

## **REFRAMING THE NOTION OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: WHAT ROLE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

From an Afrocentric perspective, the notion of regional integration has over the years has received much scholarly attention and debate(s) from scholars, practitioners, heads of states and civil society alike. Such notion is drawn from the fact that colonialism by erstwhile European colonizers brought with it dire effects on most African states lack of development and economic growth prospects. In this vein, post the colonial era, regional integration was regarded as a perfect blueprint if most Africa states were to rise from their development doldrums. Since the demise of colonialism, a lot has been done by African heads of states, continental organizations and Regional Economic Communities (RECs). However, there has been the notion that not much has been done to promote the role of civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa's (SSA) regional integration endeavours. The objective of this article is to delve on the role of civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa's regional integration frameworks and how it (civil society) can currently and in the future supplement the work done by other continental organizations towards realizing the gains of regional integration.

**Keywords:** Regional Integration, Sub-Saharan Africa, Civil Society, Economic Growth, Development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Globally, regional integration as a development blueprint has over the years gained much prominence and indeed scholarly attention. It has offered participating states the opportunity of promoting their best area of specialization. By narrowing this down to an Afrocentric perspective, there has, particularly from the 1960s onwards been vast regional integration formations and blueprints. Such is a result that this has interestingly coincided with developments in the Western world in the sense that SSA countries have taken regional integration as an instrument for economic integration as the vehicle to socio-economic and political prosperity. Perhaps as Bala (2017) submits, after the demise of colonialism, the fragmentation of Africa into small nation-states with scant economic coherence drove most African heads of states to consider regional integration as vital for their development strategy. Drawing from similar sentiments as Bala, Jiboku (2015) asserts that from the 1960s, a historical period in the African political landscape as more Africa states were gaining or about to gain their independence from their respective European colonizers, regional integration became a pivotal doctrine for most continental leaders.

This was spearheaded by the fact that because of Africa's balkanization and colonial rule, it would be difficult for newly created African states to make progress concerning development and economic growth in a world dominated by rich, powerful and industrialized countries of the

west. Such led to the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 that in turn gave impetus to the formation of sub-regional groupings and other institutions ought to promote regional integration. Thus, regional integration continues to predominantly feature on Africa's development agenda as attested in continental institutions such as the OAU's Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), the 1991 Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Drawing from the above background, this article examines the role of civil society in enhancing regional integration in SSA. It argues that notwithstanding the limited role civil society has on regional integration in some parts of SSA, nevertheless, it has a fundamental role to play in the development and economic growth of the continent.

Civil society as a potential driver for economic, political and social transformation has gained vast political debate(s) and global research particularly in the developing world (Zajontz & Leysens, 2015). One may deduce that the role of civil society towards regional integration in SSA has not received much scholarly attention post the colonial era, hence, the focus of this article.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Demise of Colonialism and the need for Regional Integration**

Itai and Constance (2014) assert that the importance of regional integration post the colonial era has long been in the minds of African heads of states such that this saw this notion been embraced by African leaders at first for political reasons and later as a development blueprint as to rise from the hindrances of landlockedness, minor markets, trade and benefit from economies of scale. Hence, there was a notion that the only way to speed up economic growth was via regional integration. Such provided the rationale of past and current continental institutions such as the OAU, LPA, African Union (AU) and NEPAD. Before to the scramble for Africa, African economies were doing well and advancing predominantly in trade. Colonialism exploited the physical human and economic resources of a particular country to benefit the colonizing nation (Settlers, 1996).

The imposition of colonialism on Africa by European countries reformed its history forever as African patterns of cultural development, modes of thought and ways of life were forever impacted by the change in political structure brought about by colonial masters. It undeniably brought with it the underdevelopment of African states in diverse ways (see Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). It is in such vein that regional integration was viewed as a vital factor concerning to the envisioned possible gains for African states encompassing but not limited to attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), abolishing tariffs (via the reconfiguration of neo-colonial influence and unfair trading practices), promote political independence, bilateral agreements, infrastructural development and robust security mechanism and dependence on western donors.

This made regional integration to be geographically intuitive as colonial masters created tremendously fragmented state systems, which combined with political and economic marginality, stimulated the formation of a large number of institutions and inter-state organizations. Indeed, SSA represents a small relatively peripheral and shrinking component of

the world economy such that from a period where the OAU called “the economic integration of Africa as a prerequisite for real independence and development” there has been vital milestones (see table 1) geared towards regional integration that have included but not limited to:

**Table 1:** Showing some of Africa’s Regional Integration ambitions 1980-2002

<b>Year</b>	<b>Regional Integration Ambition</b>
1980	LPA
1985	Africa’s Priority Program for Economic Recovery
1990	OAU Declaration on the Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and the fundamental change-taking place in the world.
1991	Kampala Document
1991	Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community.
1993	Mechanism of Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution.
1995	Cairo Agenda for Action
1997	Africa common Position on Africa’s External Debt Crisis
1999	Algiers Decision
2000	Solemn declaration on the conference on security, stability, development and co-operation
2000	Constitutive action of the AU
2001	The Omega Plan
2001	New Africa Initiative
2001	NEPAD

**Source:** See Gibb (2009).

These were primarily envisaged to robustly strengthen the existing RECs while also to establish other economic groupings in other regions on the continent. Such shows that post the colonial era, SSA states have experimented with diverse types of regional economic integration arrangements and formulated different policies underpinned by Pan-African ideas robust integration and cooperation (Jiboku, 2015). This is even though the fact that regional integration involves a complex combination of interstate formal processes included but not limited to formal trade practices, macroeconomic policies, regulatory mechanisms, industrial and agricultural policies and other diverse processes with cross border implications (Byiers & Vanheukelom, 2013).

According to Tuluy (2016), there is sufficient evidence that states benefit from participation and openness in the global economy. In this regard, trade, whether in finance, services and goods coupled with participation in the global value chains (GVCs) contributes to

growth via access to enhanced competition, deeper markets and new technology all driving efficiency and productivity. In SSA, regional integration has taken many forms and shapes ranging from minor associations made up of few actors to larger continental unions that address a multitude of problems from food security, peace and trade. Again, regional integration projects are made up of varying actors including interest groups, private businesses and civil society. In this vein, one may describe regional integration in a twofold dimension as (1) a process and (2) an outcome.

As a process, regional integration entails a country's willingness to share or unify into a larger whole such that the degree to which the unifying states share and what they share determines the level of integration. As an outcome, regional integration is seen as occurring when pre-established criteria are met. Such criteria are outlined in the treaties and agreement that establish regional institutes and its goals (Straker, 2012). Maruping (2005) contends that from an SSA perspective, the history concerning regional integration paints a picture that the objectives for integrating have been evolving. Such that these have shifted from the initial focus on political decolonisation of Africa to the present emphasis on socio-economic integration in the post-independence era for a more robust bargaining base both in the continental and global arena.

### **The Pursuit of Regional Integration in SSA: Challenges Encountered**

While the notion of regional integration was particularly from the 1960s viewed as a vital element to SSA's blueprint growth planes, there have been challenges encountered along the way. Jiboku (2015) points to the fact that Africa's regional integration initiatives started right after the demise of colonialism. To her, because most African states were newly independent, they were yet to achieve what she calls economic independence. Again, as political entities, these countries were yet to achieve a workable form of national integration. In this vein, such meant that from the get-go, basic institutions and structures to enable the integration process were either insufficient or not in place.

She again refers to the OAU's charter signed by African heads of states. Its principles did not address the vital question of national sovereignty of member states as such countries lacked basic elements of statehood thus making them ill prepared to achieve needed continental vision of African unity. Such was seen as theoretical gaps in Africa's regional integration agenda that have over the years affected the process of cooperation and integration. Hence, scholars such as Muchie, (2019); Chingono & Nakana, (2009) affirm that African regional integration has registered mixed levels of success often lagging or failing to match that of its ideological or rhetoric commitment. While some progress has been achieved in some areas, the level of integration has not been visible such that some African RECs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) have integrated more than others.

Similarly, if one has to observe the pivotal component such as trade, a big chunk of SSA trade is conducted informally particularly across porous borders which are in most cases poorly monitored and encompass of weak productive capabilities, insufficient infrastructure, lack of technological sophistication coupled with weak institutional capacities (Karingo, 2016).

Lack of essential infrastructures such as roads, energy, rail, power and telecommunications together with other links for the smooth facilitation of the free movement of capital, goods, services and persons is a major hindrance to the consummation to the integration

dream in Africa. Despite a plethora of regional trading blocs, intra African trade is limited to a majority of SSA countries as most trade more with the developed world especially those from the European Union (EU). This is in most cases driven by the incidences of weak industrial and productive sectors in most SSA countries. Inadequate human, financial resources and the challenge of harmonizing regional programmes into robust national policy frameworks further manifest such. Elements such as low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate(s) no or insufficient access to means of production, high unemployment rates, capital inflows and per capita income have also hindered SSA regional integration (Mlambo, 2018; Mlambo, 2019). Gibbs (2009) brings in another vital factor, when he outlines that the reason why regional integration has not been successful is also routed to the fact that Africa is still home to autocratic regimes<sup>1</sup> who as a result of their iron-fist rule, make it difficult for regional integration to be achieved as some are complicated in bad leadership, poor governance, military coups intra-state and inter-state conflicts and development challenges. It is no hidden fact that political instability (terrorism and ethnic violence) has continued to rock most African states post the colonial era, which has bought with it dire effects to the continents socio-economic growth plans.

Countries such as Lesotho, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Mali, Nigeria, Somali and Niger have continued to witness vast internal fighting with either government forces or different rebel groups. This has bought with it poverty, destroyed physical infrastructure and human capital to a sense that it has made it difficult to accelerate sustainable economic development. Such instability also points to the leadership crisis in most SSA states, hence, the need for more robust leadership in Africa (Bala, 2017). A majority of SSA states are members of more than one sub-regional or regional bloc, which seeks to enhance economic coordination, cooperation or integration between member states concerned. Such brings with it membership issues, slow ratification of protocols and reluctant implementation of agreed policies (Maruping, 2005). While there are challenges, being encountered concerning regional integration in SSA, one should ponder what role could civil society play in SSA's regional integration frameworks.

### **What Role (if any) for Civil Society?**

In spite of some scholarly works that have emerged about civil society<sup>2</sup> over the years, not much concentration has been paid to its role in regional integration. This could be perhaps derived from the fact that regional integration in SSA has mostly been state-centric, suggesting that states are often viewed as drivers of economic and political integration in the context of neoliberal global transformation (Fioramonti, 2014). Nevertheless, in recent years, none state actors have been viewed as an integral part of the continents regional integration frameworks such that Fioramonti asserts that:

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<sup>1</sup> Some regimes such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and the DRC possess an innate distrust of civil society, hence, often undermining its ability to spearhead a meaningful role in development and democracy.

<sup>2</sup> In its earliest form, civil society may be traced to the 16<sup>th</sup> century from a philosopher/historian Adam Ferguson. He linked the idea of civil society to the development of any state. Civil society may be termed as a set of associational interactions by actors between states and family to put the interests and concerns of individuals and the broader public on the development agenda while at the same time also trying to pursue the government to address the challenges or concerns of the marginalized (Masterson, 2006; Landsberg, 2006).

*“Civil society is not only likely to build regionalism from below, but also that some processes within the civil society arena can lead to meaningful contestations of existing regionalism paradigms and contribute to reshaping regions in line with alternative agendas”.*

Drawing from this, civil society has over the years been viewed as vital actors on the regional integration field. Globally, from the 1980s, civil society has gained a valuable reputation by obtaining the protections and freedoms necessary to engage and at times direct the course in which governments focus their policies and priorities. Such that in both the developed and developing world, civil society is becoming a prominent actor in shaping government policies. Reframing and the construction of civil society have over the years taken on different ideological traditions; hence, one may observe three viable conceptual traditions in the use of the term. One is associated with economics and political science that is often labelled as liberal. Such (liberal) is concerned with the political development such as forming democratic governance and establishing a participatory form of government (Straker, 2012).

In this form of civil society doctrine, political activities and civic institutions are essential components of political society rooted in the notion of rights, democratic representation, citizenship and the rule of law. To the liberals, civil society is a driving force concerning corrupt states and human rights abuse. Secondly, this is rooted via the lens of sociology. Here, civil society is viewed as a repository of popular resistance to government policies. Finally, the third expect has to do with international cooperation for development such that civil society is as an organization representing diverse stakeholders in the process of economic development and its war against poverty (Straker, 2012).

Continently, some scholars such as Godsater (2014) view civil society as having a robust role to play via representing the grassroots in bodies such as the AU and other continental institutes through the monitoring and policy formulation while also ensuring a degree of accountability to continental bodies. Such as Millstein (2015) contends is driven by the notion that in SSA, civil society is growing rapidly and diversifying in both form and focus and often engaging around a range of issues such as trade, service delivery, health, gender, education and human rights. It is in this vein that in recent years, there has been a major impetus paid to the role of civil society from an Afrocentric perspective and largely due to the role of civil society organizations and groups in the fight for liberation from colonial rule and later the quest for democratic governance (Masterson, 2006). Over time, civil society organizations in most SSA countries have gone a rapid and profound transition in the manner in which they often interact with other vital actors such as government and state institutions about to governance matters. This has also been witnessed through efforts to engage with continental institutions such as RECs, the AU, the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and NEPAD.

In SSA, many constitutions provide a special provision for civil society to play a pivotal role in the functions and progress of democratic institutions. While the role of civil society has gained significant attention, many African heads of states are yet to fully grasp and appreciate its importance. Such stems from the fact that while the role of civil society has been welcomed as private entities, funding of civil society in SSA has been a major contribution to the conflicts between some government and the civil society sector. Such is because a majority of them are Western-funded which to some autocratic heads of states does not sit well. Hence, at times the work of civil society is met with scepticism together with feelings of untrustworthiness.

Again, Reinold (2019) is of the view that there is a shrinking space when it comes to civil society participation in SSA in a sense that the AU is increasingly spearheading an exclusionary stance when it comes to civil society participation. There are those scholars such as Zajontz & Leysens (2015) who are of the view that the neglect of civil society on regional integration by some RECs or member states is largely a theoretical and methodological problem. Hence, to them, there is a dire need to develop ways in which we theorize and study civil society concerning regional integration. Such particularly entails that the study of civil society must thereby go beyond western liberal notions in such a way that they take into consideration the socio-cultural and political realities of the specific region under investigation. One might perhaps deduce that for civil society to succeed there is a need for robust institutional capacity and structural arrangements driven by an enabling legislative and functioning legal and political environment (See Mlambo, VH, Zubane & Mlambo, D.N., 2019).

### **Looking Ahead: Future Prospects of SSA's Regional Integration Agenda**

According to Godsater (2015), for a meaningful role towards regional integration, there is a need for civil society to be knowledgeable and well informed about the diverse issues they deal with and present viable policy alternatives. In this vein, the power to affect policy changes is directly linked to the type of knowledge that an organization produces. Thus, two aspects are crucial, expertise and experiential evidence. Expertise is at times and often related to knowledge about a specific issue and as such referred to as technical expertise.

On the other hand, experiential evidence draws from experience from knowledge from direct experiences of peoples understanding of gender, poverty, inequality, environmental issues and so forth. Understanding and grasping such important aspects is crucial to the future work on civil society in SSA. However, to further aid civil society concerning regional integration in SSA, there is a dire need to eradicate the wasteful and costly duplication of multiple memberships and should be a priority to continental institutions such as the AU. Indeed, such should be based on priority needs and efficiency from comparative advantage. Therefore, this notion of belonging to a plethora of groupings should be carefully studied and given much-needed attention moving forward. SSA heads of states should at the earliest bring the private sector and civil society on board much earlier in the development process, thus, precede regional integration programmes to enhance ownership that motivates full implementation among all relevant stakeholders such that the process is inclusive and participatory.

It is highly advisable that in stages of critical planning of regional integration programmes that civil society is highly involved in the inclusive and participatory planning encompassing of formulation of frameworks, monitoring and evaluation, budget, action plans and so forth. Again, for civil society to have a robust and valued say towards regional integration programmes, there is a need for as Mlambo, V.H & Mlambo, D.N outline in their published article '*Challenges Impeding Regional Integration in Southern Africa*' to improve the provision of good governance as this is vital in promoting regional integration such that transparency and accountability are vital here. Apart from the role of civil society, SSA heads of states and RECs are of need to enhance both soft and hard infrastructure. Regional integration requires much-needed devotion and responsibility from all stakeholders (public and private) in a sense that this requires robust laws, political will and robust regional integration driven institutions. Such

pertains to the fact that irrespective of a state's level of development, every state has a role to play in regional integration.

## CONCLUSION

This article aimed to ponder the role of civil society towards regional integration in SSA. The article shows that globally, regional integration has gained much prominence and indeed scholarly attention and this is particularly true from an Afrocentric perspective post the 1960s after the effects left by colonialism, this is even though there have been challenges encountered along the way. Indeed, over the last few years, there has been much impetus paid on the role of civil society towards regional integration in SSA. Such stems from the fact that civil society is a vital actor for stimulating blueprints geared towards regional integration while advocating and stimulating regional solutions to regional challenges by (in most cases) working jointly with RECs, continental organizations and government while also possessing the aptitude to hold them into account. To enhance SSAs regional integration frameworks and meet targeted blueprints moving forward, there is a vital need for continental organizations, RECs and heads of state to involve civil society in all forms of regional integration both presently and moving forward.

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