bribery occurs through patronage and nepotism, the thief of the state assets or the diversion of state revenue.

In a similar vein, Salisu (2000) penned that corruption is the mismanagement of public funds for private or pecuniary gains or interest. To him, there is corruption when funds that are earmarked for development or social services are appropriated by public office holders to the detriment of the people the nation's development. This is also similar to that given by the Transparency International that sees corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gains".

In politics, corruption undermines democracy and good governance by flouting or even subverting formal processes. Corruption in election and in the legislature reduces accountability and distorts representation in policy making; corruption in the Judiciary compromises the rule of law; and corruption in public administration results in the inefficient provision of services. For republics, it violates a basic principle of republicanism regarding centrality of civic virtue (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/political-corruption).

In ECOWAS, corruption is endemic and caused a lot of damages in all spheres of human endeavour. As noted earlier, the effects of corruption are always negative. They block and frustrate genuine efforts of development. The general development of the region is hampered as a result of endemic corruption.

ii. Inept Political Leadership: This is another political challenge militating against development in the ECOWAS region. Most of the leaders in ECOWAS region are not proficient in the act of governance hence displaying of incompetence in handling issues in their respective States. As a result of the unskillful nature of these leaders, there is insecurity and other vices in the region. This has scared off foreign investors from the region hence unemployment cut across the length and breadth of ECOWAS, and again worsening the insecurity of the region. Incompetence in leadership is not only the problem of people who occupy positions in government; it is a reflection of the leadership culture of the region.

It has become obvious that it is politics that drives the economies of nations. That the major difference between developed countries and developing countries is in their political leadership/evolution. Developed countries have political and economic systems that inclusive and offer opportunities for most to create wealth.

However, most developing economies have political and economic systems that are extractive. Those in the ruling class have a strong hold on political power and use it to channel economic resources to benefit themselves and those close to them. Foreign aid, when channeled through such extractive systems almost never reaches the most vulnerable in society (Adeyemi, 2017:1). Moyo, quoted by Adeyemi lists the problems enhanced by aid to include corruption, civil conflict, strinking of the middle class, and the instilling of a culture of dependency. All of these combine to make the region unattractive to global investors.

As a result of globalization, there is increasing economic, social, technical, cultural and political interdependence between nations. People are more inter-connected now than ever before. The availability of worldwide communication systems through rapid improvements in communication technology and the internet has led to more international trade and exchange. But globalization does not appear to be hastening Africa's development. The problem is also rooted in the political structure and the leadership culture prevalent in Africa, and affected development in the region.

Inept leadership fuels and perpetuates the inequalities and discontent that lead to fragility, violent, extremism and conflict.

iii. Political Ideological Differences: The era of cold war was the era of ideological conflict fully manifested in the relationship between the capitalist west and the socialist world. This situation affected not only the political environment but, the economic relation of the world. There was fear and suspicion between the two blocs to the extent that integrating and development of the member countries of the two different blocs became impossible.

Although, African countries were seen to be non-aligned nations, but in practice, they were divided and individual countries turned toward any of the two major groups thereby hindering the effective process of integration and development in the region (ECOWAS, 1993b). In one way or the other, till this day ideological differences are still affecting development in African continent.

Differences in political ideologies influence attitudes and approaches to regional integration and development. If there is no integration in the region, development will be impossible. For example, during the negotiation of the ECOWAS rules of origin and the protocol on community enterprises, socialist governments and national administrations that were pursuing strong indigenization policies fought for a regional policy that encouraged greater state or indigenous participation. Against this were Member States wedded to the Laissesfaire ideology, advocated a more liberal approach to the issue of the third world nations' participation in community project. This latter ideological school eventually won the day, since the rules have been revised by lowering to twenty percent the share of indigenous equity participation required for goods to qualify as originating from the community.

iv. Undemocratic Nature of Governance: Globally, it is the quality and characteristics of government that shape the level of peace and stability and the prospects for economic development. There is no more critical variable than governance, for it is governance that determines whether there are durable links between the state and the society it purports to govern. The nature of governance is central because it determines whether the exercise of authority is viewed as legitimate. Legitimate authority, in turn, is based on accepted laws and norms rather than arbitrary, unconstrained power of the rulers. Governance also has an important regional dimension relating to the institutional structures and norms that guide a region's approach to challenges and that help shape its political culture (Chester, 2019).

Governance is either democratic or undemocratic in nature. Democratic nature of governance entailed a broad consensus on values and procedures, the participation in the selection of ruling elites, and the accountability of leadership to the electorate. Ideal democratic governance brings about good governance which entails the efficient and effective reciprocity between rulers and the ruled, with it incumbent upon government to be responsive in her dealings. While the undemocratic nature of governance is a system, process or decision that is democratic is one that is controlled or made by one person or a small number rather than by all the people involved. Undemocratic is a situation where the process is not characterized by, derived from or relating to the principles of democracy (www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/undemocratic).

ECOWAS leaders clinging on to power longer than they were constitutionally mandated had fallen out of fashion in the region. A number of Presidents in ECOWAS region seek to tighten their grip on power rather than stand down as they are constitutionally mandated to do. For example, President Alassane Ouattara in Cote d'Ivoire stands for a third term in presidential elections, despite the two-term limit there. In Togo, President Faure Gnassingbe manipulated the process for his fourth term in the election. Gambian President Adama Barrow has sparked uproar by refusing to stand down after his three years in power, as he had originally pledged to do (Moody, 2020). This cut across to many ECOWAS leaders and has caused more harms than good. It sparked demonstrations/ protests in various degree and has affected the general development of the region. If the citizens are angry and see no democratic means of seeking change, they may provide perfect recruitment fodder for armed insurgent, who will seek to utilize such grievances in broadening their base.

v. Fear of Political Domination and Unequal Levels of Development: According to Ebie (2009), quoting Anyaele (1994), penned that the poorer members fear that as a result of unequal distribution of national resources both in human and material endowment, the little they have will be taken away from them and given to those who have more. The expression of fear of dominance has created a lot of problems, or simply put, has hindered the progress activities of ECOWAS toward the general development of the region. The principle of co-operation and development emphasizes harmony among the Member States. The unequal levels of development and the fear of domination has created a lot of suspicions and ill feeling among ECOWAS countries; most especially between big and more developed countries like Nigeria and other less developed countries within the region.

Looking at the objectives of ECOWAS, it is expected that there should be free trade and movement of persons, goods and services within the region; but the protest in Ghana against investors and traders shows that some membership of ECOWAS have not accepted in practice the principle of integration that would ultimately bring about development, out of fear of being dominated by bigger members.

The most important factors of a regional configuration are the degree of balance and complementary and the extent to which the component States are oriented to integrative behaviour. It is argued that a relatively balanced distribution of economic capacities ensure genuine equalities and breeds mutual confidence while unequal capabilities cause apprehension – real or perceived – among the weaker States because of their disadvantage position economically and politically. This has affected the development of ECOWAS region in no small measure.

vi. Lack of Political Commitment: ECOWAS have been having the most unstable political arrangements in Africa. From 1960 and even till date, those governments had not been interested in keeping the systems which had allowed for multiple political parties to coexist and compete for their share of the electorate system. The healthy competition that multiple parties bring into politics as they try to persuade the electorate to vote them into power opens up, otherwise closed political systems to scrutiny, as it forces the parties to lay out clearer manifestoes. In the contrary, abuses like imprisonments, disappearances, house detentions, forced exiles and even death had become rampant in the region (Bamfo, 2013:14). Again, the member governments are not under control as joint decisions taken are deliberately floated by some member states without sanctions. Very often, when given the choice between political survival and long term interest in collective regional development, the former tends to prevail for leaders in the region. New governments in the ECOWAS region frequently do not feel bound by regional commitment made by their predecessors (Chambers & Harris, 2012:4), claiming that "newly elected leaders are eager to establish their own identity and differentiate themselves from their predecessors. This often results in abandoned positions previously established. This is exacerbated by frequent cabinet reshuffles and inadequate national strategies. The political instability that is persistent in the region is as a result of bad government, high illiteracy, high level of poverty, mismanagement of resources, elections rigging, corruption and lack of rule of law. All these have devastating effect on the entire regional development.

vii. Multiplicity of Organizations: The multiplicity of organizations in ECOWAS member states with the same objective has affected the general objective of ECOWAS of integrating the region for development. Several ECOWAS members are currently part of the West African monetary union (also known by its French language acronym "Union Monetaire Ouest-Afriaine" UEMOA), a regional economic and monetary union which shares a common currency – the CFA franc and common custom. The francophone countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo with Guinea Bissau (Lusophone) comprise UEMOA. The currency (CFA Franc) they all use is pegged to the euro.

The ECOWAS could not generate effective political institutions to regulate social relationships based on economic and political order, and therefore were not able to replace their traditional social force with "occupational class and skilled grouping" in their process of modernization. Public institutional structures remained highly fragile and utterly disorganized in the face of enormous pressure from varied and fast expanding social force. The inability of ECOWAS political development to accommodate great qualities of "consensus, legitimacy, effective, and stability" created grave deficiencies in enthroning effective and stable government throughout the region. This in turn created condition for wide spread "mistrust among their citizens, in national and public loyalties in organization skill and capacity building (Huntington; 1968:1-28).

viii. Strong External Political Influence: Many of the member states of ECOWAS were former colonies of some colonial powers. Countries such as Britain, France and Portugal had one colony or two that now belong to the ECOWAS group. They are tagged Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries. There is palpable rift caused by the differing ideological and cultural perspectives of the English, the French and the Portuguese who influenced administration in their colonies respectively. These different administrative perspectives have been the primary basis for trade and cultural exchanges among the ECOWAS countries and their former metropolitan masters. Great Britain, Portugal and France, to varying degrees, have kept trade, diplomatic and cultural ties with their former colonies, which have restricted those countries from committing themselves fully to ECOWAS (Bamfo, 2013:13).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
i. The need to combat corruption

From the study, it was discovered that corruption erodes public trust in government and undermines the social contract. That corruption is one major factor that has hampered general development in the ECOWAS region. It continues to hampered democracy, development and the ability to bring people out of poverty. To come out of this quagmire, the ECOWAS should put in place the following in addressing this menace.

a. Reformation of public administration and finance management. Reforms focusing on improving financial management and strengthening the role of auditing agencies have in many countries achieved greater impact than public sector reforms on curbing corruption. One of such reform is the disclosure of budget information, which prevents waste and misappropriation of resources.

b. Promotion of transparency and access to information. Nations successful at curbing corruption have a long tradition of government openness, freedom of the press, transparency and access to information. Access to information increases the responsiveness of government bodies while simultaneously having a positive effect on the level of public participation in a country.

c. Empowering the citizens. Strengthening citizen's demand for anti-corruption and empowering them to hold government accountable is a sustainable approach that helps to build mutual trust between citizens and government. For example, community monitoring initiatives have in some cases contributed to the detection of corruption, reduce leakages of funds and improved the quantity and quality of public services (www.transparency.org/en/news/how-to-stop-corruption-5-key-ingredients).

d. Regular meeting of ECOWAS commission with regional anti-corruption network. There should be regular consultative meeting of the commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with the Network of Anti-corruption Institutions in West Africa (NACIWA) to always fashion out ways of developing faculties for training on Corruption Risk Assessment (CRA). This will enhance cross fertilization of ideas on how best to curb or minimize corruption in the region. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the West African States must play more robust role in curbing this menace as the true watchdogs for the people. Periodic accountability of those in authority will equally reduce massive corruption.

ii. The need for exceptional character for ECOWAS leaders

The cultivation of leaders with exceptional characters and skills are critical to ECOWAS development. ECOWAS partners should recognize that it is too late to teach someone who occupies a high position in government how to lead during/at global events. They should also bear in mind that there has been alignment between the sense of identity of the leaders and that of the followers for leadership to work. Political leaders everywhere face competing in the act of governance. On the one hand, they recognize the need for strong, responsive state institutions; weak, fragile states do not lead to good governance.

The power distance that exist between leaders in government and citizens as a result of inept political leadership should be closed.

iii. The need to sanction erring Nation

ECOWAS should sanction undemocratic leaders in the region to serve as deterrent to others. The region cannot afford in this twenty-first century for few disgruntled elements to continue to rule with iron fist. Anyone found in this regard should be sanctioned immediately. If ECOWAS allows this dangerous trend to go unchecked, it will set a worrying situation in the region. ECOWAS should do well to consider the dangerous implication of not assisting in upholding democracy in a region where residents are increasingly infuriated by the authoritarian tendencies of their leaders.

iv. The need for concerted effort

There is nothing inevitable about the crisis of inequality that defines the ECOWAS region, but without concerted efforts by governments, the crisis is likely only to get worse. In a nutshell, the key is for ECOWAS governments to radically increase their commitment to tackling the emerging issues. It falls to the national governments and to the ECOWAS to reverse the trend by prioritizing a regional plan to fundamentally change the status of the region that brings about integration and development. ECOWAS should redouble its efforts in the promotion of greater cooperation and joint resource utilization between the strong and the weak Member States. This will curb the continued dominance of the political and economic activities in the region by a few Member States.

v. Promotion of intercultural & interpersonal relationship

The obvious disparities in ideological, socio-economic and political system, ECOWAS must strive to transcend these limitations and constantly seek to promote sustainable intercultural and interpersonal relationship between Member States with greater emphasis on those things that bind them together, while de-emphasizing disputable and contentious issues.

vi. The need to harmonize the various organizations

The presence of multiplicity of organizations in ECOWAS Member States with same objective has affected the general development of the region. The need to harmonize these various organizations in the ECOWAS region cannot be over emphasized. Finally, when the above recommendations are carefully implemented, certainly there will be a new lease of life in the ECOWAS region.

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