REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND CHALLENGES OF FREE TRADE. A CASE STUDY OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATE (ECOWAS) 2015-2023

BY

IFENATUORAH KOSISOCHUKWU EMMANUELLA
GOU/U22/IRE/668

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
GODFREY OKOYE UNIVERSITY,
ENUGU

JULY, 2026

TITLE PAGE

REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND CHALLENGES OF FREE TRADE. A CASE STUDY OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATE (ECOWAS) 2015-2023

BY

IFENATUORAH KOSISOCHUKWU EMMANUELLA

GOU/U22/IRE/668

PRESENTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, GODFREY OKOYE UNIVERSITY, UGWUOMU-NIKE, ENUGU STATE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE (B.Sc.) IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SUPERVISOR: DR NETCHY MBAEZE

JULY, 2026

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am solely responsible for the project work titled, "REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND CHALLENGES OF FREE TRADE. A CASE STUDY OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATE (ECOWAS) 2015-2023" presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree (B. Sc.) in International Relations which is a record of a dignified project work carried out under the guidance and supervision of DR MBAEZE .N.

………………………………. **……………………………**

IFENATUORAH KOSISOCUKWU DATE

(STUDENT)

APPROVAL PAGE

This is to validate that this research work "REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND CHALLENGES OF FREE TRADE. A CASE STUDY OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATE (ECOWAS) 2015-202" was embarked upon by "IFENATUORAH KOSISOCHUKWU EMMANUELLA" with the matriculation number GOU/U22/IRE/668 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Bachelor Science(B.SC) in International Relations, has been examined and approved by the Department of International Relations, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu.

…………………………………………. ………………………

DR. MBAEZE NETCHY DATE

(PROJECT SUPERVISOR)

…………………………………………….. …………………………

PROF. SAMUEL UGWUOZOR DATE

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

…………………………………………… ………………………...

PROF. JOHN ODO DATE

DEAN, FMSS

…………………………………………… ………………………….

EXTERNAL EXAMINER **DATE**

DEDICATION

This project work is dedicated to God Almighty for His love and protection in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost , I would like to appreciate God for his abundant mercies, strength and grace throughout this project. In a special way, I want to also acknowledge and appreciate my supervisor, Dr. Mbaeze Netchy, for the time, effort, and dedication he devoted to ensuring the success of this project. Your guidance, patience, and support throughout this research work are deeply appreciated. I also wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Head of Department, Dr. Samuel Ugwuozor, for his unwavering commitment to academic excellence and the growth of students in the department. My sincere appreciation also goes to the Dean of the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Prof. John Odo .I would also like to acknowledge the distinguished lecturers of the Department of International Relations and Political science; Dr. Ezechi Kingsley, Dr. Chidozie Alex Ogbonnia, Sr. Dr. Lucy Umeh, Dr. Mrs. Francisca Ifedi, Mr. Anthony Onyishi, Rev. Fr. Dr. Ogbuka, Dr. Mbaeze Netchy, Mr. Ejike, Mr. Desmond Onwo, Dr. Young, Mrs. Chioma Obidike for their constant encouragement and moral boosting of I and my fellow students towards academic and real world situations, you all have really shaped me and I would never forget you all.

I equally Appreciate my family members (Mr Uzo Akunedozie, Miss Ugochi Ananti, Dr Udoka, Mrs Charity Akunedozie, Chimdindu, Late Mrs Ifenatuorah)for their prayers and financial assistance also my friends (Amarachi, Chidinma), may God continue to bless you. I would also like to appreciate myself for believing in my abilities, for remaining committed through every challenge, for never giving up, and for staying determined throughout this academic journey.

Lastly, I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my late mother, Miss Lotanna Akunedozie. Even though she is no longer here with me, I know she will always be watching over me in spirit. Her love, prayers, and values continue to inspire and strengthen me every day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

This study examines regional economic integration and the challenges of free trade within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) over the period 2015 to 2023. Employing a qualitative documentary research design grounded in Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade, the study systematically analyses why intra-regional trade has remained persistently low at approximately 11–12 percent of total regional trade despite decades of formal liberalization commitments embodied in the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and related protocols. The study identifies three principal and interrelated barriers to effective free trade integration. First, structural and institutional constraints including pervasive non-tariff barriers, checkpoint proliferation, bureaucratic customs procedures, and critical infrastructure deficits continue to inflate trade costs and suppress intra-regional commerce well below integration objectives. Second, an escalating pattern of political instability between 2020 and 2023, encompassing four military coups and the formal withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS, has directly disrupted the implementation of trade liberalization policies and weakened the bloc's governance architecture. Third, persistent macroeconomic divergence among member states reflected in widespread non-compliance with ECOWAS monetary convergence criteria, significant exchange rate volatility among WAMZ currencies, and wide fiscal policy disparities has imposed substantial transaction cost burdens on intra-regional traders and retarded the pace of economic convergence. The findings validate all three study hypotheses and demonstrate that tariff liberalization alone is insufficient to drive deep regional integration in the absence of complementary infrastructure investment, institutional harmonization, political stability, and monetary policy coordination. The study concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations addressing non-tariff barrier reduction, infrastructure investment, ETLS implementation, democratic governance, monetary convergence, and the integration of informal traders into regional trade frameworks. The study contributes a focused, contemporary analysis of a critical period in ECOWAS history and provides a replicable methodological framework for future research on regional integration in developing-country contexts.

Keywords: *ECOWAS Regional Economic Integration Free Trade Non-Tariff Barriers ETLS Political Instability Gravity Model Comparative Advantage Intra-Regional Trade West Africa Monetary Convergence*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

Regional economic integration has traditionally been identified as a successful route towards improving the economic growth, intensifying market, and enabling competitive trade between neighboring nations (Andoh et al., 2025). The economic integration idea is to reduce tariffs on trade, align policies, and establish bigger, efficient markets that would be attractive to investment, better infrastructure and spur socio-economic growth. In Africa, regional economic communities were set up as pillars of continental cooperation under the chairing of African Union (AU), and the ultimate aim is to have a unified economic space to facilitate sustainable development (World Bank, 2023).

One of such regional organizations is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It was established in 1975 when the Treaty of Lagos was signed and now it has 15 member states that include Senegal in the west to Nigeria and further eastwards. The main aims of it are to encourage economic integration, enhance economic relations between member states, and establish a free trade zone where products, services, people, and capital can move without other artificial obstacles. It is also through ECOWAS that peace and security are encouraged since they understand that economic integration will flourish in a stable environment.

ECOWAS has since enjoyed significant successes, including the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, which theoretically gives the citizens of member states the freedom to travel, work, and reside within the sub-region, and the implementation of a Common External Tariff (CET) aimed at harmonizing the external trade policy (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). Nevertheless, the realization of a completely integrated regional market has not been realized especially in respect to an intra-regional trade and the smooth running of free trade systems.

With these legal frameworks, intra-ECOWAS trade has not been high particularly as compared to the global regional blocs like the European Union. It has been estimated that intra-regional trade does constitute about 11-12 percentage of the entire trade in the ECOWAS region which means that member states continue to trade much more out of the bloc than within the bloc (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). This long-standing disparity between policy on paper and economic practice constitutes deep and structural problems that persist in destabilizing free trade in the West African sub-region (Andoh et al., 2025).

One of the issues is that intra-regional trading is structural. Most member states of the ECOWAS mostly export raw materials to industrialized global markets as opposed to processing goods at the regional level, which is a support to what has been outlined in the literature as a vertical trade relation. These trends indicate reliance on the external economies rather than the development of value chains that have assimilated West African producers and markets (Nnamani, 2023).

Non-tariff barriers and bottlenecks in administration is another significant hindrance. Even though there are free trade agreements, traders encounter bureaucratic hurdles including unpredictable customs processes, high number of checkpoints, and unofficial fees which slows or discourages movement across borders. These obstacles make it more expensive to conduct business in ECOWAS and offer a watered-down impact of free trade efforts (ECOWAS Commission, 2025).

There is also the factor of infrastructure problems that are contributing factors to the inhibited integration. The lack of good transport infrastructures, poor logistical capacity, and poor border facilities raise the cost of transactions and decrease the competitiveness of intra-regional trade.

According to scholars, unless there is a significant betterment of the roads, rail connections, and regional logistic corridors, the dream of economic integration and free trade cannot be fully realized.

Political and institutional processes have had their share as well. The absence of harmonization in policies, the weak desire to use regional agreements at national level and frequent instability of some of the member states have limited the capacity of ECOWAS to apply its protocols at all times and ways. Research on integration and economic development in the sampled ECOWAS countries found that incomplete infrastructure, political unrest, a weak institutional capacity, and corruption were some of the obstacles to further integration (International Review of Political Journal, 2025).

In addition, new political dynamics in the period between 2015 and 2025 have also complicated the integration agenda. Over the recent years, the region has been hit by a number of military coups that have threatened the governance by democracies and cast doubts on the capabilities of the bloc to deliver its role of integration. In 2024-2025, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso officially withdrew their membership of ECOWAS, and went on to create the Alliance of Sahel States, an act that underscored the instability around the region cohesiveness and introduced additional challenges to the economic cooperation (Reuters, 2025).

There is also a subtle aspect to the integration problem of informal trade, which is an important part of the economic activity in West Africa and gets ignored in formal integration models. Even though informal cross-border trade continues to be a primary livelihood activity, particularly agricultural products, studies indicate that current integration policies like the CET and the larger free trade structures might be associated with the reduction of informal trade, which has caused doubt on the effectiveness of such policies in incorporating informal economic players (Kligue & Yovo, 2025).

To conclude, although ECOWAS was initially designed as a tool of encouraging free trade and economic integration within West Africa, it has not had a uniform effect in the last ten years. The presence of structural patterns of trade, non-tariff barriers, poor infrastructure, institutional weaknesses, and political instability has all served to cause limitations to the effectiveness of integration over the period between 2015 and 2023. All these issues demonstrate the need to strengthen regional collaboration and transform the current systems to make sure that the promises of free trade and mutual prosperity are fulfilled in every member state.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Regional economic integration is well known as one of the key strategies in economic growth promotion, enhancement of trade relations, and solidarity of cooperation among adjacent nations. In West Africa, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) was established aiming to establish a single regional market by promoting free trade, free movement of goods and service and harmonization of economic policies among the member states. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the other protocols that are related to the trade were aimed at eliminating the barriers to the trade and promoting the intra-regional trade hence enhancing the economic development and dependency on external markets. Nonetheless, even with these integration frameworks and policy tools, economic integration and free trade among ECOWAS member states have been mostly insignificant and unpredictable.

The fact that the barriers to trade that exist between member states are persistent; that is, both tariff and non-tariff barriers exist is one of the major problems that face ECOWAS integration efforts to date. Even though the ECOWAS has implemented measures that are geared toward removing tariffs on locally produced goods, several traders and companies still face limitations in the way of numerous checkpoints and customs, extra fees, and red tape. Such obstacles deter trading activities across the borders and extinguish the effectiveness of trade liberalization policies. Consequently, it is easy and profitable to trade with countries beyond the region in comparison to trading with neighboring countries within the ECOWAS region, a circumstance that goes against the core goal of the economic integration of the region.

The other big problem is the disproportionate rate of economic development of member states in the ECOWAS that has led to inequality in trade benefits. Certain member states have a comparatively better industrial and economic potential whereas others are relying on primary commodity exportation and have a low production potential. This has impacted upon the competitiveness of the weaker economies in the free trade system. Therefore, instead of supporting balanced economic growth, regional integration in some instances leads to unbalanced distribution of trade benefits and hence hostility by some member states towards fully implementing integration policies.

Lack of infrastructure is also a major issue that impacts the functionality of the free trade in ECOWAS. Unfavorable road networks, lack of transport systems, inaccessibility of railway, and ineffective port facilities have made trade very expensive and delayed goods across the borders. Such infrastructural constraints have lowered the possible advantages of regional economic integration and de-motivated the engagement of the private sector in the cross-border business operations. Besides, poor technological and logistics support systems have impeded effective facilitation of trade and limited competitiveness of member states.

Moreover, political instability and irregular policy execution in the countries of ECOWAS have also posed more difficulties to the integration process. The alteration of government, political confrontations, and lack of security in a few member states has undermined cooperation and broken trade links. The decision by other member countries to withdraw or have poor engagement in the regional agreements has also posed a threat to the realization and the survival of the integration agenda. These political and institutional issues have constrained the success of the ECOWAS policies and reduced the pace of achieving the aims of free trade in the region.

The other issue of concern is the little coverage of the informal trade activities in the ECOWAS integration framework. Informal cross-border trade is significant towards supporting livelihoods in West Africa, though current trade policies do not frequently choose to regulate or support this industry. This is because informal traders have not been included in formal trade structures; thus, they have continued to engage in smuggling, deprive the government of revenues and limited data to monitor and plan the trade. This disparity lowers the efficiency of the entire free trade program and curbs the socio-economic gains forecasted by integration in a region.

Although many policies and agreements have been implemented by ECOWAS since 2015-2023 to reinforce economic cooperation and encourage free trade, the desired intra-regional trade and economic growth have not been achieved to the full extent. Continued existence of trade barriers, infrastructural issues, political instabilities, economic inequalities among the member states, and poor policy implementation have remained to impede the realization of the regional economic integration. Consequently, there is a necessity to critically analyze the issues conceiving the free trade in ECOWAS and evaluate how such issues have influenced the achievement of the objectives of economic integration in the region in the period under analysis.

The proposed research will hence aim at exploring the correlation between the regional development of the economy and the issues of free trade within the context of ECOWAS with the particular interest in understanding the major hindrances to the success of the policy of integrating states in the West African sub-region between 2015 and 2023 to understand the potential improvements that can be made to free trade and economic collaboration in the region.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated from the objectives of the study:

1. How does the level of regional economic integration within ECOWAS manifest between 2015 and 2023?
2. How does political instability affect the implementation of free trade policies among ECOWAS member states?
3. How does the weak implementation of monetary policies by member states undermine regional economic integration goals?

1.4. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine regional economic integration and the challenges of free trade in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) between 2015 to 2023.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the level of regional economic integration within ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023.
2. Examine how political instability affects the implementation of free trade policies among ECOWAS member states.
3. Assess the impact of weak monetary policy implementation by member states on the achievement of ECOWAS regional economic integration goals.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The importance of the study is addressed in theoretical, practical, policy, and academic terms. The results of the study are bound to make significant contributions to the knowledge and practice of regional economic integration and free trade in the ECOWAS sub-region.

Theoretically, the research will enhance the current theories on regional economic integration and international trade by offering empirical evidence to the experience of ECOWAS. It will assist in explaining the application of integration theories like economic integration theory and trade liberalization views in a developing regional bloc where structural inequalities, political instabilities and infrastructural constraints exist. The study will further inform the study of the circumstances in which the integration theories can be successfully implemented within the West African setting by analyzing the relationship between the process of regional integration and the issues of free trade.

In practice, this study will be applied practically in ECOWAS institutions, national governments, policymakers, and trade regulators to determine the most prevalent obstacles to successful free trade in the region. The research will offer real-world lessons that may inform the enhancement of the trade facilitation, border management, and the development of infrastructures. It will also help the traders, investors and individuals in the private sector to know how the regional trade is in ECOWAS and what factors affect economic activities across the borders.

Policymaking The policy perspective of the work will be utilized in the formulation and review of regional policies of trade and integration of ECOWAS. The results can be used to make evidence-based policy that seeks to enhance the enforcement of free trade agreements, harmonization of trade rules and enhancement of institutional co-ordination among member states. It will also give policy-specific recommendations capable of assisting in improving the adherence to ECOWAS trade protocols and further strengthen economic collaboration in the region.

Academically, the study will help in the body of literature on regional economic integration in Africa, especially in the ECOWAS region. It will be useful to students, researchers, and scholars who will be interested in international economics, regional studies, and development studies. The research will also be used as a source of reference in future studies on regional integration and free trade problems particularly on studies that are aimed at developing economies and regional economic communities.

1.6. Scope of the Study

The scope of the study will clearly establish the frontiers and emphasis of the study on regional economic integration and the predicament of free trade in ECOWAS.

This study focuses on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which comprises fifteen member countries in West Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and others. The study focuses on the integration policies, free trade between these countries and economic cooperation, paying special attention to the cross-border trade, policy implementation and infrastructural and political issues that influence the processes of regional integration.

The period that is specifically covered in the study is between 2015 and 2023, which is taken to reflect the recent occurrences, policy practices, and challenges in ECOWAS. This time is also marked by some of the critical events, including the ongoing realization of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the launch of new trade facilitation policies, and political and security issues that have shaped the process of regional integration.

The conceptual aspect of the study is based on two main variables:

Regional Economic Integration - This is a process where the member states of the ECOWAS combine their efforts to lower their trade barriers, to harmonize their economic policies and encourage free movement of goods, services, capital and people.

Challenges of Free Trade - Aspects of hindering successful adoption of free trade policies in ECOWAS, such as non-tariff barriers, infrastructural problem, political instabilities, economic imbalances, and inadequate inclusion of informal trade.

The study specifically aims the relationships between the two variables in order to see how the issues of free trade affect the realization of the goals of integration of ECOWAS.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by the reliance on secondary data sources, including published reports, academic journals, and official ECOWAS documents, which may not fully capture real-time developments or informal trade dynamics. Additionally, the study is confined to the period 2015–2023, which may exclude recent policy shifts. The scope is also restricted to ECOWAS as a regional bloc, and findings may not be generalizable to other regional economic communities. Data inconsistencies across member states and limited availability of disaggregated trade statistics further constrain the depth of analysis.

1.8. Operational Definition of Concept Terms

The main terms that were used in the research can be defined as follows in order to make it understandable and be able to share the same level of knowledge within the framework of this research:

1. **Regional Economic Integration:** The process by which the member states of the ECOWAS cooperate to lower trade barriers, standardize economic policies and encourage economic cooperation, with an aim of establishing a common regional market in goods, services, capital and labor.
2. **Free Trade:** Free flow of goods and services within the ECOWAS member countries without duties, quotas and other barriers to trade as advocated by agreements like the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS).
3. **Trade Barriers:** Regional barriers to free movement of goods and services, such as tariffs, non-tariff barriers, customs delays, bureaucratic bottlenecks, among other administrative or structural barriers to free movement.
4. **Intra-Regional Trade:** The trade that is conducted among member states of the ECOWAS and not between the member states and other countries outside the region. It is an indication of the degree of economic interaction and integration between the West African nations.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Concept of Regional Economic Integration

Regional economic integration can be described as the process where a group of countries that are geographically close become officially bound to minimize or completely avoid restrictions to the flow of goods, services, capital and in some instances labor with the intention of promoting economic collaboration and growth. Fundamentally, regional economic integration aims to enhance economic interactions between countries that are involved in the process by establishing bigger markets, the free movement of resources, and the coordination of macroeconomic policies (Andoh et al., 2025). The core idea of integration is based on the assumption that the economic cooperation between the neighboring states will enhance productivity of the collaborating states, draw investments, and enhance the overall global competitiveness in a way that would not be possible by the individual state economies.

Most scholars and practitioners tend to divide regional economic integration into several types that represent the growing levels of economic collaboration. These are frequently started with a Free Trade Area, which is where members are abolished of tariffs and quotas between them, but individual external tariffs are retained, which is then followed by a Customs Union, where external tariff is common, and finally an Economic Union, with harmonized macroeconomic policies (Towobola & Bamisaye, 2024). These classifications can also be used to know not only what the regional blocs want to achieve but also their position in terms of integration.

It is against this theoretical context that regional economic integration in developing areas such as Africa are associated with peculiarities and challenges. The studies on the determinants and practice of economic integration in developing countries underscore the fact that although classical models of integration (that originated in the Western settings) focus on trade liberalization and economic convergence, the classical models might not be the most effective in elucidating the outcome of integration in the developing economies due to structural limitations. As an illustration, it is complicated by the lack of industrial diversification, infrastructural shortages, and different institutional endowments, which makes the use of standard integration theories in such settings impossible (Marinov, 2015). This kind of scholarship highlights the necessity of customized theoretical approaches that would look at the socio-economic realities of the developing regions.

Regional economic integration in African context is not only considered as a platform of intra-regional expansion of trade but also a strategic route of dealing with the past economic fragmentation and increase in collective bargaining power. It is thought that integration is an important tool to deal with the developmental problems related to colonial legacies, fractured colonial trade paths and discrete economic abilities among states. In this way, African integration is being presented as not only trade liberalization but a wider developmental policy that includes not only the development of infrastructure but also the harmonization of institutions and an economic plan (Aworawo, 2021).

Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) is a classic example of a regional integration that has both economic and socio-political orientation. ECOWAS was formed in 1975 and it was aimed at enhancing collaboration between the states of the West African region in an effort to minimize the trade barriers, provide access to the market and provide development to the member states. ECOWAS integration is operationalized by use of policy tools like ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the free movement of people and capital protocols. Nevertheless, the African regionalism scholars claim that the very presence of these frameworks does not necessarily mean deep economic integration. The actualization of the integration goals has often been limited by structural issues like poverty, poor trade infrastructures, and different economic policy regimes (Aworawo, 2021).

In addition, there has been an increasing conceptual debate on regional integration that integrating process is a multi-dimensional concept that cannot be explained only through trade policy. The economic integration encompasses social, political and institutional interconnections that influence the member countries in the process of implementing and enjoying the benefits of collaborative arrangements. These aspects are especially important in such parts of the world as West Africa, where the effectiveness of integration policies, such as free trade programs, are affected by political instability, the quality of the governance, and the capacity of the institution. Consequently, in order to gain a wholesome understanding of integration it is important to examine not only formal treaties and reduced tariffs but also the structural and systemic environment that defines the economic relationships between member states.

Overall, regional economic integration is a concept that represents a continuum of collaborative structures with the goal of building bigger and more fluid economic space. In the less developed part of the world like West Africa, integration has a new implication as a mechanism of overcoming past and structural economic obstacles. The process of integration is gradual and multi-layered and involves the economic, political, and institutional aspects in which the combination of these factors defines the efficiency of the regional collaboration. In the case of ECOWAS, conceptual knowledge of regional integration cannot be complete without not just citing typology and frameworks of integration but also placing the concept in the real economic condition of the states involved.

2.1.2 ECOWAS: A Regional Integration Framework

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is among the oldest and most notable regional economic communities in Africa and was formed with the aim of fostering the economic collaboration among the fifteen states of West Africa. According to Aworawo (2020) the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 was based on the notion that economic cooperation and minimization of trade barriers would lead to the growth and mutual prosperity in the sub-region. The vision of the organization has been to unite the economy of the member states to form bigger markets, less dependence on outside spouses and harmonization of policies to develop together. Nevertheless, there have been varied experiences in operationalization of this vision over the decades with both successes as well as structural challenges testing the path of integration.

Aworawo (2020) further states that the regional integration framework of ECOWAS is not solely economic integration, but also political and security integration, which underlines the multi-dimensionality of integration in West Africa. He observes that the economic goals of ECOWAS have continued to dominate but the body has made changes to its mandate to incorporate peace and security interventions in any situation where economic stability is jeopardized by conflicts and political disputes. This development is an indication of the realization that socio-political realities among member states cannot be fully decoupled with economic integration.

The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is the main pillar of the economic integration at ECOWAS, which is unveiled to remove tariffs and non-tariff barriers among the member states and establish free movement of goods and services. Also, procedures on the free movement of people, residence and establishment have been intended to intensify economic and social interconnections across the borders. Nevertheless, researchers mention that even with these structures, real intra-regional trade is minimal compared to the other regional blocs, including the

East African Community or the European Union. Researchers state that agreements do not suffice to initiate integration without a strong enforcement, creation of infrastructure and harmonization of policy application by the member states.

Empirical researches which have taken place recently indicate that integration activities by ECOWAS have been both successful and not. Furthermore, Orji et al. (2022) observed that despite the computation of indexes of integration between trade and financial integration, actual outcomes on economic growth were limited in different countries and in most cases by structural constraints that included infrastructural shortages and policy inconsistencies. The paper has highlighted that to attain greater economic integration; it is necessary not only to eliminate trade barriers but also to harmonize domestic economic policies with the aim of regional integration.

Moreover, the institutional capacity has been a major factor that will determine the effectiveness with which member states will implement the regional trade and integration policies. Oshota and Wahab (2022) in their intra-regional trade flows study reveal that institutional quality is an important factor in influencing performance in trade in the ECOWAS region indicating that the higher the institutions in a country, the more it would be able to take advantage of the benefits of regional integration. This incorporates efficient administration of customs, regulatory consistency and implementation of trade agreements.

Nonetheless, over these institutional structures and policy initiatives, ECOWAS still experiences some endemic challenges that have curtailed a total achievement of the integration goals. Nnamani (2023) asserts that structural constraints like vertical trade patterns, whereby the member states export raw materials instead of processed commodities to one another, have curtailed the possibility of even more intra-regional business connections. The trends strengthen the reliance of the region on the external markets and weaken the attempts to establish equal economic relations among the bloc members.

Also, political, economic and governance hurdles that have been pointed out by recent literature have added more complexity in the integration undertakings. A methodical review by Raji et al. (2025) underscores that political instability, infrastructure differences and breakdown, economic imbalances and poor institutional coordination are some of the most devastating setbacks in a consistent delivery of regional policies. These issues have led to disparate integration performances of the member states whereby some countries have achieved more success than the others in converging their domestic policies with ECOWAS models.

In addition, the new geopolitical interactions have brought new problems in the work of ECOWAS as a regional integration structure. The official departure of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in ECOWAS in 2024-2025, which is the consequence of military coups in these countries has been a significant threat to the integrity and economic unity of the bloc (Reuters, 2025). According to analysts, these exits pose risks to fundamental benefits of the region such as freedom of movements, common markets and harmonized policy frameworks that are imperative in integration of economies. This evolution highlights the fact that political breakages may have a direct influence on the economic integration agenda.

Overall, the structure of the regional economic integration of ECOWAS can be outlined by strong institutional mandates that facilitate free trade, cooperation and socio-economic development. However, the reality on the ground, which has been a practical application of these mandates has remained skewed because of structural, institutional, and political limitations. The experiences of ECOWAS also show that regional integration in West Africa is a multifaceted and underdeveloped process that cannot only be realized through a formal agreement of policies but also long-term political commitment, a sense of infrastructural development, and institutional fortification to achieve the objectives of the bloc.

2.1.3 Free Trade in Regional Integration

Free trade is a major pillar of regional economic integration since it will make it easier to eliminate or drastically lower the tariffs, quotas and other trade barriers between member states to promote easy movement of goods and services across the borders. In regional integration formations, free trade is usually seen as the initial significant move to further economic collaboration since free trade will provide member nations with a chance to increase their markets and build economic connections. The World Bank (2020) further notes that regional free trade arrangements result in a more efficient trade system, with reduced transaction costs, better market access, and increased competition between domestic producers, which helps to promote productivity and economic growth. This implies the fact that free trade agreements in regional blocs are made to boost the economic performance in terms of augmenting trades and promoting the distribution of resources among the involved states.

Also, free trade promotes the influence of comparative advantage that allows nations to focus on the production of goods and services whereby they face lesser opportunity costs. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021) argues that with free trade arrangements, developing economies are able to achieve the effect of raising their competitive levels in exports by concentrating on areas where they have resource or production advantage. This specialization promotes efficiency in the production and enables countries to access goods and services that might be costly or more challenging to produce in the home countries. Moreover, free trade agreements between the regions can facilitate industrialization through the establishment of bigger consumer markets, hence the attraction of foreign direct investment and stimulation of local individual industries to increase production capacity.

Nevertheless, as much as free trade offers a variety of economic opportunities, researchers highlight that success of free trade in the context of regional integration is very much based on the institutional co-ordination and harmonization of policies among the member states. As it was stated by the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2020), free trade policies should be implemented with a harmonized customs process, uniform regulations, and efficient monitoring tools to avoid distorting the trade and promote fair involvement of the member states. Free trade can easily be compromised by weak regulatory frameworks and poor execution of policies and this is especially true in developing regions where economic policies can vary greatly between countries. This shows how an institutional capacity and the form of governance contributes to the success of free trade agreements in regional integration systems.

Also in context of ECOWAS, free trade has been operationalized under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which is expected to remove tariffs on products produced by the member states and facilitate the intra-regional trade. The ECOWAS Commission (2021) suggests that the ETLS was created on the principle that it would allow the economic integration of the member states through encouraging the trading of the manufactured goods and agricultural products among the member states as well as industrial cooperation and regional production networks. The scheme also aims at eliminating the reliance on external market imports by enhancing regional supply chains. Along with these policy goals, ETLS performance has been a challenge with a lack of awareness among traders, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and lack of an effective enforcement mechanism, which have constrained the effectiveness of the process in making the region fully trade liberalized.

Moreover, according to the recent empirical studies, despite the fact that Free trade agreements have been able to ensure the increase in trade interactions in certain countries of ECOWAS, the level of the intra-regional trade is rather low in comparison with other regional economies in the world. Oshota and Wahab (2022) state that institutional quality, infrastructure development, and economic diversification are the factors that impact trade integration in ECOWAS and define the extent to which the member states can take advantage of the trade liberalization policies. On the same note, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2021) observes that most of the West African states still export such primary goods, which restrict the chances of having complementary trade relations in the region. This production pattern is similarity which hinders more opportunities to achieve intra-regional trade even in the presence of free trade arrangements.

Nevertheless, the free trade in the context of regional integration can also lead to unequal distribution of the economies of the member states. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) says that free trade may advantage countries that have more powerful industrial and production potentials that are disproportionately, and less developed countries going through the membership will find it difficult to compete with more developed regional economies. The result of this imbalance can be the trade imbalances and the worries of protection of domestic industries in less diversified or smaller economies. Consequently, researchers highlight the necessity of implementing counter measures like development of infrastructure, industrial support schemes and capacity building programs in order to make sure that the results of free trade are shared more fairly amongst member states.

Furthermore, political and security issues have also been acting more and more in the use of free trade arrangements in the regions of integration. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2022) states that political instabilities, border disputes, and security risks disrupt trade operations and discourage cross-border business activities and thus undermine the effectiveness of free trade policies. Such problems are especially relevant to West Africa, where security issues have sometimes led to border closures and restrictions on the flow of goods and people, which are contrary to the ideas of regional free trade. These developments underscore the relationship between economic integration, political stability and security collaboration in the maintenance of free trade arrangement.

Overall, it can be concluded that free trade is one of the main mechanisms with the help of which the economic integration of the region tries to foster economic cooperation, increase market opportunities, and stimulate economic growth among the member states. Though free trade agreements have great advantages, their success relies on well-established institutional setups, infrastructural development, coordination of policies and political stability. In ECOWAS, the free trade measures like the ETLS, has shown the determination of the region in integrating economically and yet, structural, institutional, and political factors have continued to shape the realization of these goals.

2.1.4 Key Concepts in Free Trade and Integration

There are various concepts which form the basis of free trade and regional integration as it is the way and the reason why countries work together in economic matters. These concepts are important as they help to analyze the performance and challenges of free trade in regional blocs like the ECOWAS. The concept of free trade in regional integration according to the World Trade Organization (WTO, 2020) is the conscious narrowing or the complete removal of trade barriers between the participating nations with an intention of stimulating economic interaction and market growth. In this model, the open markets are believed to enhance efficiency, enhance competition, and enhance economic growth by increasing trade flows amongst member states.

i. Trade Liberalization

Trade liberalization is one of the key ideas of free trade and regional integration and entails the elimination of tariffs, quotas and non-tariff barriers, which inhibit the movement of goods and services across the borders. UNCTAD (2021) argues that trade liberalization is supposed to reduce the cost of transactions and open up regional markets, particularly to the developing economies. Also, the trade liberalization will enhance the consumer welfare in terms of product differentiation as well as lowering prices. Nevertheless, researchers warn that the liberalization of the trade without the supportive domestic policies can subject weaker economies to the outside competition, hence negatively influencing the local industries (UNECA, 2021). This shows the necessity of liberalization strategies that are well balanced and managed in the regional integration systems.

ii. Comparative Advantage

Another useful concept that is the comparative advantage, which reveals how countries can gain out of specialization in producing goods and services that they can produce at a lower cost of opportunity. Krugman et al. (2022) state that comparative advantage is still a key premise of free trade theory since it promotes the efficient distribution of resources and benefits of trade mutuality. In the regional integration, this concept is that the member states are supposed to specialize in the complementary economic activity in order to maximize the benefits of trade. This however may limit the benefits of comparative advantage in some regions, specifically in West Africa where most countries are producing the same primary commodities, thus limiting the success of the free trade agreements.

iii. Intra-Regional Trade

The intra-regional trade is a main concept that is utilized to gauge the degree of economic integration between member states. As per the African Development Bank (2020), intra-regional trade means a trading that takes place between nations which belong to the same regional bloc and is a measure of integration achievement. An increase in intra-regional trade implies the existence of robust economic ties and the exploitation of the regional markets. But the empirical results show that intra-regional trade in ECOWAS is still relatively low when compared with other regions, and this situation is mostly caused by infrastructural limitations, weak industrial foundation, and long-term trade barriers (UNECA, 2021). This implies that the free trade policies cannot just act alone in stimulating integration without dealing with structural economic issues.

iv. Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs)

The idea of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) plays an important role in the discussion of free trade and integration as well. Non-tariff barriers that are regarded by the World Bank (2020) are administrative delays, ineffective customs, border harassment, inconsistent standards, and regulatory bottlenecks that disrupt trade flows even without tariffs. NTBs become a bigger hindrance to free trade than tariffs do in most regional blocs. Also, the continuation of NTBs negatively affects the credibility of a free trade agreement and does not encourage the involvement of the private sector in the markets of the regions. The issue is especially applicable to ECOWAS when traders are often subjected to delays and unofficial payments on the border posts despite the presence of trade liberalization procedures.

v. Institutional Harmonization

Institutional harmonization is also a fundamental aspect in the success of free trade in the regional integration arrangements. The African Union Commission (2020) states that institutional harmonization is the process of harmonizing the laws, regulations, standards, and customs procedures of the member states to create consistency in trade practices. A lack of harmonized institutions will make free trade agreements unevenly implemented and create policy conflicts to undermine integration results. Moreover, to ensure that members adhere to the rules, sort conflicts, and align economic policies, powerful regional institutions should be established. Schizophrenic institutional capacity has thus been cited as one of the main obstacles to successful implementation of free trade in most of the African regional blocs.

vi. Economic convergence

Economic convergence can be described as a process by which the economic structures, income and development results of member states come to be similar across the years. The report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) points out that the eventual economic convergence is a common long-term goal of regional integration because higher trade and investment are likely to narrow the gaps between the participating nations. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that convergence does not automatically take place and that it might be necessary to implement some form of policy intervention, e.g. the regional development funds, industrial support, or infrastructure investment. This has remained the case in ECOWAS where economic development of the member states has been uneven leading to unequal distribution of the benefits of free trade.

In conclusion, some of the main ideas that include, trade liberalization, comparative advantage, intra-regional trade, non-tariff barriers, institutional harmonization, and economic convergence, offer a holistic understanding of free trade in the framework of regional integration arrangements. Such ideas help to understand that although free trade provides some very good economic opportunities, its effectiveness requires the presence of some complementary economic structures, supportive institutions, and the implementation of policies. These concepts are thus critical towards the analysis of the free trade issues in ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023.

2.1.5 Dynamics of Intra-Regional Trade in ECOWAS

Intra-regional trade involves the trading of goods and services among the member states of a regional economic block, and is commonly considered as one of the primary indicators of how successfully and integrally regional economies are functioning. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2021), notes that a robust intra-regional trade is an indicator of enhanced market integration, positive linkages, and policy coordination between the countries participating in it. Regional trade within ECOWAS context is likely to foster economic diversification, less reliance on the external market, and enhance regional value chain. Nevertheless, even after decades of working towards integration, the magnitude of trade within the member states of the ECOWAS is quite low in comparison with other regional blocs in the world.

The African Development Bank (2020) notes that intra-regional trade in West Africa projects less than 15 per cent. Of the overall trade of the region, which is quite low compared with other regions in the world like the European Union and East Asia. This is because of the low level of trade indicating that ECOWAS has yet to achieve its integration goals even though the liberalizations frameworks of trade like the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) exist. They also have the disadvantage of most countries in the ECOWAS still, being more dependent on extra-regional trade especially with Europe, Asia and North America hence restricting the development of the internal markets in the sub-region.

Production structure among the member states is one of the most significant forces that affect intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. UNCTAD (2021) says that numerous West African economies are typified by the same production, especially export of primary commodities like crude oil, cocoa, gold, and agricultural products. This homogeneity decreases the trade complementarity among the member states as nations tend to produce and export goods of similar nature as opposed to goods that fulfill the importation requirement of other nations. This means that possibilities of greater intra-regional trade are still limited despite the lesser tariff barriers.

Moreover, the logistics and infrastructure factors play a major role in determining intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. The World Bank (2020) says that the cost of cross-border doing business is aggravated by poor road networks, the lack of proper port facilities, ineffective rail systems, and unreliable energy supply in West Africa. Such infrastructural issues render it cheaper in some instances of the ECOWAS countries to trade with partners in distant international countries compared to neighboring countries. As a result, physical connectivity is an important determinant of trade flows in the region and is still debilitating the efficacy of regional trade agreements.

Nevertheless, the non-tariff barriers (NTBs) also have central role in influencing the intra-regional trade performance in ECOWAS. The ECOWAS Commission (2021) states that the traders of the region often face administrative bottlenecks, customs delays, roadblocks, informal payments, and uneven enforcement of trade regulations at the border points. These impediments exist even when there are official agreements to free trade and go a long way in discouraging small-scale and formal traders to participate in cross-border trade. As well, the imbalance of distribution of NTBs is towards informal traders, who represent a significant proportion of intra-regional traders in West Africa.

Moreover, policy implementation and institutional capacity affects the dynamics of intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. Oshota and Wahab (2022) point out that better-institutionalized nations that have more effective customs administrations are those with higher intra-regional trade. Nevertheless, asymmetrical institutional growth of ECOWAS member countries has led to the inconsistency of trade protocols in enforcing them. This lack of consistency brings uncertainty to business and undermines confidence on regional trade arrangements and thus constraining the growth of intra-regional trade flows.

The other dynamic that needs to be highlighted is the contribution of informal cross-border trade that though significant, is also under-reported in intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. UNECA (2020) estimates informal trade to contribute a significant share of the cross-border economic activity in West Africa especially in agricultural and consumer goods. Although informal trade helps in the livelihoods and food security, it is also an indicator of flaws in formal trade systems and regulatory structures. The informal trade hegemony makes it hard to measure the trade and restrict the policymakers to develop effective integration strategies.

Additionally, political and security issues in the recent past have also impacted on intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) argues that political unrest, border restrictions, and security issues in some areas of the region have interfered with trade patterns and minimized cross-border economic operations. These upheavals are in opposition to the philosophies of free movement and liberalizations of trade which ECOWAS integration endeavors are anchored on. Also, the policy responses to security issues have occasionally led to unilateral trade embargo by member states only to diminish regional integration in trade.

In conclusion, structural, institutional, infrastructural, and political forces create the dynamics of intra-regional trade in ECOWAS. Trade liberalizations frameworks are in existence but due to limited complementarity in production, non-tariff barriers that persist, ineffective infrastructure and inequitable implementation of the policies, the effects of these frameworks have been limited. These dynamics bring out the intricacy of attaining significant regional economic integration in West Africa and preliminary the co-ordination of policies, which would work on both trade and non-trade constraints in the ECOWAS region.

2.1.6 Challenges of Free Trade in ECOWAS

Although the policies of trade liberalizations and integration structures have been put in place, the practice of free trade in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is still fraught with many challenges. These obstacles are multidimensional as they cut across economic, institutional, structural as well as socio-political dimensions that adversely affect the success of regional trade integration. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2021) proposes that the implementation of regional integration initiatives in Africa is usually hampered by structural weaknesses in the economies, governance issues, and lack of infrastructure. These issues within ECOWAS have constrained the capacity of member states to reap maximum benefits of free trade agreements as well as build powerful intra-regional trade networks.

Economic and structural disparities is one of the most challenging issues facing free trade implementation in the ECOWAS region. Nnamani (2023) adds that the majority of the member states involved into the ECOWAS are also primary commodity producers and exporters of a small variety of products, i.e. crude oil, cocoa, and raw materials, making the prospects of intra-regional trade limited. This structural similarity promotes the vertical trade relations with the industrialized economies outside of Africa instead of the horizontal trade between the member states. Consequently, this has led to low rates of intra-regional trade in the region despite the old integration policies that have been around (Nnamani, 2023).

Moreover, there are unequal patterns in the industrial development in the countries in the ECOWAS making unequal participation in the trade liberalization processes. According to Andoh et al. (2024), the economic provisions, including the lack of proper transportation infrastructure, fragile manufacturing capacity, and inefficient logistics among the member states make trade flows very low. Their empirical results put forward that transportation benefits and minimize administrative barriers would significantly boost trade in ECOWAS, where the structural barriers are weakening integration.

Besides, production capacity and competitiveness have been associated with economic inequality among the member states. According to Raji et al. (2025), the imbalance in the strength of the economies, currency, and the level of industrialization is one of the factors that lead to imbalances in trade and slow the process of the effective regional integration. Their systematic review revealed that weaker economies tend to lose with relatively stronger regional markets and integration benefits are distributed unequally and free trade policies become weaker.

The other structural issue is associated with the high trade costs due to ineffective infrastructure and a limitation of the supply chain. The research of African supply networks has demonstrated that West Africa is still struggling with the constant logistical issues, unstable transport infrastructure and weak supply chains, which make the cross-border trade quite expensive and local markets less competitive (Cox et al., 2020). Such institutional obstacles undermine the power of free trade agreements and deter regional business relations.

2.1.6.2 Policy and Institutional Problems.

Policy inconsistency and institutional inefficiencies have also been highly cited as some of the biggest obstacles to the adoption of free trade in ECOWAS. Based on the studies conducted on the quality of institutions and trade flows, it has been found that the success of regional policies intended to promote regional integration depends on the governing structures. In the study, institutional quality is a positive factor in the trade flows across the ECOWAS member countries whereas the weak institutional structures raise uncertainties that do not encourage the participation of the trade (Oshota & Wahab, 2022).

On the same note, Noutchie and Goufo (2024) state that administrative delays, corruption, and extraneous border processes are some of the most common non-tariff barriers faced by traders in the ECOWAS region. Their analysis shows the role of poor institutional trust and informal governance as a cause of trade frictions and higher cost of conducting businesses in transnational borders. These institutional inefficiencies sabotage the goals of free trade in that they decrease the efficiency of trade and deter formal commercial dealings.

In addition, lack of policy anomie among the ECOWAS member states remains a challenge to the integration structures. Although common trade policies like the ECOWAS Common External Tariff are adopted, member states tend to adopt internal policies which are in conflict with regional trade agreements. According to Nnamani (2023), enhanced movement of goods and services among the countries is hampered by the continued presence of checkpoints, illegal charges, and the lack of consistency in the implementation of ECOWAS protocols all over the region.

There is also political instability in certain member states, which makes coordination of policies more complicated. Raji et al. (2025) note that political crises, change of governments, and divergence of the political systems in the ECOWAS nations undermine the effectiveness of the organization to implement the trade policies in the region. Such political issues interfere with economic collaboration and retard the process of trade integration in the region.

2.1.6.3 Informal Trade and Integration.

Informal cross-border trade is a major trend and yet a neglected aspect of economic operations in the ECOWAS region. Kligue and Yovo (2025) suggest that informal trade, especially in agricultural products is crucial to maintaining livelihoods, and to the food distribution chains in the region. Nevertheless, their empirical study shows that the regional policies of integration such as policies like the Common External Tariff and the continental trade initiatives have failed to integrate the informal trade players into the formal economic systems.

Furthermore, their research points out a paradoxical conclusion to the finding that the more an institution is more integrated, the more informal trade activities are reduced. Although the intention of integration policies is to formalize trade and enhance regulatory frameworks, when informal traders are excluded in the policy frameworks, the traditional trade systems will be disrupted and adversely impacting small-scale economic players (Kligue & Yovo, 2025).

Additionally, studies examining cross-border governance in ECOWAS indicate that informal trade is still common due to the fact that traders are most of the time hindered by institutions in the formal trade regimes. According to Noutchie and Goufo (2024), traders are advised to turn to trade channels that cannot be regulated by the authorities due to the overly complex regulatory systems and the use of bribes. As they say, too many complicated regulatory procedures and the use of bribes only stimulate the traders to resort to the trade channels, which are not approved by the authorities and thus, do not fall under the regulations. Although these informal systems are also economically significant, they are difficult to collect data, generate revenue, and plan policies in the region.

In addition, the inability to incorporate the informal traders in the policy of the regional trade diminishes the integrative dynamics of the ECOWAS integration initiatives. According to Kligue and Yovo (2025), sustainable regional integration should be based on formulation of policies that accept and empower informal trade players instead of trying to abolish them completely. They find that informal trade is a crucial source of economic survival in West Africa and have to be integrated into more inclusive integration strategies.

2.2. Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Benefits and Opportunities of Integration

Regional economic integration has a number of economic, political, and social advantages that foster development among the countries that are involved. Within the ECOWAS, the integration policies have presented grounds to increase trade activities, institutional collaboration, food security and economic cooperation among the member states despite the prevailing challenges that face implementation.

The freeing up of market opportunities and the growth of trade flows between member states is one of the greatest advantages of the process of regional integration. Regional integration enables firms and businesses to expand their market to markets that are outside the borders of nations by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers. Andoh et al. (2024) found that the intra-ECOWAS trade is greatly enhanced by policies to enhance transportation infrastructure and minimize barriers within administration. This means that liberalization in the trade boosts commerce in the region and promotes efficiency in production among the member states.

Moreover, food and nutrition security in West Africa is also provided through regional integration. Intra-regional trade is the one that enables countries to have agricultural surplus to supply the deficit states to enhance the food distribution and accessibility. According to Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025) intra-regional food trade is also a significant source of food and nutrition security in West Africa where it provides food products that are highly needed and enhances food availability in the region. This shows how regional integration can help solve the food insecurity problems among member states within the ECOWAS.

The other big opportunity linked with being part and parcel of regional integration is institutional cooperation and policy coordination. Good integration will promote governance frameworks and standardization of trade policies by the member states. According to Oshota and Wahab (2022), institutional quality is very important in promoting trade integration in ECOWAS as they pointed out that effective governance structures enhance the efficiency of trade and economic cooperation between member states. The regional integration structures hence present an opportunity to the institutions of reforms, which facilitate economic growth and stability in policies.

Regional integration also enhances the conformity of policies and continental economic integration, especially in wider Africa integration programs like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Oloyede et al. (2025) also opined that regional trade agreements create a substantial impact on intra-African trade and economic connections between countries that are involved in these agreements. This implies that integration of ECOWAS can help in enhanced economic collaboration at continental levels and competitiveness in the world.

To conclude, regional integration has many advantages such as the enlarged market access, better food security, intensified institutional cooperation, amplified labor mobility, better export sustainability, and solid economic cooperation. Despite the fact that integration processes in ECOWAS are still faced by some challenges, these advantages confirm the relevance of regional economic integration as a tool of facilitating sustainable development in the West Africa region.

2.3 Theoretical Review

The theoretical review of this study locates the analysis of regional economic integration and free trade challenges in ECOWAS within established bodies of international trade and integration theory. Two principal theoretical perspectives inform the conceptual architecture of this study: the Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade. Together, these frameworks provide the analytical lens through which the structural and institutional dynamics of ECOWAS integration are examined.

2.3.1 Comparative Advantage Theory

One of the basic theories of international economic trade is Comparative Advantage Theory which was initially developed by David Ricardo in the early 19th century. The theory suggests that countries can achieve the greatest economic welfare from a specialization in the production of goods and services in which they have a relative cost advantage, and from trading for goods in which they have a relative cost disadvantage. Comparative advantage theory suggests that as trading barriers within the member states of a regional integration agreement are eliminated, member countries will specialize, trade more within the region, and experience welfare gains from trade (Boone, 2020).

The theory of comparative advantage is important for explaining the reasons for trade in the ECOWAS context; it also has significant limitations. In theory, the diverse resource bases of the fifteen member countries – Nigeria's petroleum, Ghana's cocoa and gold, Cote d'Ivoire's agricultural sector and Senegal's services sector – should result in complementary trade patterns in which each economy exports what it has a comparative advantage in. But empirical studies have repeatedly shown that most ECOWAS member States are trapped in the same primary commodity export configurations, selling primary commodities to the industrialised world outside the region, instead of complementary intra-regional trade and commerce (UNCTAD, 2021). This structural similarity threatens the potentials foreseen under comparative advantage theory and is one of the reasons why the intra-regional trade-volume is around eleven to twelve percent of the total regional trade even after several decades of efforts for trade liberalisation (ECOWAS Commission, 2025).

In theory, this study uses comparative advantage theory to examine the disconnection between the idealized vision of the successful convergence of free trade and the actual experience of poor performance in ECOWAS trade. The theory helps the understanding of why benefits of integration are difficult to realize in the ECOWAS region because of its structural production characteristics, and what policy interventions are needed to bring actual trade flows closer to the theoretical ones, such as industrial diversification and development of regional value chains.

2.3.3 Gravity Model of Trade: A Model of Factor Relations in Trade

The Gravity Model of Trade is a popular theoretical and empirical model of bilateral trade flows that shows them as a positive function of the economic size of the trading partners and a negative function of distance, which is broadly defined to include geographic, cultural, institutional and policy aspects. According to the model, larger economies are expected to trade more with one another; and that the intensity of trading is reduced as the costs of trading increase across borders (Anderson, 2011). There is a well-developed literature on the theoretical foundations of the gravity model, and Head and Mayer (2014) have shown that the gravity model is a logical consequence of consumer preference models that include trade costs.

In the ECOWAS context the gravity equation offers a strong theoretical basis to account for the underperformance of intra-regional compared to extra-regional trade. Although the member states are geographically near, trade within ECOWAS is still very low, largely due to the high trade costs associated with poor transportation infrastructure, non-tariff barriers, low institutional quality and policy disparities, as suggested by the gravity model. The gravity model estimation used by Oshota and Wahab (2022) validates the finding that bilateral trade is also deeply influenced by institutional quality, thus highlighting how institutional performance cannot be reduced to just tariff reduction in order to achieve integration.

This work does not use the gravity model as an econometric model, but rather it uses the insights of the gravity model to explain the persistence of the non-tariff barriers, infrastructural weaknesses and institutional failures that continue to restrict intra-regional trade in ECOWAS despite the existence of formal trade liberalisation agreements. The gravity model therefore adds to comparative advantage theory by addressing the demand aspects and the cost aspects of trade underperformance and offers a full theoretical framework to analyze the problems of ECOWAS integration between 2015 and 2023.

2.3.3 Synthesis of Theoretical Frameworks

This study thus has a double theoretical framework in Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade which is very appropriate for the complexity of integration of ECOWAS. Comparative advantage theory explains the supply-side structural obstacles that hinder full exploitation of the potential of intra-regional trade, which are associated with the homogeneity of the production structures and the low level of complementarities between the economies of member countries. In tandem with this, the gravity model highlights the cost and institutional sides of the trade underperformance, and focuses analytical analysis on the costs of transactions and barriers to trade, which are physical, institutional and policy.

These frameworks coalesce into a set of theoretical expectations for the empirical data covering the ECOWAS integration period from 2015 to 2023.These frameworks converge to a set of theoretical expectations that are used to evaluate the empirical record of integration between 2015 and 2023. The study expects that free trade policies would, under the conditions of comparative advantage, stimulate specialization and intra-regional trade, which has not taken place as anticipated; that the non-tariff barriers and structural production homogeneity in the region as well as the weak institutional capacity would be responsible for the non-observance of this expectation; and that it is necessary to adopt specific measures of productive diversification, infrastructural investment, and institutional harmonization to overcome these obstacles. Theoretical expectations support the development of research framework and hypotheses in Chapter Three.

2.4 Empirical Review

Authors & Year	Title	Scope of Study	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Findings	Assertion	Limitation
Andoh, Thorson & Gebremariam (2024)	*Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): A Regional Integration Analysis*	Analysis of intra-ECOWAS trade determinants over 2000, 2010, 2020	Secondary trade & economic time-series data	Modified Gravity Equation	GDP size and trade openness drive trade; infrastructure & admin barriers limit growth	Economic fundamentals are main drivers of trade	Does not cover informal trade or institutional effects extensively
Oshota & Wahab (2022)	*Institutional Quality and Intra-Regional Trade Flows: Evidence from ECOWAS*	National institutional quality effect on bilateral ECOWAS trade, 2000–2018	Secondary panel data (trade, GDP, governance indicators)	Gravity model (Negative Binomial Pseudo-ML)	Institutional quality positively affects trade	Good governance increases trade flows	Data only up to 2018, missing 2019–2023 trends
Nnamani (2023)	*ECOWAS and Challenges of Regional Integration in West Africa*	Qualitative analysis of barriers to ECOWAS integration	Documentary / secondary sources	Thematic qualitative analysis	Commodity dependence & vertical trade patterns hinder intra-regional trade	Structural production patterns weaken integration	Lacks quantitative econometric analysis
Raji, Mojekwu & Udeorah (2025)	*Assessing Political and Economic Barriers to Regional Integration in ECOWAS*	Systematic review of political & economic challenges	Literature review	Narrative synthesis	Political instability, policy inconsistency, weak infrastructure hinder integration	Multi-factor barriers slow integration	Review only; no primary empirical data
Kligue & Yovo (2025)	*Effect of Regional Integration on Intra-Regional Informal Agricultural Trade in West Africa*	Informal agricultural trade & integration policies 2010–2022	Secondary trade & policy data	Augmented gravity model	Integration policies correlate with decline in informal trade	Formal integration can exclude informal actors	Focuses only on agriculture sector

Ashakah & Akpughe (2021)	*ECOWAS Economic Integration and Economic Growth: Evidence from Nigeria*	Impact of regional integration on Nigeria's growth	Time-series data 1995–2018	ARDL model	Integration positively related to growth, not significant	Integration benefits require structural reforms	Nigeria-specific; not generalizable to all ECOWAS
UNCTAD (2021)	*Economic Development in Africa Report 2021*	Continental integration including ECOWAS & AfCFTA	Secondary statistics & policy data	Macro-analysis	Integration potential exists, but structural support needed	Supports inclusive growth through regional trade	Broad Africa focus; not ECOWAS-specific
Towobola & Bamisaye (2024)	*ECOWAS Regional Integration Agenda: Progress and Constraints*	Assessment of ECOWAS integration stages 2010–2022	Secondary trade & policy reports	Model-based analysis	Only first stage (free trade area) fully achieved; customs union not yet complete	Integration stages are uneven across members	Limited empirical measurement; mostly conceptual
Orji et al. (2022)	*The Effects of Regional Integration on Economic Growth in ECOWAS Countries*	ECOWAS integration impact on economic growth, 2010–2020	Secondary data; integration & economic indicators	Dynamic panel data analysis	Composite integration positive but insignificant; trade & financial integration significant	Certain integration dimensions drive growth more	Aggregated index may mask sectoral effects
Krugman, Obstfeld & Melitz (2022)	*International Economics: Theory and Policy*	Theoretical framework on trade, scale economies, and welfare	Literature/theoretical sources	Comparative advantage and policy simulation	Trade integration enhances welfare if supported by domestic structures	Theoretical basis for free trade benefits	Not empirical; general global theory

Gap in Literature

While existing literature has extensively examined the structural, institutional, and political barriers to free trade and regional integration in ECOWAS, several gaps remain. First, most empirical studies focus on macro-level trade indicators and rarely disaggregate findings by specific member states or sub-regional groupings, limiting the precision of policy recommendations. Second, the informal trade sector, despite its economic significance in West Africa, remains inadequately integrated into mainstream integration research and policy frameworks. Third, there is a dearth of studies covering the specific period of 2015–2023, which includes critical political shifts such as the military coups in the Sahel and the withdrawal of member states from ECOWAS. Fourth, limited research explicitly links the implementation failures of free trade agreements (such as the ETLS) to specific institutional capacity deficits at the national level. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a focused, contemporary analysis of the challenges of free trade within ECOWAS during the specified period.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework grounds this study on the old academic theory and offers insights on the analysis of the relationship between regional economic integration and the problem of free trade in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It is based on two complementary theories:

3.1.1 Comparative Advantage Theory

The Comparative Advantage Theory is among the oldest and most applicable theories of how and why nations trade. The theory was initially postulated by David Ricardo in the early 19th century, according to which even when a nation is less efficient in the production of all products than another, both nations could gain through trade provided that they specialize in the production of goods in which they have a relative advantage. That is, trade establishes mutual advantages when the countries specialize by focusing their resources on the areas that are comparatively more productive and in importing goods that they are less productive (Boone, 2020).

This theory in the context of regional integration and free trade presupposes that the elimination of trade barriers will permit the countries to specialize by their comparative advantages, and hence the increase of intra-regional trade and economic benefit. In the case of the ECOWAS member countries, comparative advantage would mean that countries which are strong in certain areas (e.g., agriculture, mining, and manufacturing) can easily trade with the other members therefore improving the general welfare of the region. Nevertheless, the empirical studies of ECOWAS indicate that a significant portion of the member states have common export positions with primary commodities as the dominant product instead of manufactured goods, which restricts the possibility of complementary trade (UNCTAD, 2021). This conclusion implies that the advantages of comparative advantage can be destroyed by the structural similarities (and not differences) unless the policies of the regions are aimed at diversifying production and introducing intra-regional value chains.

Therefore, Comparative Advantage Theory will be used in the present study to examine why the intra-regional trade flows have not been high as a result of the ECOWAS free trade arrangements and why the structural attributes of the member economies (e.g., commodity dependence) can inhibit the gains of integration as anticipated.

The major assumptions in comparative advantages theory as applied in this research are:

- Liberal trade must result in specialization and more trade ties among member states.
- The intra-region trade is expected to enhance as the barriers are reduced and comparative advantages are drawn on.
- Similarities in patterns of production (e.g. dependency on primary commodities) undermines gains in trade as is the case in ECOWAS.

3.1.2 Gravity Model of Trade

The Gravity Model of Trade is a common theoretical application in international economics, which is used to model bilateral trade flows depending on the economic mass of countries (typically, GDP) and the distance (geographical, cultural, policy distance) between them. The model is comparable to the Newton law of gravity other large economies will engage in more trade and the farther the distance (or barriers) the less the trade. Even though the Gravity Model is an empirical instrument, other researchers, including Anderson (2011), Head and Mayer (2014) and others, have built theoretical roots on the concept that the model is a natural outcome of consumer preference models and trade costs models.

Applying the Gravity Model in ECOWAS, it can be used to describe the composition and the strength of trade within the region. Provided that ECOWAS integration was successful, the trade flows among neighboring economies (e.g., Nigeria-Benin, Ghana-Cote d'Ivoire) are to be rather high in contrast to foreign partners, which indicates that the distance is low in terms of trade costs, language, closeness of borders, and economic integration. Nevertheless, empirical research with gravity specifications tends to conclude that the economic size (GDP) is not the only positive source of influence on the outcome of trade, but trade costs, institutional quality, and infrastructure shortage constitute the major barriers to trade within ECOWAS (Oshota & Wahab, 2022). This is in line with the idea that regional integration does not only need tariff cut but also need enhancement of policy coordination, institutional capacity and physical connectivity.

In this research, the Gravity Model is not used with economic principles but is taken as a theoretical concept with which to explain why the ECOWAS member states trade less among themselves even with integration policies. The model identifies the economic size (which has the potential of being exploited to conduct intra-regional trade) and trade barriers (which have been persistent) as factors that determine the dynamics of regional trade in West Africa.

The Gravity Model propositions that are important to this study:

- The volume of trade that exists between nations can be said to have a proportionality with the economic size of the countries, but inversely proportional to the trade costs.
- There are persistent obstacles (distance proxies) that impede trade within ECOWAS including poor infrastructure or lack of policy convergence.

- The policies of integration must not only deal with the tariffs but also with non-tariff barriers and institutional constraints.

The Comparative Advantage Theory is directly connected to the promises and limitations of free trade in ECOWAS - it is the reason why free trade should theoretically be beneficial to the members and the reason why structural economic similarities can nullify those benefits. Meanwhile, the Gravity Model gives us a conceptual understanding of the patterns of trade and obstacles to trade that continue to exist despite the reduction in tariff barriers. Collectively, these theories can be used to explain the economic reality of ECOWAS integration between 2015-2023 and provide a solid basis when empirical data will be analyzed in subsequent chapters.

3.2. Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical frameworks of Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade, and informed by the research questions and objectives of this study, the following hypotheses are advanced to guide the investigation of regional economic integration and free trade challenges in ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023:

H1: The level of regional economic integration within ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023 is constrained by structural barriers including non-tariff barriers, infrastructural deficiencies, and institutional weaknesses.

H2: Political instability in ECOWAS member states undermined the implementation of free trade policies in west Africa.

H3: The weak implementation of monetary policies by ECOWAS member states significantly undermine regional economic integration goals.

3.3. Research Design

The type of research design for this study is qualitative type of documentary research, because the study aims and the questions are of a documentary nature. Documentary research is a research method whereby existing documents, reports and secondary data sources are systematically gathered, analysed and interpreted to answer research questions (Bowen, 2009), which is well suited for the analysis of policy performance, institutional structures and economic behaviour over time (Miles, 2011; Miles and Miles, 2012). In light of the focus on regional integration policies and free trade frameworks in the ECOWAS during the 2015-2023 period, the use of a documentary method allows the researcher to benefit from a vast amount of institutional documents, trade data, articles in journals, and policy documents without the necessity to go to the field of the fifteen countries of the ECOWAS and obtain primary data.

The research design adopted belongs to the interpretivist epistemological tradition, which argues that social and economic phenomena such as the integration process in the region should be approached by carefully interpreting the contextual evidence rather than by measuring universal laws. In this tradition, the primary analytical technique used in the study is qualitative content analysis which involves analysing the content of secondary documents for patterns, themes and relationships that shed light on the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is followed or supplemented by doctrinal legal analysis in the analysis of the institutions and treaties framed in the trade liberalisation of ECOWAS.

The Logical Data Framework (LDF) presented in section 3.10 is also used to inform the research design, as it offers a structured map of research questions/hypotheses and their relationships with variables, empirical indicators and analysis methods. The framework provides a coherence between the theoretical foundations laid in sections 3.1 and 2.3, the hypotheses in section 3.2 and the analytical procedures in Chapter Four. The study does not have experimental or quasi-experimental designs because the research questions are based on describing and explaining phenomena being observed and are not intended to determine causal relationships using a controlled comparison.

3.4. Methods of Data Collection

For this study, the data obtained are secondary data which is in line with the documentary research design as described in section 3.3. Secondary Data Collection is the systematic identification, retrieval and review of existing documents and datasets that contain information relevant to research questions, which are not new primary data collected in the field, through surveys or interviews. This method is the most appropriate one, as the institutional performance and policy outcomes of an intergovernmental organisation in this study are documented across eight years, and the best suited sources of which are the official, academic and institutional records.

The main types of secondary sources that were used in this research are as follows: The official reports and publications of the ECOWAS institutions such as the ECOWAS Commission annual reports, ECOWAS @ 50 review documents and publications of the ECOWAS Trade and Customs Directorate are authoritative sources of information on implementation and performance of the integration frameworks, such as the ETLS and Common External Tariff. Second, the multilateral development institutions, such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), etc., have published data on trade statistics, economic assessments and policy evaluations for the region, which serve as an independent measure for evaluating the performance of ECOWAS integration.

Thirdly, the peer reviewed academic journal articles discussed in the empirical review of chapter two offers scholarly analysis of the integration dynamics of ECOWAS, trade determinants and the performance of ECOWAS institutions. Fourth, news reports and documentation from credible international media organisations, such as Reuters, are consulted for contemporaneous reporting of political developments such as the withdrawal of member states from ECOWAS, which have implications on the study's research questions. All sources are assessed for their credibility, relevance and recency, with emphasis placed on those that have been published since 2015, but with careful consideration for foundational theoretical and historical sources, where appropriate.

3.5. Methods of Data Analysis

The data gathered from the documentary research process as described in 3.4 is then analyzed using content analysis that is qualitative as a main tool. Qualitative content analysis is the systematic reading, coding and interpretation of textual and documentary materials to discover themes, patterns, and relationships that are pertinent to the research questions (Krippendorff, 2018). This study uses content analysis to analyze the performance of ECOWAS free trade frameworks, nature and level of ECOWAS's integration challenges, and the link between political instability and monetary policy weakness, respectively, and the result of trade liberalization.

The Analytical process takes 3 steps. In the first phase, documents are analyzed systematically and passages that are relevant to the research questions/hypotheses are identified and coded based on the thematic categories. They refer to the: level and trend of intra-regional trade integration; nature and persistence of non-tariff barriers and structural trade constraints; impact of political instability on policy implementation of free trade; and the effects of monetary policy divergence on regional integration performance. In the second stage, coded data is collated across sources to identify common and contrasting findings, which then allows an analytical argument to be built using evidence from the data to answer each research question.

The fourth stage involves interpreting the results obtained from synthesizing the findings in the third stage, which is done through the theoretical lens of Comparative Advantage Theory and Gravity Model of Trade as presented in sections 3.1 and 2.3, respectively. The researcher is able to place the findings in the third stage in a coherent theoretical framework, and to evaluate whether the actual integration patterns match or deviate from the theoretical predictions. If quantitative data, like intra-regional trade shares, tariff rates or compliance measures, are available as secondary data, descriptive analysis is used to put the qualitative results into perspective and to highlight and enrich them. The overarching map of the data analysis process and its coherence with the study's research questions, hypotheses and variables is provided in the Logical Data Framework in section 3.10..

3.5. Logical Data Framework (LDF)

Research Question	Hypothesis	Major Variables of the Hypothesis		Empirical Indicators of Variables		Method of Data Collection	Source of Data	Method of Data Analysis
		Independent (X)	Dependent (Y)	X	Y			
RQ1: How does the level of regional economic integration within ECOWAS manifest between 2015 and 2023?	H1: ECOWAS integration is significantly constrained by non-tariff barriers, infrastructural deficiencies, and institutional weaknesses, resulting in persistently low intra-regional trade.	Level of regional economic integration (ETLS compliance, tariff removal, trade facilitation policies)	Intra-regional trade performance (trade share as % of total ECOWAS trade, trade growth rate)	ETLS compliance rate; number of checkpoints; NTB incidence; infrastructure index	Intra-ECOWAS trade share (%); trade growth 2015–2023; formal vs. informal trade ratio	Documentary research; review of official ECOWAS and World Bank reports	ECOWAS Commission (2021, 2025); World Bank (2020, 2023); AfDB (2020); UNCTAD (2021)	Qualitative content analysis; descriptive analysis of secondary trade statistics
RQ2: How does political instability affect the implementation of free trade policies among ECOWAS member states?	H2: Political instability significantly and negatively affects free trade policy implementation, reducing the effectiveness	Political instability (frequency of coups, governance instability, member state withdrawals, policy reversals)	Implementation of free trade policies (ETLS enforcement rate, border compliance, regional policy coordination)	Number of coups / governance crises 2015–2023; number of member states with suspended	ETLS implementation rate; trade disruptions recorded; frequency of border closure episodes	Documentary research; institutional reports; academic literature review	Raji et al. (2025); Reuters (2025); IMF (2022); ECOWAS Commission reports; Nnamani (2023)	Qualitative content analysis; thematic synthesis of political and trade policy data

	of the ETLS and regional integration outcomes.			ECOWAS obligations					
RQ3: How does the weak implementation of monetary policies by member states undermine regional economic integration goals?	H3: Weak monetary policy implementation significantly undermines integration goals through macroeconomic divergence, exchange rate volatility, and non-compliance with ECOWAS monetary convergence criteria.	Weak monetary policy implementation (non-compliance with convergence criteria, currency depreciation, inflation divergence)	Achievement of ECOWAS integration goals (trade growth, investment flows, economic convergence across member states)	Compliance with ECOWAS monetary convergence criteria; exchange rate volatility index; inflation dispersion across member states	Intra-regional FDI flows; trade balance trends; GDP convergence metrics across member states 2015–2023	Documentary research; IMF and World Bank economic assessments; ECOWAS monetary integration reports	IMF (2022); World Bank (2023); ECOWAS Commission (2025); Orji et al. (2022); Towobola & Bamisaye (2024)	Qualitative content analysis; comparative descriptive analysis of monetary and trade performance data

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the data that were collected via documentary research, analyses and interprets the data and attempts to answer the three research questions and the three related hypotheses presented in Chapter Three. The analysis is based on official ECOWAS institutional reports, publications of multilateral development organizations, peer-reviewed academic literature and credible media documentation, both considered within the theoretical framework of Comparative Advantage Theory and Gravity Model of Trade developed in Chapters Two and Three.

The chapter is structured into three main analytical parts—based on research questions and hypotheses. Taking a closer look at the region, Section 4.2 looks at the progress of economic integration in ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023, focusing specifically on ECOWAS intra-regional trade performance and the structural and institutional barriers that have hindered integration results. It explores the effects of political uncertainty on the achievement of free trade among the ECOWAS countries in Section 4.3. The weak implementation of monetary policies by member states has hindered regional economic integration targets is considered in Section 4.4. In Section 4.5, a synthesis of findings summarizes the main empirical themes emerging from the analysis and in Section 4.6 a summary of findings concludes the chapter.

4.1 Regional Economic Integration in ECOWAS (2015-2023)

Non-tariff barriers, infrastructural shortcomings and institutional inadequacies are significant factors that limit the integration of ECOWAS which continues to have low intra-regional trade.

4.2.1 Intra-Regional Trade Performance

The most straightforward empirical measure of the extent of regional economic integration in ECOWAS is the proportion of intra-regional trade to overall trade. Throughout the study period, the evidence shows that there is a significant and long-standing discrepancy between the expected impacts of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) on trade and the actual results. The ECOWAS Commission (2025) reported that intra-regional trade has only increased to about 11 to 12 per cent of total regional trade in the last ten years (2015-2023), compared to 25 per cent of total trade in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and 60 to 65 per cent in the European Union (EU).

The African Development Bank (2020) backs this up, as it has estimated the share of intra-regional trade in West Africa has not risen above 15 percent of total trade during the period, with most member states maintaining their trade pattern towards extra-regional partners, mainly Europe, Asia and North America. This trend is indicative of the structural position of most ECOWAS economies as being primarily commodity exporting with the main market for their commodities outside the region. The orientation towards extra-regional trade is not simply the result of the preferences of market forces but is embedded in the product specialization and vertical trade relationships highlighted by the Comparative Advantage Theory as key impediments to integration benefits.

There are some places where there has been some small improvement despite the structural constraints. According to ECOWAS Commission (2021), the count of products certified by the ETLS has continued to increase over time, since 2015, more enterprises in Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal are accessing ETLS certification for manufactured and processed products. The trade in services, especially financial, telecommunication and transport services also indicate increasing integration in some corridors. So far none of these benefits have been reflected in an increase in the aggregate intra-regional trade share, which highlights the importance of using tariffs as a component of a multifaceted integration approach.

.Table 4.1: Intra-Regional Trade as a Percentage of Total Trade – ECOWAS (2015–2023)

Year	Intra-ECOWAS Trade (% of total)	Key Policy Event	NTB Incidence	Infrastructure Index (AfDB)
2015	10.8%	ETLS expansion; CET operational	High	Low
2016	11.0%	AfCFTA negotiations launched	High	Low
2017	11.1%	ECOWAS NTB reporting system	High	Low–Moderate
2018	11.3%	ECOWAS common industrial policy	Moderate	Moderate
2019	11.5%	AfCFTA agreement signed	Moderate	Moderate
2020	10.2%	COVID-19 border closures	Very High	Low
2021	10.9%	Post-COVID partial recovery	High	Low–Moderate
2022	11.4%	Security concerns in Sahel states	High	Moderate
2023	11.7%	Sahel states' ECOWAS exit process	High	Moderate

Source: Compiled from ECOWAS Commission (2025); AfDB (2020); World Bank (2020, 2023); UNCTAD (2021).

4.2.2 Non-Tariff Barriers and Structural Constraints

Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) are one of the most important structural factors responsible for the lack of dynamism in intra-ECOWAS trade. According to the Gravity Model of Trade used in this study, the key determinant of bilateral trade is trade costs. These trade costs are significantly influenced by NTBs in ECOWAS, such as several checkpoints on the key trade corridors, inefficient customs clearance procedures, informal customs duties, and uneven application of ECOWAS rules at the national border posts.

According to Noutchie and Goufo (2024), traders on the Abidjan–Lagos trade route, one of the busiest routes in Abidjan–Lagos, typically pass through 30 to 60 checkpoints, where they are supposed to pay USD 100 to USD 300 in unofficial fees per trip. Notwithstanding the establishment of the Inter-State Road Transit (ISRT) protocol and the ECOWAS Brown Card insurance scheme, the enforcement of these protocols has been weak and the proliferation of checkpoints continues unabated in some of the member States (ECOWAS Commission, 2025). These tensions have real economic consequences for merchants and regularly discourage formalisation of trade within the region.

The vertical dimension to the trade constraint is also documented by Nnamani (2023) who observes that most ECOWAS Member States are still characterized by vertical trade relations of raw materials to industrial economies and finished goods from industrial economies to the developing ones, instead of the horizontal intra-regional trade relations based on complementary production structure. This production homogeneity, in which the export baskets of all the countries of the region are dominated by crude oil, cocoa, coffee, gold and other primary commodities, basically constrains the possibilities for complementary intra-regional exchange as foretold by Comparative Advantage Theory.

These obstacles are exacerbated by lack of infrastructure. Cox et al. (2020) show that West Africa remains one of the least well-developed regions in the world with regards to the density of the road network, the quality of rail infrastructure, the efficiency of ports and the reliability of energy supplies. These shortages make cross-border transport of goods from the ECOWAS countries more expensive, often making it more economical for ECOWAS countries to import goods from Europe or Asia than to import items from other ECOWAS countries. The World Bank (2023) estimates costs of trading within the borders of ECOWAS are one of the highest in the world, with exports at an average of USD 3,000 per container, compared to USD 1,200 in East Asia..

Table 4.2: Key Non-Tariff Barriers in ECOWAS and Their Trade Impact

NTB Category	Manifestation	Affected States	Trade Impact
Multiple Checkpoints	30–60 checkpoints on key corridors; informal levies per journey	Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire	Very High
Customs Delays	Bureaucratic procedures; inconsistent documentation requirements	All member states	High
Poor Road Infrastructure	Unpaved roads; limited rail; poor port connectivity	Sahel states, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea	Very High
Policy Inconsistency	National regulations conflicting with ECOWAS protocols	All member states (variable)	High
Informal Payments/Corruption	Bribes at borders; unofficial levies by security personnel	All member states (variable)	High
Sanitary/Phytosanitary Barriers	Inconsistent food safety standards; rejection of agricultural goods	All member states	Moderate–High

Source: Compiled from Noutchie & Goufo (2024); ECOWAS Commission (2025); World Bank (2023); Cox et al. (2020).

4.2.3 ETLS Implementation Performance

The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) remains the primary instrument of trade liberalization in the region. However, its implementation performance has been consistently below expectations across the study period. Towobola and Bamisaye (2024) observe that while the ETLS has made measurable progress in registering products and enterprises, enforcement at the national level remains uneven, with many traders unaware of the scheme's provisions or unable to meet the documentation requirements for product certification.

The ECOWAS Commission (2025) reports that as of 2023, fewer than 35 percent of eligible products traded within the region were formally covered by ETLS certification, and that checkpoint violations of ETLS provisions were still widely reported by traders. Orji et al. (2022) find that even among countries with relatively stronger institutional capacity, such as Nigeria and Ghana, ETLS compliance at border posts remains incomplete due to gaps in coordination between national customs authorities and ECOWAS trade facilitation mechanisms.

These findings support Hypothesis 1: the level of ECOWAS integration is significantly constrained by non-tariff barriers, infrastructural deficiencies, and institutional weaknesses, resulting in persistently low intra-regional trade. The data demonstrate that formal liberalization commitments encoded in the ETLS have not been matched by commensurate improvements in on-the-ground trade facilitation, and that structural, institutional, and infrastructural barriers continue to suppress integration outcomes across the study period.

4.3 Research Question 2: Political Instability and Free Trade Policy Implementation

H2: Political instability significantly and negatively affects free trade policy implementation, reducing the effectiveness of the ETLS and regional integration outcomes.

4.3.1 Overview of Political Instability in ECOWAS (2015–2023)

The study period of 2015 to 2023 was marked by significant and escalating political instability across several ECOWAS member states, creating substantial disruptions to the integration agenda of the bloc. Raji et al. (2025) identify political instability as the most consistent structural barrier to effective policy coordination within ECOWAS, noting that military coups, governance crises, and civil conflicts have repeatedly undermined the bloc's capacity to enforce its trade protocols and maintain regulatory consistency across member states.

Between 2020 and 2023 alone, four successful military coups occurred within ECOWAS member states: Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Guinea (September 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), and Niger (July 2023). These coups resulted in the suspension of constitutional governance in the affected states and triggered significant diplomatic tensions within the bloc. The subsequent process of withdrawal by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS formalized in 2024 and 2025 represented the most significant rupture in the bloc's membership since its founding, removing three francophone states from the framework of ECOWAS free movement, common market, and policy harmonization protocols (Reuters, 2025).

Beyond the coup-affected states, ongoing security challenges associated with jihadist insurgencies in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel, cross-border criminal networks, and communal conflicts in Nigeria, Ghana, and Cote d'Ivoire have continued to complicate trade and border management across the region. The IMF (2022) estimates that security-related trade disruptions in conflict-affected ECOWAS corridors have reduced bilateral trade volumes between affected state pairs by between 15 and 25 percent relative to counterfactual scenarios without conflict.

Table 4.3: Political Instability Events and Their Impact on Free Trade Policy Implementation in ECOWAS (2015–2023)

Year	Member State	Political Event	Trade Policy Impact	ECOWAS Response
2020	Mali	Military coup (August 2020)	ETLS implementation suspended; borders closed temporarily	Sanctions imposed; Mali suspended from ECOWAS institutions
2021	Guinea	Military coup (September 2021)	Trade disruption; diplomatic tensions with ECOWAS partners	Guinea suspended; economic measures threatened
2022	Burkina Faso	Two military coups (January & September 2022)	Border closures; withdrawal from ECOWAS protocols	Suspension; ECOWAS diplomatic engagement
2022–2023	Nigeria	Insecurity in Northeast; banditry in North West	Trade corridor disruptions on Kano–Agadez route	Security cooperation discussed at ECOWAS summits
2023	Niger	Military coup (July 2023)	ECOWAS trade sanctions imposed; border closures	Sanctions; military intervention threat; ultimately lifted
2023–2024	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso	Formation of Alliance of Sahel States (AES)	Formal disengagement from ECOWAS trade frameworks	Ongoing negotiations; membership exit formalized

Source: Compiled from Raji et al. (2025); Reuters (2025); IMF (2022); ECOWAS Commission (2025).

4.3.2 Mechanisms Through Which Political Instability Affects Free Trade Policy

Political instability affects the implementation of free trade policies in ECOWAS through several distinct mechanisms. First, military coups and governance crises result in the suspension or de facto abandonment of ECOWAS commitments by affected member states, removing their participation from ETLS certification, NTB reporting systems, and regional policy coordination mechanisms. Nnamani (2023) documents that during periods of political transition in coup-affected states, border management reverts to ad hoc national procedures that frequently contradict ECOWAS protocols, creating uncertainty for traders and discouraging formal cross-border commerce.

Second, political instability generates direct trade disruptions through border closures, military checkpoints, and the diversion of administrative resources away from trade facilitation toward security management. ECOWAS-imposed sanctions on coup-affected states such as the border closures and trade restrictions applied to Mali in 2021 and Niger in 2023 have further reduced trade flows and complicated the integration agenda, illustrating the tension between the bloc's political conditionality and its economic integration objectives (ECOWAS Commission, 2025).

Third, political instability erodes the institutional continuity required for sustained policy implementation. Raji et al. (2025) find that frequent changes of government in ECOWAS member states whether through elections or coups—are associated with policy reversals, renegotiation of bilateral trade agreements, and inconsistent adherence to ECOWAS protocols, all of which raise transaction costs and uncertainty for regional traders. This dynamic is consistent with the Gravity

Model's identification of institutional quality and policy consistency as primary determinants of bilateral trade flows.

Fourth, the broader security environment generated by political instability including the spillover of Sahel insurgencies into coastal West African states such as Benin, Togo, and northern Ghana creates persistent security risks along key trade corridors that deter transport operators, increase insurance and logistics costs, and effectively raise the trade cost distance between member states, suppressing trade flows in the manner predicted by the Gravity Model.

4.3.3 Assessment of Hypothesis 2

The empirical evidence presented in this section confirms the hypothesis that political instability significantly and negatively affects free trade policy implementation in ECOWAS. The study period was marked by an exceptional frequency of political crises that directly disrupted the implementation of the ETLS, resulted in temporary and permanent departures of member states from the integration framework, and generated persistent security-related trade cost increases across key regional corridors. The institutional interpretation of the Gravity Model that governance quality and policy stability are critical determinants of trade flows is strongly supported by the documented relationship between political instability events and observed trade disruptions during the period under review.

4.4 Research Question 3: Monetary Policy Implementation and Regional Integration Goals

H3: Weak monetary policy implementation significantly undermines integration goals through macroeconomic divergence, exchange rate volatility, and non-compliance with ECOWAS monetary convergence criteria.

4.4.1 The ECOWAS Monetary Integration Framework

The monetary integration agenda of ECOWAS represents one of the most ambitious and persistently unrealized dimensions of the bloc's integration programme. Since the 1990s, ECOWAS has pursued a two-track monetary integration strategy: consolidating the existing West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU/UEMOA) a monetary union among eight francophone states sharing the CFA franc and establishing a second monetary zone (WAMZ) among the remaining non-CFA member states, with the long-term objective of merging both zones into a single ECOWAS monetary union with a common currency (the ECO).

The ECOWAS monetary convergence framework specifies four primary convergence criteria to be met by all member states: a single-digit inflation rate, a fiscal deficit not exceeding 3 percent of GDP, central bank financing of fiscal deficits not exceeding 10 percent of the previous year's tax revenue, and gross external reserves equivalent to at least three months of import cover. These criteria are modelled on the Maastricht convergence criteria of the European Monetary Union and are designed to ensure sufficient macroeconomic harmonization before monetary union is achievable (Towobola & Bamisaye, 2024).

However, the evidence across the 2015–2023 period reveals pervasive and persistent non-compliance with these criteria across ECOWAS member states, with the exception of the WAEMU zone members who benefit from the structural discipline of their CFA franc arrangements.

Table 4.4: ECOWAS Monetary Convergence Criteria Compliance by Member State (Selected), 2015–2023

Country	Currency Zone	Avg. Inflation (%)	Avg. Fiscal Deficit (% GDP)	Avg. Import Cover (months)	Convergence Status
Nigeria	WAMZ	13.8	4.6	4.2	Non-compliant (inflation)
Ghana	WAMZ	14.2	5.8	3.1	Non-compliant (inflation, deficit)
Sierra Leone	WAMZ	16.4	6.2	2.8	Non-compliant (all)
Liberia	WAMZ	12.9	5.1	2.3	Non-compliant (inflation, deficit)
Senegal	WAEMU	2.9	3.5	4.8	Largely compliant
Cote d'Ivoire	WAEMU	2.7	3.1	5.2	Compliant
Guinea-Bissau	WAEMU	2.5	2.8	4.5	Compliant

Source: Compiled from IMF (2022); World Bank (2023); ECOWAS Commission (2025); Orji et al. (2022). Note: figures represent averages over the 2015–2023 period.

4.4.2 Exchange Rate Volatility and Trade Impact

The coexistence of multiple currency regimes within ECOWAS with eight member states in the CFA franc zone, one dollarized economy (Liberia), and six states with independent floating or managed currencies creates persistent exchange rate volatility and currency conversion costs that significantly raise the trade cost distance between non-CFA member states. The IMF (2022) identifies exchange rate volatility among WAMZ currencies, particularly the Nigerian naira and the Ghanaian cedi, as a major source of trade uncertainty for regional traders.

The Nigerian naira, which has been subject to multiple devaluations and managed exchange rate regimes throughout the study period, experienced a cumulative depreciation of over 200 percent against the US dollar between 2015 and 2023, driven by the decline in global oil prices, fiscal pressures, and inconsistent central bank interventions. The Ghanaian cedi experienced a severe currency crisis in 2022–2023, depreciating by over 50 percent against major trading currencies within a single year (World Bank, 2023). These currency shocks create significant transaction cost uncertainty for intra-regional traders seeking to price goods and services across multiple currency zones, effectively suppressing trade flows in the manner identified by the Gravity Model.

Orji et al. (2022) find that exchange rate volatility among ECOWAS non-CFA states has a statistically significant negative effect on bilateral trade flows, with a one percent increase in exchange rate volatility associated with an estimated 0.6 to 0.8 percent reduction in bilateral trade volumes. This finding underscores the material trade cost implications of the monetary policy divergences prevailing within the ECOWAS region.

4.4.3 Fiscal Policy Divergence and Integration Constraints

In addition to monetary and exchange rate policy, fiscal policy divergence among the member countries of ECOWAS is another dimension of macroeconomic insecurity which negatively affects the integration agenda. The significant differences in fiscal deficits between the WAEMU countries, which may be below 3 percent of GDP in WAEMU countries and exceed 7 percent during crisis in other countries make coordination of trade and investment policies in the region more difficult.

Towobola and Bamisaye (2024) provide a general assessment of a state of weakness in the governance of ECOWAS, compared to the European Central Bank or the IMF, which has no legally binding mechanism to impose financial penalties on member states that do not meet the convergence criteria. The fact that convergence criteria have no binding conditionality makes them non-effective instruments of macroeconomic harmonisation.

The data support Hypothesis 3: the effects of weak monetary policy implementation are significantly negative on the ECOWAS integration objectives. The uncertainty of trade costs, due to macroeconomic divergence, exchange rate volatility and chronic non-compliance with monetary convergence criteria, hinders intra-regional trade volumes and slows down the rate of economic convergence among member states.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

The three analytical parts of this chapter lead into a body of uniform empirical results that together shed light on the structural, political and macroeconomic aspects of the integration deficit in ECOWAS. First, intra-regional trade has consistently been low in 2015-2023, with around 11-12 percent of total regional trade, which is significantly lower than the targets of the bloc for integration and the performance of other regional blocs. Second, non-tariff barriers such as the proliferation of checkpoints, the cumbersome bureaucracy of customs and the informal payments all contribute to the operational obstacles of integrating free trade, with the institutional gaps adding to the physical price of cross-border trade. Third, political crises have direct consequences on the implementation of free trade policies, through military coups, governance tensions and Sahel countries' withdrawal from ECOWAS, creating institutional breaks that have affected the bloc's capacity to coordinate the policy. Fourth, divergence of monetary policy and exchange rate volatility, especially between the WAMZ member states, create burdens on the transaction costs faced by traders and thereby reduces trade volumes systemically.

Combined, these results support the two theories used for the cross-country trade: the Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade. The common interest in primary commodity exports by the ECOWAS member states, negatively affects the rationale for specialization and exchange among the ECOWAS countries, based on comparative advantage. The ongoing high trade costs from the three research questions identified under the NTB and infrastructure gaps, political disruptions and monetary volatility are the very gravity model trade obstacles that underlie the failure of geographic proximity to drive deeper trade integration in West Africa.

4.6 Chapter Summary

The empirical evidence was presented and analyzed for the three research questions and the three corresponding hypotheses in this chapter. The results confirm that over the last five years, from 2015 to 2023, the overall effort of ECOWAS regional economic integration has been repeatedly impeded by a mix of structural, institutional, political and macroeconomic barriers, which have not led to the regional trade liberalisation goals and increased trade between the countries that were expected. The empirical evidence confirms all three hypotheses, namely: integration is significantly affected by NTBs (H1); political instability significantly and negatively affects the free trade policy implementation (H2); and the weakness of monetary policy implementation significantly weakens the regional integration goals (H3). Chapter Five summarizes the results of this research in order to draw conclusions and make policy recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This Conclusive Chapter draws the study's conclusions and recommendations that address the research questions and objectives presented in Chapter One and formulates a set of evidence-based policy recommendations to strengthen regional economic integration and free trade in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The chapter also outlines the significance of the study for knowledge and recognises its shortcomings and proposes areas for further research.

5.2 Summary of the Study

This study carried out the regional economic integration and the problems of free trade in ECOWAS among the year 2015 – 2023 with the following research questions and hypotheses. The study used a qualitative approach through documentary research relying on secondary data obtained from official ECOWAS institutional reports, publications of multilateral development institutions, peer reviewed academic publications and credible media documentation. The analysis was based on the two theoretical frameworks of Comparative Advantage Theory and Gravity Model of Trade.

Chapter One provided the general background of the study, the problem statement, the research questions, objectives, the significance of the study, the scope of the study and the limitations of the study, thereby positioning the study within the general context of ECOWAS's founding mandate and the continued discrepancy between its integration policy goals and the realized integration outcomes. The conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on regional economic integration and free trade in ECOWAS was reviewed in Chapter Two, highlighting key concepts, theories and gaps in the existing literature. The methodology, theoretical framework, hypotheses, research design, data collection methods, as well as the approach of analyzing the data were presented in Chapter Three of the study. The Logical Data Framework was also created in Chapter Three which mapped the research questions and analytical variables and indicators.

The empirical results were given in Chapter Four with respect to the three research questions. Considering the Research Question 1, the evidence showed that intra-ECOWAS trade has been consistently low (about 11 to 12 percent of total trade in the region) during the study period, hampered by the presence of non-tariff barriers, infrastructural deficiencies, structural production homogeneity and poor implementation of ETLS. As regards Research Question 2, the study recorded high levels of political instability across the region, with four military takeovers and three withdrawals by member States from the free trade policy, which had direct impact on the implementation of the free trade policy, and made the institutional framework of the bloc less effective. As to Research Question 3, the study established that there is global non-conformance of ECOWAS monetary convergence criteria, high exchange rate volatility among WAMZ member countries and fiscal policy differences which collectively placed high costs of transactions on the intra-regional traders and hindered economic convergence.

5.3 Conclusions

The level of economic integration within ECOWAS between 2015 and 2023 has been largely insufficient to reach the goals foreseen in the bloc, with intra-regional trade shares averaging around 11-12 per cent of the total trade within the region over the period. This outcome is a direct result of the lack of synergy between the formal aspects of ECOWAS trade liberalization as outlined in the ETLS, CET and free movement protocols, and the practical aspects of intra-regional trade, which remain high due to non-tariff barriers, infrastructure deficits, and structural production constraints. The results support the conclusion that trade liberalisation through the reduction of barriers to trade alone is not enough for achieving deeper integration without investments in physical infrastructure, institution building and productive diversification.

Political instability has emerged as a significant and growing limitation to the achievement of free trade policies in ECOWAS. The ECOWAS integration agenda has seen the biggest political turbulence since Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger withdrew from the bloc as a result of military upheavals that occurred between 2020 and 2023. These events have not only directly affected the trade flow and implementation of ETLS in the affected states, but also affected the institutional basis of the ETLS's governance system and diminished its policy coordination capability. This finding is strongly supported by the evidence that political stability is essential to the success of free trade policy implementation, and highlights the interdependence of the political and economic aspects of regional integration in West Africa.

The non-compliance of the member countries of ECOWAS, especially the WAMZ countries, with the monetary convergence criteria of the bloc, the high level of volatility of their forex rates, and fiscal divergences have significantly weakened the macroeconomic bases necessary for a good regional integration. The study period experience validates the vision of a single monetary union, which is still far from being achieved in ECOWAS, and the fact that the macroeconomic diversity of the bloc is a structural obstacle to the advancement of trade integration. In addition to being a technical economic problem, monetary policy divergence is also a symptom of the overall governance and political commitment problems that constrain the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a rule-based integration institution.

5.4 Recommendations

Given the findings from the empirical research, the next recommendations are made for ECOWAS institutions, governments and development partners to improve the efficacy of regional economic integration and free trade within the region of West Africa:

ECOWAS institutions to work towards phased elimination of illegal checkpoints, harmonization of customs paperwork and digitization of border processes through an all-round action plan for the removal of non-tariff barriers in a time-bound manner. The timely implementation of a regional single window system for traders, through which all documentation needs for cross-border trade can be completed in a single place, electronically, should be a key trade facilitation reform project. The publication and implementation of the standardized border management protocols consistent with ECOWAS provisions must be made and followed by the member states, and monitored and verified by ECOWAS commission and civil society actors.

There is a need for a step change in the scale of regional investment in infrastructure in West Africa to reduce the trade costs. ECOWAS should push for implementation of the ECOWAS Infrastructure Master Plan, especially the completion of the Trans-West African Coastal Highway, rehabilitation of cross-border rail lines, and strengthening the port infrastructure at key gateway ports such as Dakar, Abidjan, Tema, and Lagos, in collaboration with the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and bilateral development partners. Infrastructure investment should be clearly and directly oriented to trade facilitation goals and complementary investments in energy supply, logistics hubs, and border post facilities should be limited to reducing the costs of cross-border trade.

ECOWAS Commission should make a great effort in strengthening the implementation and monitoring of ETLS through increased awareness creation through outreach and capacity building programmes of traders, customs and border management officials on the provisions of the ETLS. A dedicated ETLS compliance monitoring mechanism with quarterly reports by member states on the frequency of checkpoint ETLS violation and the results of the dispute settlement process should be put in place. Member states which are systematically not in compliance with the ETLS provisions should be subject to tougher sanctions, to provide credible incentives for compliance.

ECOWAS should bolster its early warning and preventive diplomacy mechanisms to tackle the underlying causes of political instability in the region such as inadequacies in governance, socioeconomic marginalization, and security threats. The bloc should continue to fund projects that support democratic governance, institutional accountability and civil-military relations in member countries, keeping in mind that political stability is the prerequisite for the continuity of implementation of trade and integration policies. Relationship with the Alliance of Sahel States should continue through diplomatic channels with an eye to keeping the arrangement of functional trade and movement with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger intact, even if they are not formally a part of the bloc.

ECOWAS monetary integration agenda demands a fresh political will of member countries to attain convergence requirements with improved technical backing from ECOWAS' technical team, the West African Monetary Institute (WAMI) and international counterparts. Member states that fail to take practical measures to attain convergence should be compelled to submit credible fiscal and monetary adjustment programmes for continued access to the benefits of trade facilitation under the ECOWAS. Increased transaction cost uncertainty for traders of goods and services within the region would be avoided if a regional currency stabilisation mechanism were established to give support to the central banks of member states during periods of acute exchange rate volatility, and would offer a practical basis for increased monetary cooperation.

This is because the importance of informal trade in West Africa's economic life is immense and thus the strategies for integration should not exclude informal traders, but rather include them. This needs to be tackled by the establishment of simplified trade facilitation measures for SME traders such as the establishment of dedicated informal trade routes at key land border crossings, the reduction of documentation requirements for cross-border trade of small value and streamlining of border crossing procedures. Formalization incentives, such as financial services, trade insurance and market information systems, should be offered to informal traders to facilitate their gradual inclusion in formal trade channels.

5.5 Contributions to Knowledge

The study makes various contributions to the existing knowledge on regional economic integration and free trade in ECOWAS and the African continent in general. First, it offers an in-depth, empirically based study of the multi-dimensional impediments in the way to ECOWAS integration during the specific time frame of 2015-2023, which has seen unprecedented political disruptions, but has been inadequately systematically studied by academia. Second, the study integrates and reinforces the two theoretical perspectives of Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model of Trade and thus provides a comprehensive analytical tool for understanding the underperformance of ECOWAS integration from the supply-side structural constraints and demand-side cost barriers. Third, the study's Logical Data Framework is a replicable methodological model for future documentary research in contexts involving regional integration in developing countries.

5.6 Limitations and Directions for future research

The study has faced some limitations, such as being based solely on secondary data sources, which may not fully reflect the informal trade dynamics, recent policy changes outside of 2023, or the lived experience of traders and border officials in the field. The limit in documentary analysis does not allow to collect primary qualitative or quantitative information that would offer finer-grained insights into the integration experiences of the firms or household level. Future studies should take a mixed methods approach, including an analysis of the documents, trader surveys, key informant interviews, and the econometric analysis of bilateral trade data, to better estimate the relative importance of the barriers identified in this paper. Furthermore, comparative research on the experience of ECOWAS with other African regional economic communities like the East African Community or the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa would contribute to the growing knowledge on factors that facilitate or hinder the success of regional integration in Africa.

5.7 Final Remarks

A truly integrated West African economic community in which goods, services, capital and people freely cross borders, unlocking shared prosperity and development is an inspiring but not yet realised goal. The results from this study show that barriers to this vision are not inevitable or untackleable; they can be overcome through political will, institutional commitment and coordinated action across the entire spectrum of trade, infrastructure, governance and monetary policy. ECOWAS has already shown the drive and determination to work for regional integration for the last 50 years, despite enormous hurdles. The challenge now is to apply that vision to the real measures of reform that must be taken, from reforms in practice to investment and governance, to ensure that the progress of free trade becomes a reality for the 400 million people of West Africa.

.

REFERENCES

African Development Bank (AfDB). (2020). African economic outlook 2020: Developing Africa's workforce for the future. African Development Bank Group.

African Development Bank (AfDB). (2022). Regional integration policy and strategy 2014–2023: Progress report. African Development Bank Group.

African Union Commission (AUC). (2020). Agenda 2063: The Africa we want. African Union Commission.

Anderson, J. E. (2011). The gravity model. Annual Review of Economics, 3(1), 133–160.

Andoh, F. K., Thorson, G. R., & Gebremariam, G. H. (2024). Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): A regional integration analysis. International Journal of Regional Development, 11(2), 45–68.

Andoh, F. K., Thorson, G. R., & Gebremariam, G. H. (2025). Infrastructure, administrative barriers, and intra-ECOWAS trade performance: An updated assessment. West African Journal of Economics, 14(1), 12–34.

Ashakah, O. J., & Akpughe, G. O. (2021). ECOWAS economic integration and economic growth: Evidence from Nigeria. International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues, 11(3), 88–97.

Aworawo, D. (2020). ECOWAS and the challenge of regional integration in West Africa. Journal of African Studies and Development, 12(4), 55–70.

Aworawo, D. (2021). Regional integration in Africa: Historical perspectives and contemporary challenges. African Affairs, 120(480), 320–345.

Boone, T. (2020). International trade theory and practice: A comprehensive guide. Oxford University Press.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), 27–40.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

Cox, A., Ferrantino, M., & Tsigas, M. (2020). Supply chain resilience and trade costs in West Africa. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 9345.

ECOWAS Commission. (2021). ECOWAS trade report 2021: Tracking regional integration progress. ECOWAS Commission Publications.

ECOWAS Commission. (2025). ECOWAS @ 50: Achievements, challenges and the path forward. ECOWAS Commission Publications.

Head, K., & Mayer, T. (2014). Gravity equations: Workhorse, toolkit and cookbook. Handbook of International Economics, 4, 131–195.

International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2022). West Africa regional economic outlook: Navigating a complex landscape. International Monetary Fund.

International Review of Political Journal. (2025). Regional integration and economic development in ECOWAS: A cross-country study. International Review of Political Journal, 18(1), 22–41.

Kligue, A., & Yovo, K. (2025). Effect of regional integration on intra-regional informal agricultural trade in West Africa. Journal of Agricultural Economics and Development, 13(2), 78–99.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Krugman, P., Obstfeld, M., & Melitz, M. (2022). International economics: Theory and policy (12th ed.). Pearson Education.

Marinov, E. (2015). Economic integration theories and the developing countries. Proceedings of the International Conference on Applied Economics, 383–392.

Nnamani, D. O. (2023). ECOWAS and challenges of regional integration in West Africa: A critical review. African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 17(1), 1–18.

Noutchie, N., & Goufo, E. F. D. (2024). Non-tariff barriers and cross-border governance in ECOWAS: Institutional trust and trade friction. Journal of West African Studies, 6(2), 33–54.

OECD. (2025). Food security and intra-regional agricultural trade in West Africa: Policy insights. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Oloyede, I., Fasanya, I., & Adediran, O. (2025). Regional trade agreements and intra-African trade: Evidence from ECOWAS and AfCFTA. African Economic Research Consortium Working Paper Series.

Orji, A., Ogbuabor, J., Anthony-Orji, O., & Nwosu, E. O. (2022). The effects of regional integration on economic growth in ECOWAS countries. Journal of Economic Integration, 37(2), 289–316.

Oshota, S. O., & Wahab, B. A. (2022). Institutional quality and intra-regional trade flows: Evidence from ECOWAS. Journal of African Trade, 9(1–2), 23–43.

Raji, R. O., Mojekwu, J. N., & Udeorah, S. A. (2025). Assessing political and economic barriers to regional integration in ECOWAS: A systematic review. Journal of International Development and Cooperation, 31(1), 56–78.

Reuters. (2025, January 28). Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formalize ECOWAS exit, creating Alliance of Sahel States. Reuters.

Towobola, W. L., & Bamisaye, O. A. (2024). ECOWAS regional integration agenda: Progress and constraints. International Journal of Economic Policy in Emerging Economies, 17(3), 201–220.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2021). Economic development in Africa report 2021: Reaping the potential benefits of the AfCFTA for inclusive growth. United Nations Publications.

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2020). Informal cross-border trade in West Africa: Data, trends and policy implications. Economic Commission for Africa.

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2021). Building forward together: Financing a sustainable recovery for inclusive growth and development in Africa. Economic Commission for Africa.

World Bank. (2020). World development report 2020: Trading for development in the age of global value chains. The World Bank.

World Bank. (2023). Africa’s pulse: Boosting fiscal space for development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The World Bank.

World Trade Organization (WTO). (2020). World trade report 2020: Government policies to promote innovation in the digital age. World Trade Organization.