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International Diffusion and the Puzzle of African Regionalism:  
Insights from West Africa



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## **Abstract**

Since decolonization, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen the birth of a large number of regional initiatives whose institutional set up and high integration ambitions are inspired by the model of the European Union (EU). West Africa's sub-regional organizations: the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) and the Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA), are clear examples of this pattern of diffusion. However, African regionalism is often decried as ineffective, in particular in the domain of trade and economic cooperation. Two arguments have been usually put forward in order to explain the simultaneous adoption of the EU model of integration in Africa and its mixed outcomes: constructivist scholars have emphasized normative tensions, while area studies specialists have focused on the neo-patrimonial nature of African politics. Looking at West Africa as a case study, this article argues that both perspectives have limits. Structural constraints and sociological institutionalist theory appear more appropriate in order to account for the mixed record of regionalism in Africa. It is argued that these challenges seem to be less specifically 'African' than usually thought.

Keywords: regional integration, Africa, ECOWAS, UEMOA, European Union, institutional sociology

## Introduction

African regionalism exhibits contradictory trends. On the one hand, since decolonization, the continent has seen the birth of a large number of regional cooperation and integration initiatives, with many formal organizations established, both at the continental and at the sub-continental level. On the other hand, African regionalism is often decried as ineffective or inappropriate to the challenges that it is supposed to meet.

The conflict management dimension of African regionalism has in the last few years attracted a lot of scholarly attention. However, most African regional organizations, particularly the eight sub-regional Regional Economic Communities (RECs) officially recognized by the African Union (AU), have been set up as organizations pursuing socio-economic integration goals.

Scholars have remarked that African leaders appear fascinated by regionalism, especially the kind of 'deep' and institutionally complex regionalism inspired by the example of the EU (Hancock 2014). Ambitious plans for economic integration have proliferated in Africa since independence. The 1991 Abuja treaty, for instance, which has brought sub-regional initiatives under a single framework, envisage the creation of an African Economic Community: the existing RECs should be merged by 2031 into a single market, where people and goods will be able to circulate freely, with a single currency overseen by an African central bank and a Pan-African Parliament with supra-national powers.

However, these grandiose projects of integration have often had a mixed follow up. Twenty-five years after Abuja, in spite of significant financial and technical support from partners such as the EU and the African Development Bank (ADB), no REC has been able to set up a fully-fledged common market (Hancock 2014; De Melo and Tsikata 2014). Some regional schemes have never really taken off, but also the most dynamic organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the East African Community (EAC), have a record of setting up deadlines that have been repeatedly missed or postponed. The number of regional organizations in Africa itself, rather than corroborating the vitality of African regionalism, is often seen as a sign of its incoherence and ineffectiveness (Fioramonti and Mattheis 2015; Franke 2007).

In trying to explain why so many regional organizations have been established in Africa, many scholars have remarked on the influence of the EU and of its model of integration on the continent, in particular with respect to the institutional set up and the vision of integration as a linear succession of stages from a free trade area via a customs union to a common market (Clapham 2001; Gibbs 2009; Hancock 2014; Fioramonti and Mattheis 2015). However, it has also been noticed that the mimicry of the EU model has often been superficial and shallow (Fioramonti and Mattheis 2015; Gibbs 2009; Söderbaum and Taylor 2008). The EU model in West Africa has suffered a 'syndrome of partial

implementation' (Van de Walle 2001) or, in other words, a decoupling between the nominal adoption of institutions and norms inspired by the EU-model and the everyday functioning of West African regionalism (Lenz 2013).

Why have African leaders so often copied from Europe, and why has the result been mediocre? This paper tries to disentangle the puzzle of African regionalism by analysing the experience of West Africa. The sub-region has a long history of engagement with regionalism, but it also shares with the rest of Africa problems such as the overlap between different regional schemes, the repeated postponement or non implementation of regional commitments and lack of capacities.

The purpose of the paper is twofold. First, it aims to close an empirical gap, by focusing on a sub-region that has received little attention in comparative regionalism studies. The main West African organizations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA) have been treated by the literature in a partial manner, with an almost exclusive focus on ECOWAS' work in conflict management (i.e. Adebajo 2002; Aning 2004; Obi 2009) and a predominance of econometric studies for UEMOA (i.e. Carrère 2004; Guillaumont, Geourjon and Guérineau 2012). The analysis of the process of regional norm diffusion in West Africa allows one to give more historical depth to the discussion on interregional cooperation and to question a series of established myths on the normative power of Europe.

Second, the article points to the limits of existing scholarship in accounting for why ECOWAS and UEMOA were created as organisations strongly inspired by the European model of integration and why they have often failed to fully emulate such model. It notably holds that explanations offered by constructivist scholars, which points to the clash of norms, and by Africanists, who focus on the predominance of informality and neopatrimonialism in Africa, are unable to explain the contradictions of African regionalism. It shows instead the usefulness of applying a sociological institutionalist approach, pioneered by scholars of Asian regionalism (Jetschke and Murray 2012) and of integrating political and economic analysis (Hancock 2014; De Melo and Tsikata 2014).

The first part introduces the West African region and gives a general account of regional integration in West Africa and its record of success and failure. The second analyses the mechanisms through which regionalism in West Africa has been directly and indirectly influenced by the EU model of regional integration, both with respect to the decision to set up ECOWAS and UEMOA in the first place and as pertains to their subsequent development. The third part summarizes existing explanations for the failure of African organizations to perform as expected, concluding that they are ultimately unconvincing.

In the fourth part, the alternative explanation is put forward. The conclusion assesses the way forward for West African regionalism.

## **ECOWAS and UEMOA**

West Africa is one of the most disadvantaged parts of the world in terms of economic development. With the exception of Nigeria, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, all sixteen West African states are considered Least Developed Countries (LDC). Most of the states that constitute the region exist as independent political entities only since the 1960s following the end of colonialism. There is a clear imbalance in demographic and economic terms between the small states of the region and Nigeria, which represents half of the West African population and more than half of its Gross National Product (GNP). Administrative capacity in West Africa is generally very low and corruption and clientelism are widespread. Not surprisingly the region has also experienced high levels of political instability, manifesting in *coups d'état*, internal conflicts and other forms of political violence. Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual process of political liberalization, but only a few states are democratic.

In spite of this difficult political and economic environment, the region has been a laboratory for regional integration since the end of colonialism in the 1960s. By 1979, nearly 30 sub-regional organisations had been established: a number that rose to more than 40 by June 1990 (Franke 2007). Many of these organizations were short lived. Some still exist but have a limited scope in terms of membership (i.e. the Mano River Union) or mandate (i.e. the Permanent Interstates Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel). Two sub-regional schemes, however, exhibit high ambitions in both their geographical scope and mandate: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA). The two organizations overlap in terms of membership (all UEMOA members are also ECOWAS members) and have interacted through history through rivalry, mutual emulation and cooperation.

Founded in 1975 and thoroughly reformed in 1993 with the adoption of a new Treaty, ECOWAS groups all states in the region, with the exception of Mauritania, which withdrew its membership in 1999 in order to join the Arab Maghreb Union. UEMOA has a smaller membership: it comprises of the former French colonies of West Africa with the exception of Guinea-Conakry (which is not a member, in spite of having experienced French colonization) and of Guinea Bissau, the only non French-speaking member.

There are historical reasons for the co-existence in West Africa of ECOWAS and UEMOA. Although the organization itself was founded only in 1996, UEMOA's roots are much older

than ECOWAS'. French-speaking West African countries have since colonial times, shared a single currency (the CFA Franc), managed by the Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO) and by the French Treasury and pegged first to the French Franc and later to the Euro. In 1972 these countries created the Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEAO), the direct predecessor of UEMOA. In contrast, ECOWAS was part of the wave of African regional organizations established in the 1970s, inspired by the ideal of Panafricanism that accompanied the independence of many African countries.

When they were founded in the 1970s, ECOWAS and CEAO's mandate focused on economic integration. The 1975 ECOWAS Treaty foresaw the elimination of restrictions on trade between member states and the subsequent establishment of a Common External Tariff (CET) (ECOWAS 1975). The CEAO Treaty took a similar although more modest approach, foreseeing the complete liberalization of trade in the field of raw materials, while industrial products fell under a preferential tariff (Van de Walle 1991). In response to both international challenges and international developments, however, both organizations underwent a process of reform in the 1990s. ECOWAS adopted a new treaty in 1993 and CEAO was merged with the CFA monetary union and was transformed into UEMOA in 1996.

The post Cold War history of ECOWAS has been deeply shaped by the decision taken in 1990 to deploy a military mission, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in order to stop the first Liberian civil war, although the 1975 Treaty had no provisions allowing the organization to lead such an intervention (Adebajo 2002). Following the ECOMOG experience, ECOWAS developed a series of activities targeting governance and security issues, which have been institutionalized with the adoption of the 1993 ECOWAS Treaty; the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security (PRMCR) and the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Aning, Birikorang and Jaye 2010). By contrast, UEMOA has continued to focus on socio-economic issues. Its mandate has been expanded and reinforced with respect to CEAO and encompasses the creation of a common market and the harmonization of legislation (UEMOA 2003).

As a consequence of these developments, a regional 'division of labour' has emerged. ECOWAS has today a *de facto* regional mandate on high politics and security cooperation. In the realm of socio-economic integration, on the other hand, although ECOWAS is the recognized REC for West Africa, there is an implicit acknowledgement that, given its smaller and more cohesive membership and its common currency, UEMOA has a comparative advantage. The two organizations have committed to cooperate (ECOWAS

and UEMOA 2006), although rivalry and competition have not been completely eliminated.

ECOWAS and UEMOA are neither fully fledged successes nor abrupt failures. In contrast to other African schemes that have never taken off, the two organizations do not exist just on paper but are significant regional players. Yet, they are affected by problems of organizational capacities, resources, ability to implement effectively their commitments and to push member states to comply with their decision. What is however particularly puzzling is that, while ECOWAS and UEMOA have scored significant successes in fields where they have invested themselves relatively recently such as conflict management and fiscal harmonization, West Africa has lagged behind with respect to what was the key goal of ECOWAS at the time of its creation: the reduction and eventual elimination of obstacles to the free movement of persons, services and capital.

Until the 1990s, ECOWAS achieved very little and its Trade Liberalization Scheme never really took off (Kufuor 2006). In spite of these failures, the 1993 treaty, being sequel to the Abuja Treaty at the continental level, has not only reaffirmed economic integration goals but has even scaled up ambitions leading to the 'establishment of a common market' and of an economic union, including a monetary union, as its long term objectives (ECOWAS 1993, 3d and 3e). The realization of the goals of such provisions has however, experienced very significant delays. The ECOWAS Free Trade Area was launched only in 2010 and the ECOWAS Customs Union was launched at the beginning of 2015 under very strong external pressure.<sup>1</sup> Plans for the introduction of a common currency have never taken off and even the more modest ambition of having ECOWAS countries achieving macroeconomic convergence criteria has failed (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 23 October 2013). The difficulties of ECOWAS in the domain of socio-economic integration are in part tempered by better results achieved by the more restricted group of French-speaking countries. With major support from the EU and France, UEMOA's customs union was adopted as scheduled in 2000, but implementation issues persist. A recent independent inquiry found that 'the transport of goods is still hampered by all sorts of regular or occasional issues' and that 'common external tariffs are still reproduced in an imperfect manner in the information systems of the States' customs offices' (Guillaumont, Geourjon and Guérineau 2012, 12).

A problem with the partial implementation of ECOWAS and UEMOA texts is also evident with respect to another key agenda of the two organizations – securing the free movement of persons across West Africa. For ECOWAS, the adoption in 1978 of a Protocol on the free movement of persons, residence and establishment was one of the very few achievements of the organization before the end of the Cold War (Adepoju

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<sup>1</sup> See next paragraph for the role of the EU in pushing for the adoption of the ECOWAS customs union.

2002). UEMOA has also launched its own free circulation scheme, which on paper is even more advanced than ECOWAS'. Yet, in disregard of the ECOWAS and UEMOA legislation, customs officials routinely demand fees from people and transporters that go through the borders (Observatoire des Pratiques Anormales 2011).

ECOWAS' and UEMOA's difficulties in getting their provisions implemented on the ground stem in part from the difficulties that their respective Courts of Justice have in sanctioning non compliance. Although the Court of UEMOA has powers on paper that are equivalent to the Court of Justice of the EU's (Sall 2006), it has been unable to perform an equivalent role, because it has received few complaints (Interview, UEMOA Commission, 16 October 2013). The ECOWAS Court has been strengthened by a 2005 Protocol that has given it jurisdiction over human rights complaints presented by individual citizens (Alter et al 2013). Yet, such a decision has had the paradoxical consequence that the Court has been absorbed by human rights complaints and has paid very little attention to its original mission of getting community regulations on economic integration implemented (Alter et al. 2013).

The two organizations' parliaments have suffered a similar fate: although they exist on paper, they play a marginal role in the activities of the regional organizations. The ECOWAS Parliament was inaugurated in 2000 and is now at the end of its third legislature, but, contrarily to what was stated in the 1994 Protocol that provided for its creation (ECOWAS 1994), it has never been directly elected. With the adoption of the Supplementary Act of December 2014 it is hoped that the power of co-decision now accorded the ECOWAS Parliament will be translated into actual legislative, budgetary and oversight roles. UEMOA amended in 2003 its Treaty in order to transform its Inter-parliamentary Committee into a fully-fledged elected parliament. However, more than ten years after, the UEMOA Parliament has still to be inaugurated.

In conclusion, the evolution of the two organizations has not been linear and incremental and socio-economic cooperation has not 'spilled-over' to political integration: rather, the latter has advanced while the former was lagging behind. Moreover, ECOWAS and UEMOA have developed organizations that do not manage to work as expected, such as their courts and parliaments.

In order to understand the evolution of the two organisations and some of their institutional and policy choices, the next part explores the process that has led to the diffusion of the European model of regional integration and to the transfer of institutions and norms to West Africa.

## The EU's influence on West Africa

While the influence of the EU on the region has not been the only factor that has led to the creation of West African regional organizations, it has been a prominent one. The institutional inspiration of the 'model EU' on ECOWAS and UEMOA is easily discernible, starting from the institutional set up of the two organizations. Like the EU, the two organizations have an organ composed of the heads of state and governments of the region, a council of ministers, a commission, a court of justice and a parliament. While institutional similarities were already present in the treaties stipulated in the 1970s, the process of reform of ECOWAS and the transformation of CEAO into UEMOA have made institutional isomorphism even more evident, as most innovations have aimed at conferring more powers on regional institutions and increase their supranational dimension (Kufuor, 2006; Sall, 2006). For instance, the executive organs of the two organizations, initially called secretariats, have been transformed into commissions following the example of the EU. The UEMOA Commission, in particular, has been called 'a pure and simple carbon copy of the European Commission' (Sall 2006, 83).

However, influence goes beyond institutional isomorphism to encompass some of the normative and policy choices of the two organizations. ECOWAS and UEMOA share with the EU the objective to create 'an ever closer union': to build a common regional market, underscored by important elements of political cooperation, rather than limit themselves to a loosely formalized interstate cooperation, as has been the case for some other non-European regional organizations. The influence of the then European Economic Community (EEC) is evident in several aspects of the founding ECOWAS treaty, particularly the fact that the organization put socio-economic integration at the centre of its mandate and adopted an incremental scheme. The EEC inspiration is also evident in the establishment of sectorial policies and in the will to give ECOWAS a 'solidarist' dimension, establishing a compensation fund. The 1993 Treaty reinforces the objective of 'deep' integration and seems to bear the mark of the parallel debate within Europe on how to make regional integration more democratic and participative. It reshapes the normative underpinning of ECOWAS, mentioning the 'recognition promotion and protection of human and peoples' rights' (ECOWAS 1993, 4g) and the 'promotion and consolidation of a democratic system of governance' (ECOWAS 1993, 4j) among the goals of the organization. It tries to advance societal participation in ECOWAS' activities, paying more attention to the private sector and to civil society actors (ECOWAS 1993, 4k). UEMOA, on its part, has embraced the EU-promoted model of 'open regionalism' and has championed a reduction of trade barriers with the rest of the world (Grimm 1999). Moreover, as the CFA is pegged to the Euro, the organization has put macro-economic surveillance and monetary stability at the centre of its agenda, copying the EU practices in this domain. BCEAO monetary policies follow strictly the European Central Bank's and

the organization’s system of surveillance reproduces the criteria of the Maastricht Treaty on fiscal deficit and inflation (Grimm 1999; Claeys and Sindzingre 2003).

The process of diffusion of regional institutions and norms in West Africa has been actively fuelled by the engagement of the EU itself, especially if the term ‘EU’ is used in a broad way to encompass the EEC and the EU member states. On several important respects, the case of West Africa contradicts most accounts about how the normative power of Europe operates in the diffusion of regionalism. Studies conducted on norm diffusion in regional integration emphasize the importance of mechanisms of diffusion of the ‘EU model’ that are fully non-coercive and, in some cases, even independent of the will of the EU itself. The logic of appropriateness – socialization, persuasion and emulation – has a major role in the International Relations (IR) debate on the diffusion of regionalism, at the expense of the logic of consequentialism – the more direct mechanisms of manipulation of utility calculation (Börzel and Risse 2009). However, this second logic appears not to have been exclusive but highly relevant to West Africa as Table 1 (summarizing the emulation of the EU model by ECOWAS and UEMOA) shows.

Table 1: EU influence on regional integration in West Africa

	<b>ECOWAS</b>	<b>UEMOA</b>
<b>INSTITUTIONAL SETTING</b>	Mimicry of the EU model. <i>Logic of appropriateness.</i>	Direct involvement of EU officials in the drafting of the UEMOA treaty. Financial aid and technical assistance aiming at supporting the establishment of the new organization.  Mimicry of the EU model. <i>Logic of consequentialism + logic of appropriateness.</i>
<b>NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK</b>	Political dialogue. Conditionality of aid towards member states. Funding of pro-democracy/human security activities. Recognition by ECOWAS officials of the importance of democratic values in regional governance (only partly motivated by the EU example). <i>Logic of consequentialism + logic of appropriateness.</i>	Nothing to remark (the EU regards only ECOWAS as a political actor; UEMOA lacks an articulate normative framework).

<b>CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION</b>	No role of the EU in the initial conception and establishment of ECOWAS peace and security mandate (no equivalent in the EU model). Funding currently provided to ECOWAS peace and security mandate. Possible introduction of EU concerns (terrorism, migration) in ECOWAS security policies following EU involvement. <i>Logic of consequentialism</i>	Nothing to remark (the organization has currently no mandate on peace and security).
<b>ECONOMIC INTEGRATION</b>	Mimicry of the EU model. EPA negotiations. <i>Logic of consequentialism + logic of appropriateness.</i>	Direct involvement of EU officials in the drafting of the UEMOA treaty. Financial aid and technical assistance aiming at supporting the establishment of the new organization. Pegging of the CFA Franc to the UEMOA. Mimicking of the EU model. <i>Logic of consequentialism + logic of appropriateness (but logic of consequentialism predominant).</i>
<b>SOLIDARITY AND HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	Emulation of EU model (directly and through emulation of UEMOA). <i>Logic of appropriateness</i>	Direct involvement of EU officials in the drafting of the UEMOA treaty. Financial aid and technical assistance aiming at supporting the establishment of the new organization. Emulation of EU model. <i>Logic of consequentialism + logic of appropriateness</i>

The EU is also presumed to have been largely disinterested in spreading its own model before the end of the Cold War. According to Börzel and Risse, with respect to Sub-Saharan Africa, it would have always limited itself to supporting existing local initiatives, with 'no single incident in which the EU has been able to initiate genuinely new forms of regional integration' (Börzel and Risse 2009, 10). A close look at the history of West Africa shows however that the EEC was directly and willingly implicated in promoting regionalism in West Africa since the 1960s, when its own regional project was still at the beginning. The EEC explicitly earmarked aid to support regional cooperation among French-speaking African states through its 1963 Yaoundé Convention with the Associated

African and Malagasy States. Interregional cooperation subsequently scaled up with the Lomé Convention of 1975, when the EEC/Africa Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partnership was established with the adhesion of the Anglophone African states. West Africa received more funding for regional cooperation than any other sub-region under the five Lomé Conventions and the amount of aid constantly increased through the 1970s and 1980s (Coste and Egg 1998).

Moreover, the importance of the heritage of European colonialism casts a shadow on the extent to which 'local initiatives' can be considered really local and points to the role of EU member states, particularly France, in initiating regional cooperation among West African states. The case of CEAO/ UEMOA clearly illustrates this phenomenon. Through the creation of the CFA monetary union, France was the real initiator of cooperation between French-speaking West African countries. Although the CFA zone was initially a heritage of colonial policy, and not an example of diffusion of a European model of regionalism, the line blurred as France subsequently pushed the EEC to support cooperation among the West African members of the CFA zone. The creation of CEAO was encouraged by France to create an alternative to what it saw as a Nigeria-dominated ECOWAS and to establish a *fait accompli* in Francophone West Africa before Great Britain's entry into the EEC (Asante 1985, 76). Stressing the continuity between the colonial and the post-colonial era, Asante notices that Jacques David, an EEC official and former French colonial administrator, played a key role in the drafting of the CEAO treaty. David was explicitly motivated by his conviction that the EU model provided a 'recipe for economic prosperity' (quoted in Asante 1985, 83) for Africa.

Similar dynamics have underscored the creation of CEAO's successor UEMOA, which is also seen both as an 'EU creature' and a tropical carbon copy of the EU by specialists of the region (Grimm 1999; Claeys and Sindzingre 2003; Sall 2006). Like David twenty years before, EEC/EU officials, particularly General Secretary of the European Commission Emile Noël, were directly involved in the drafting of the treaty of the UEMOA (Grimm 1999, 1). Moreover, Grimm finds that more than two thirds of UEMOA's budget in 1998 was funded by the EU (Grimm 1999, 16).

In contrast to CEAO/UEMOA, the creation of ECOWAS follows more closely the path of 'third-order effects' of the ideational diffusion of the EU model, where 'local actors loosely draw on EU-type norms and practices and advance them 'as their own', with no direct involvement by EU actors' (Lenz 2013, 217). In the process that led to the creation of ECOWAS, the influence of the EU was notably mediated through 'regional epistemic communities attached to international organizations', particularly the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (Asante 1986). The fathers of ECOWAS were African policy-makers and intellectuals. The Nigerian civil servant and academic Adebajo

Adedeji played a special part (Adebajo 2014). The organization received very little financial and technical support from the EEC/EU before the end of the Cold War and, even if the EU's aid was later scaled up, it has never been responsible for more than 10% of the organization's budget.

ECOWAS was born as the result of the result of two, potentially contradictory, drivers of African integration: the ideology of Pan-Africanism and the imitation of the European example. It was a compromise between two strands of regionalism: what has been called 'developmental cooperation and integration', inspired by the ideals of self reliance then popular in Africa, and the EU-style 'market integration approach to regional integration' (Gibbs 2009, 705). The EU's influence is openly acknowledged by Adedeji (Asante 1986, 55-56), who, however, sees regional integration as a step to achieve his ideas of self-centred development and economic independence (Adebajo 2014).

Since its creation, however, ECOWAS has evolved both from an institutional and a normative perspective and has become more receptive to the EU's example. In particular, with the end of the Cold War the influence of dependence theory and self reliance ideals on ECOWAS has faded and the weight of liberal democratic norms has risen, as almost all West African countries have experienced some form of political opening. In addition, the dynamics of competition between ECOWAS and UEMOA have led ECOWAS to incorporate elements of the EU model by emulating its regional rival.

As a result of the fact that ECOWAS' initial ideological underpinning and of the rivalry between ECOWAS and CEAO/UEMOA, the EEC preferred initially to finance institutions with a low political profile. Under the Lomé 1 – Lomé 4 Conventions (1975-1995) ECOWAS received only 6% of regional funding. About 20% of the aid labelled as 'regional aid' went to the Permanent Interstates Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (Coste and Egg 1998), a technical organization dealing with humanitarian and environmental issues. In the 1990s, UEMOA received most of EU support for regional integration, with ECOWAS relegated to a second order position (Grimm 1999).

The interest of the EU in ECOWAS conflict management activities and the reform of the EU's interregional cooperation conspired to change the EU's attitude from the late 1990s onward. In 1998, the EU established and subsequently reinforced an institutionalized mechanism of political dialogue with ECOWAS (Nivet 2006). The Cotonou Agreement, which replaced the Lomé Convention in 2000, has signalled the EU's intention to reinforce and reform its interregional cooperation, a commitment that has taken shape with the 9th (2000-2007) and 10th (2007-2013) European Development Fund (EDF). While UEMOA has also continued to receive EU funding, a substantial envelope has been earmarked to support ECOWAS. EU programmed aid has been shared among economic integration and peace and governance activities. The 2007-2013 Regional Indicative

Programme (RIP) dedicated about 70% of regional funds to economic integration and 20% to peace and governance issues. The 2014-2020 RIP formally designates peace and stability as first priority issues, but shares the resources similarly, with about 50% dedicated to economic and trade integration, 25% to natural resources management and 20% to peace and security issues (EU 2015).

Apart from aid, a powerful instrument for the EU to influence West African integration has been the litany of negotiation rounds of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which aimed at reforming the Lomé trade regime, incompatible with the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Due to its status as a REC, ECOWAS officially conducted the negotiations, with UEMOA participating as observer. As in other African sub-regions, trade negotiations have engendered much controversy (Farrell 2005; Stevens 2008). They have stalled for many years and their initial impact on regional integration has been negative. With the expiration of the deadline given by the World Trade Organization (WTO) to remove the old trade regime, West Africa has fallen under four different trade regimes – Everything but Arms initiative for the Low Development Countries (LDC), two different interim EPAs for Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire and the Generalized System of Preferences for Nigeria and Cape Verde.

However, the EPA negotiations have been a tool for the EU to pressure ECOWAS to advance with its economic integration agenda, both through the threat to withdraw market access and through the offer of economic incentives. Indeed, the necessity to conclude an agreement as a whole block has forced ECOWAS to finalize the launching of its customs union after a long and difficult discussion between the English and French speaking members (Interview, ECOWAS Commission, 2013). The EPA was signed at the beginning of 2014, while the ECOWAS customs union has just entered into force. While ECOWAS countries have obtained the commitment of the EU to launch a large aid programme supporting the implementation of the agreement in exchange for the signing of the EPA, the EPA episode is a new example of quasi-coercive, rather than ideational, influence of the EU on regional integration in West Africa.

### **The existing explanations for failed mimicry**

The attraction of the EU model for West Africa and the active role played by the EU in the sub-region, have created a fertile terrain for institutional diffusion. Why then have West African organizations deviated from the EU model in important respects?

International relations (IR) scholars have tended to explain the phenomena of decoupling and selective adoption of external models as the consequence of a conflict between international and local norms, such as the currency common outside Europe of the

principle of state sovereignty and anti-colonial ideas (Acharya 2004). Although this literature has had Asia as its initial empirical referent, there have been efforts to apply such a framework of analysis to African regionalism. For instance, Paul Williams has discussed the evolution of the AU security culture, which he interprets as a complex shift from a normative framework based on the principle of non-intervention to non-indifference (Williams 2007).

The norm-based explanation is, however, much less satisfactory if brought from the AU to the sub-regional level of African regionalism and from the domain of security to economic regionalism. It is true that the ideals of African self-reliance that underpinned the creation of ECOWAS clashed in several important respects with the EU vision of integration. Moreover, at the time of the establishment of ECOWAS most West African rulers believed that regional cooperation should not encroach on state sovereignty. However, the importance of self-reliance ideals on West African regionalism largely faded away after the end of the Cold War. In contrast to other regional blocks, after the 1990s ECOWAS and UEMOA countries have not articulated an inter-governmental conception of integration. On the other hand, they have strengthened supranationalism in their treaties concluded in the 1990s and have not been reluctant to relinquish sovereignty in some specific areas. In the peace and security domain, ECOWAS is arguably more, and not less, supranational than the EU. Its peace and security architecture, modelled not on the EU but on the UN's Security Council, can mandate peace enforcement operations in a member state upon a decision taken through qualified majority (Aning, Birikoyan and Jaye 2010). Similarly, UEMOA's monetary policy is fully controlled by the BCEAO and the organization has gone further than the EU in challenging state sovereignty in specific policy domains, such as the harmonization of tax laws.

Africanist literature offers a different view of African regionalism, which at first seems more promising. Two related perspectives have dominated the Africanist debate. The first has insisted on the predominance of informality in Africa (Bøås, Marchand and Shaw 1999; Bach 2003), while a second strand has looked at African regional organizations through the lenses of neo-patrimonial theory (Söderbaum 2004; Söderbaum and Taylor 2008; Gibb 2009).

The first perspective argues that the weakness of formal institutions and the existence of important informal dynamics pose a major obstacle to EU-style regional integration in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bach 2003; Bøås, Marchand, and Shaw 1999). Notably, West Africa is depicted as a region where 'the state's legitimacy to define rules and laws for and prescribe them to society is openly challenged and often ignored by large parts of the population', with the consequence that 'integration through law' becomes 'a very shaky construction' (Grimm 1999, 24). The literature has very much focused on informal

regional phenomenon such as informal trans-border economic activities, illicit trade flows and warlordism (Bøås, Marchand, and Shaw 1999). For instance, the literature has pointed to the importance of informal trade flows in West Africa, which might be three times larger than formal trade (Bach 2003).

Theories focusing on the predominance of informality have however some limits. First, informal dynamics can work both ways. Some informal practices, such as petty corruption at state borders and smuggling networks that exploit differences in trade and monetary policies, clearly endanger formal regional integration (Bach 2003). Informal trade and non recorded immigration can however also strengthen the regional economy and sustain a sense of regional identity among the population. Second, arguments based on informality, while they can explain why the EU model has not performed well, are much weaker at accounting for its enduring popularity and its emulation by West African organizations.

Scholars such as Fredrik Söderbaum (2004), Richard Gibb (2009) and Ian Taylor (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008; Taylor and Williams 2008) have offered a complementary explanation, which aims at accounting for both the adoption of regionalism and its mixed achievements. Neo-patrimonial theory underpins their reasoning. Söderbaum, Gibb and Taylor focus on African elites and argue that, because of their subordinate position in the international system, these elites see the formal adoption of foreign models as a way to boost their international legitimacy and obtain foreign 'resources of extraversion', such as development aid and military cooperation. Yet, they may not be seriously interested in successfully appropriating those models. The outcome is a project that is not really 'owned' by the actors involved or, at best, a syndrome of partial reform, where local actors implement only those components of a foreign-sponsored agenda that do not endanger their interests and their entrenched governance practices, depleting it of its substance. Both Gibb and Söderbaum strongly insist on the symbolic and ceremonial dimensions of regionalism and argue that 'regime boosting regionalism' (Söderbaum 2004) reinforces neo-patrimonial regimes since 'belonging to a formal, states structured, regional organisation is interpreted as an important symbol of the virility of sovereignty, as regional integration is based on and presupposes formal state sovereignty' (Gibb 2009, 716).

Although EU-Africa cooperation is officially built around the notion of 'partnership', Africanist scholars also notice that the relations between Europe and Africa continue to be shaped by the huge difference in economic and political power between the two continents. They contend that the EU is using its considerable power to diffuse, whether deliberately or not, a model of regionalism that is inappropriate to Sub-Saharan Africa. In this sense, the spread of regionalism is but the last chapter in a history marked by many

failed attempts at transferring foreign models of political and economic governance to Sub-Saharan Africa, including colonialism, post-colonial state building and structural adjustment (Gibb 2009, 702). 'Neoliberal regionalism' is seen as 'a distinctive "project", with a highly political content, fashioned and pursued by identifiable actors, institutions and interests' (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008, 26). However, such a project is bound to fail, since political elites in Sub-Saharan Africa implement neoliberal regionalism in a partial and superficial manner.

The value of the neo-patrimonial perspective is that it shows the insufficiencies of functionalist theories of integration in accounting for the complexity of West African regionalism and points to the importance of politics and the state. It also has the merit of putting the diffusion of regionalism in historical perspective, stressing its post-colonial dimension and its continuity with a history of transfer of Western models to Africa. Gibb, Söderbaum and Taylor also avoid portraying the EU as the innocent 'gold standard' of integration, seeing it instead as an actor actively engaged in promoting a model of regionalism mismatched to African realities (Gibb 2009; Söderbaum and Taylor 2008).

However, there are several problems with their perspective. First, Gibbs and Söderbaum depict African regional organization as an emanation of the interests of their member states, denying any autonomy to regional institutions. This is a vision that seems to be anchored in outdated realist IR approaches and is contradicted by a massive amount of research on international organizations. The picture that they paint of African regionalism is moreover static and exaggeratedly bleak. Gibb, for instance, characterize African regionalism as 'virtually unbroken failure' and sees only a 'litany of failed and collapsed African regional agreements' (Gibb 2009, 705) in the varied continental picture. What seems to be ignored is both the fact that the performance of regional organizations in Africa has varied very much across organizations and across domains of intervention and that regional integration is everywhere, including in Europe, an enterprise fraught with difficulties and false starts. Like constructivist IR scholars, Gibb and Söderbaum also underestimate the extent of the transfer of sovereignty to West African organizations by their member states. The normative and institutional evolution of organizations such as ECOWAS and UEMOA is denied any relevance. Initiatives such as the adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Human Rights or the attribution of a human rights mandate to the ECOWAS Court of Justice are seen as superficial actions aiming at reinforcing international legitimacy and attracting funding from donors, ignoring empirical research which paint a more positive and nuanced picture (Cowell 2011; Alter et. al. 2013). In the end, it is difficult not to see in much Africanist writing on regionalism the influence of a culturalist prejudice, which tends to reduce all African political reality to 'informal practices of social and cultural origin' (De Sardan 2010, 421). Such a reductive

vision ignores both the complexity of African reality and the need for a comparative contextualization.

### **Structural mismatch and normative emulation**

The pessimistic and critical vision of African regionalism that has dominated the literature has portrayed the failures of African regional institutions at following the EU model as a demonstration of the intrinsically dysfunctional nature of politics in Africa. One badge of problems, however, are the economic and structural bases for integration: while these are discussed in depth by the economic literature (i.e. De Melo and Tsikata 2014), they have received insufficient attention from political scientists.<sup>2</sup> If the implementation of regional commitment might not advance, but even endanger, developmental goals, then the lack of determination of African rulers to make regionalism succeed might be less a product of the nature of the state in Africa and its neo-patrimonial dysfunctions and more the outcome of legitimate political-economic concerns and divergences of interests, not different from those that have slowed down or blocked integration in other parts of the world, including Europe.

Most of the conditions that economists consider necessary for customs unions to have sizeable economic benefits, such as high levels of pre-union trade and a large number of economically strong members, are not met in African regional groupings (Hancock 2014; De Melo and Tsikata 2014). In the case of West Africa in particular, the overall economic structure, based on the export of natural resources towards more industrialized countries, does not facilitate regional integration. West African states do not produce many goods that can be sold on the regional market and there is little complementarity between the economies of the region. Indeed, ECOWAS and UEMOA trade much more with the EU than within themselves (see figures 1 and 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Gibb (2009) includes a discussion of the economic and structural basis for integration in Africa and of its potential economic impact, but subsequently ignores these constraints in his analysis of the African state.

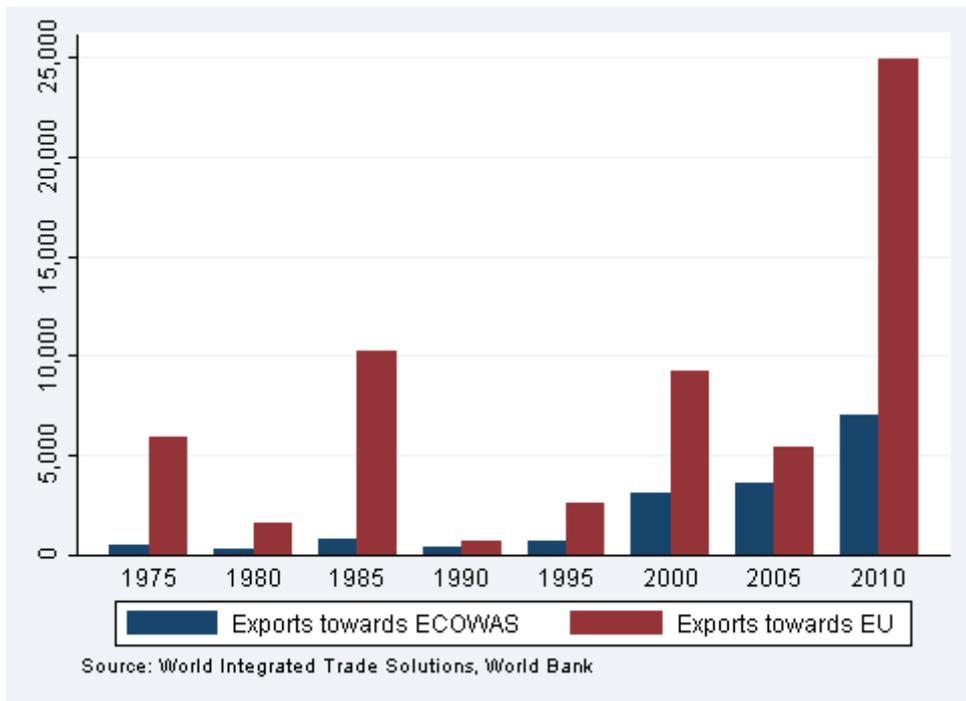


Figure 1: ECOWAS intraregional exports and exports to the EU

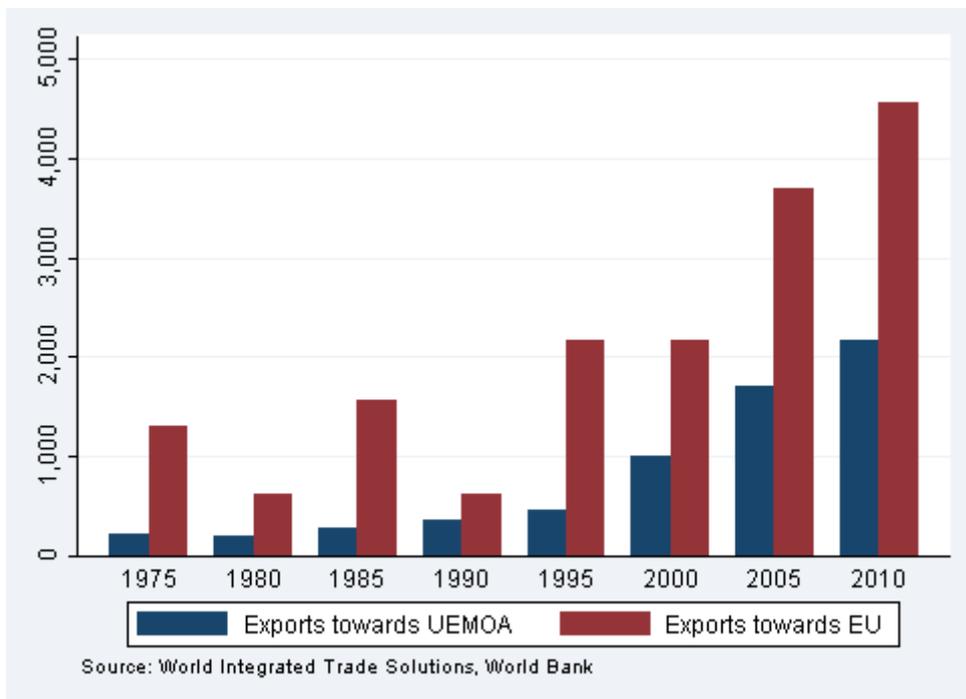


Figure 2: UEMOA intraregional exports and exports to the EU

The different stance of the Francophone and Anglophone states with respect to protectionism and monetary policy has further complicated integration across the two

blocks. Such a gap was one of the major factors accounting for the failure of ECOWAS' first Trade Liberalization Scheme and has recently slowed the process of the establishment of a customs union.

Another problem is the difference in size, population and economic importance between West African countries. Internal ECOWAS and UEMOA trade is not only small but tends to be dominated by a few countries: Nigeria on the one hand, and Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal on the other (see figures 3 and 4).

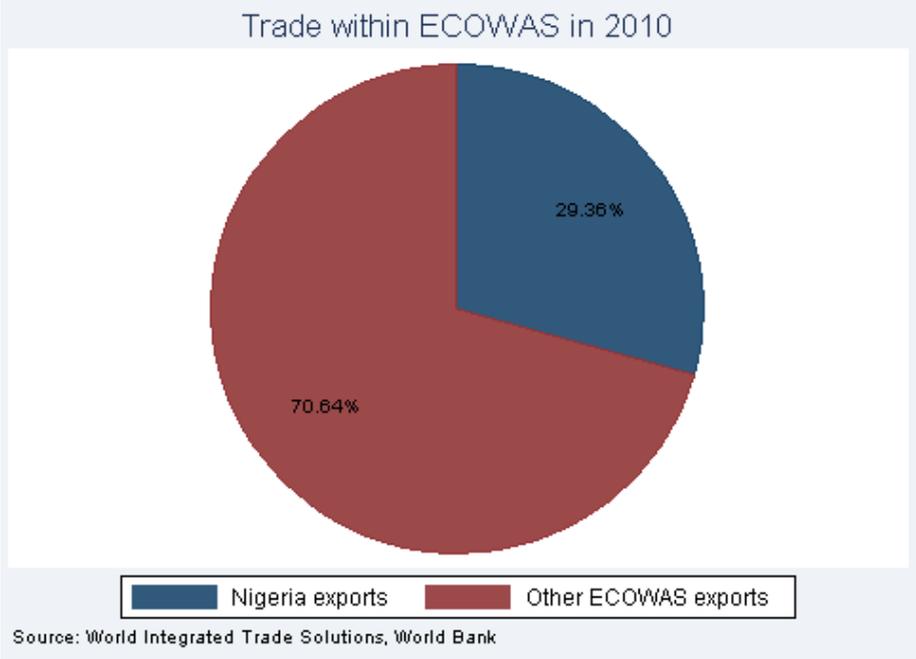


Figure 3: Dominance of Nigerian exports within ECOWAS

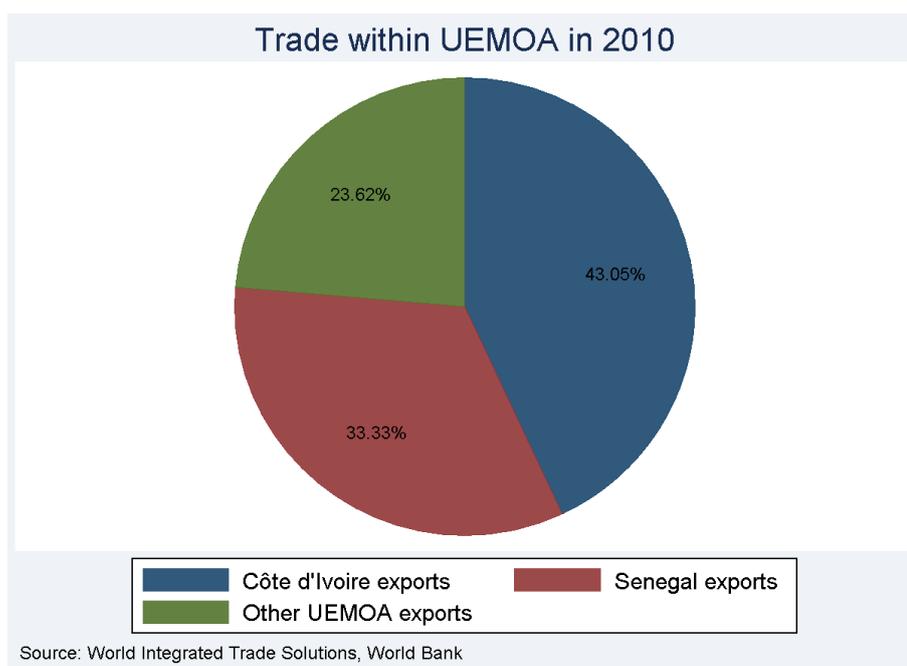


Figure 4: Dominance of exports from Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal within UEMOA

Under such circumstances, there is a strong case to argue that regional integration in Africa carries less potential gains and more risks than in highly developed regions of the world, both in the form of trade diversion and in terms of the danger that integration might disproportionately benefit the already most industrialized states (Draper 2012; De Melo and Tsikata 2014).

The experience of French speaking West Africa, which has gone further than ECOWAS in following, with apparent success, the EU model, is interesting in this respect. There are doubts about the long term impact of UEMOA and its predecessor CEAO in increasing intra-regional trade and in stimulating development in the absence of a structural transformation of its economies. Some authors have argued that the CEAO/UEMOA liberalization schemes coupled with the effect of the monetary union have been effective in enhancing trade in the current UEMOA area (Carrère 2004). However, intra-regional UEMOA trade remains low and most of the volume of trade is represented by Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal (UNECA 2010). Indeed, the fact that the two countries profited disproportionately from the CEAO integration scheme was one of the reasons for the crisis of the organization in the late 1980s (Van de Walle 1991). Moreover, UEMOA countries, with the exception of Côte d'Ivoire, are still LDCs and their growth rates in the last thirty years have been lower than the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa (Guillaumont, Geourjon and Guérineau 2012). These low growth rates are in part attributable to specific historical events, such as the effects of the devaluation of the CFA and the long phase of conflict and political unrest that has affected Côte d'Ivoire. However, the fact

that, while unsuccessful at promoting growth, UEMOA countries have been successful in maintaining low inflation rates suggests also that the monetary union and the emulation of the EU model might have encouraged them to prioritize macroeconomic stability over development.

If economic regionalism in Africa carries more dangers than benefits, why have so many organizations been set up and why have they been so resilient? Gibbs and Söderbaum view, which posits that regionalism in Africa has been often more effective in boosting international legitimacy than in addressing real-existing problems, captures in this case parts of the truth. It is however necessary to nuance their argument in two ways.

First, a long term perspective shows that some sub-regions of Africa have undergone significant external pressures in order to adopt a specific model of integration. At least for some organizations like UEMOA, the range of choices has been constrained by the heritage of colonialism and by the fact that the EEC/EU alongside former colonial power have often intervened very directly in the integration process. UEMOA members are among the poorest and weakest states in the world and they appear to have had limited leverage *vis à vis* their international partners.

Second, it is not necessary to develop theories based on African politics' allegedly unique characteristics in order to explain the mimicking by West African institutions of the EU model. Indeed, such a phenomenon can be seen through the lenses of organizational sociology (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Di Maggio and Powell 1983; Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2012). This literature sees institutional organizations as systems that 'reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 341). They are created to conform to successful models of organization that are considered legitimate, and their behaviour is driven by a concern for legitimacy rather than a preoccupation with efficiency (Jetschke 2009: 409; see also Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2012). From a theoretical point of view, normative emulation is distinct from lesson drawing, which implies that the model is seen as providing effective solutions (Jetschke and Murray 2012: 180), although empirically the distinction might not always be clear cut.

The attraction of isomorphic regionalism is by no means exclusive to Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent literature on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for instance, has underscored that, contrarily to the previous emphasis on ASEAN as an alternative model of integration, ASEAN, like ECOWAS and UEMOA, has tended to mimic the EU selectively. Even more interestingly, in ASEAN also, the adoption of foreign institutions has been motivated by, *inter alia*, the desire to attract foreign resources and has resulted in the launching of 'oversized' projects' and in a 'record of inefficiency and implementation failures' (Jetschke 2009: 409).

The incentives for seeking legitimacy through institutional isomorphism are however higher in Sub-Saharan Africa, than in other regions given the lack of material resources that shape the African reality and the dependence on foreign aid. However, this strategy has arguably stifled the development of institutions and practices that are endogenous and really adapted to the West African context (Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2012). In this respect, African regional organizations experience problems that are similar to those experienced by African nation-state institutions, whose exogenous origin and 'disconnect' from their citizens has been frequently alluded to (Englebert 2000; Moore 2004)

Exogenous development and institutional mimicry also lead to persistent capacity gaps in formal institutions, as organizations tend to enlarge their mandate to new tasks that they are not able to discharge (Moore 2004; Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2012). Indeed, lack of capacity, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, is one of the most frequent complaints of the ECOWAS and UEMOA Commissions and of their external partners. The Commission of UEMOA, although its powers and prerogatives have been carbon-copied from the EU, has around 400 staff. As UEMOA officials themselves remark, this is more or less the same number of staff members of the EU Directorate of Internal Market (Interview, UEMOA official, 14 October 2013). For several years, the ECOWAS Commission has been understaffed because of a freeze on its process of recruitment of permanent staff after some problems of mismanagement had been detected (Personal correspondence, ECOWAS official, October 2013).

ECOWAS' and UEMOA's quest for increasing their legitimacy and continuing to mimic the EU model directly or by emulating each other, has increased the risk of overburdening. For instance, in order to bring regional integration closer to the people UEMOA launched two Regional Economic Programmes (PER I and PER II) from 2006, designed by the Commission and jointly implemented by the organization and its member states. The activities financed by the PERs are very much inspired by correspondent EU Programmes (such as INTERREG and Erasmus) and it has been widely acknowledged that through the PERs UEMOA wants to do a 'job in the EU structural funds style' (Interview, Official of an EU member state embassy, Ouagadougou, 18 October 2013). However, several donors have argued that UEMOA is overburdening itself and that the implementation of the PERs should be delegated more frequently to member states and NGOs (Interview, Official of an EU member state embassy, Ouagadougou, 18 October 2013; Interview, official of a development agency, 17 October 2013, Ouagadougou). Competition between the two organizations and the logic of symbolic emulation are pushing ECOWAS to, in turn, launch a Community Development Programme, which was adopted by the Conference of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in July 2013 in Accra. While some of the

actions carried as part of the programme might be beneficial to the region, they bear similar risks of capacity overstretching.

### **The future of African regionalism**

Culturalist explanations focusing on the neo-patrimonial character of African political culture tends to be over-deterministic in predicting failure and dysfunctional behaviour. If, on the other hand, Africa is caught in a 'institutional mimicry trap', the road ahead is difficult but might not be so bleak.

Significantly, ECOWAS and UEMOA have scored their major successes in the fields where they have least imitated the EU model. ECOWAS has been a pioneer among regional organizations in pursuing a peace and security agenda that has developed as a response to specific local challenges, and not as the adoption of an abstract external model. With regard to the recent engagement of the ECOWAS Court of Justice in the fields of human rights, recent research suggests that scepticism is misplaced and that the Court has shown a real willingness to proscribe human rights violations (Alter et al 2013). In the case of UEMOA, the fact that the organization's work on fiscal harmonization has proceeded quite well can be arguably attributed to the fact that member states considered it important to strengthen their taxation system after the fiscal crisis that they experienced in the 1990s.

Regardless of the fact that West African officials have hitherto regarded the EU as a model, there are positive signs that the Euro-crisis might stimulate a more critical way of thinking. During some of the interviews conducted for the present study, a number of high ranking officials stressed the need for ECOWAS and UEMOA to take some distance from the EU and 'be more innovative' (Interview, ECOWAS senior staff, 23 October; Interview, West African politician, 29 July 2013). Although the process of retaking ownership of their own regionalism is primarily a responsibility of West Africans, the role of external partners should not be to offer lessons but to facilitate such a reflection. In particular, there is an urgent need for the EU to rethink its regional integration aid to West Africa.

Since the EU has stepped up its support for West African regional institutions, ECOWAS' and UEMOA's difficulties in absorbing and managing EU aid have emerged as a major issue (EU 2009). Because of ECOWAS' and UEMOA's limited administrative capacities much of EU funding earmarked never reaches them, but goes to external partners, such as international organizations and NGOs. Mindful that the EU continues to attach complicated procedures to its aid, officials from both ECOWAS and UEMOA often find it easier to work with national cooperation agencies (Interview, ECOWAS senior staff, 23

October; Interview Official of an EU member state embassy, Ouagadougou, 18 October 2013). In response to ECOWAS' and UEMOA's limitations, EU aid has been increasingly targeted at capacity building, through activities such as trainings and seminars (Interview EU Delegation to Nigeria and ECOWAS 2013). At the same time, however, many ECOWAS and UEMOA officials express scepticism about these activities and see the shortage of permanent staff and bureaucratic dysfunction, rather than lack of proper training, as their true problems (Interview, ECOWAS senior staff, 23 October; Interview, UEMOA staff). Rather than earmarking large amounts of aid that cannot be managed by regional institutions and that increases the phenomenon of institutional overburdening, the EU should give less and better.

Moreover, at a moment when European countries themselves are increasingly questioning the benefits of economic and monetary integration, it is important that the EU integrates a reflection on the actual gains of integration and on the most appropriate regional model for LDCs in its inter-regional policy. During the first phase of regional cooperation in Africa, the influence of the EU model, with its over-emphasis on trade and economic issues, had negative implications. This might have led African sub-regional organizations to set unrealistic economic goals and neglect key governance and security issues (Clapham 2001, 59). While the EU has more recently recognized the importance of ECOWAS' conflict management activities, in the socio-economic domain its action has continued to be guided by the implicit assumption that EU-styled regionalism is good for the region. In particular, the launching of the ECOWAS customs union has been almost forced on West Africa by the EU, through the EPA negotiations, and welcomed as a success irrespectively of its actual impact on the regional economy. While the new RIP for 2014-2020 incorporates (to some extent) the concern for reinforcing ECOWAS and UEMOA capacities to absorb aid, it continues to be underpinned by the belief that the creation of a common market will be unambiguously beneficial to West Africa. A reflection on an appropriate monetary policy for UEMOA member states and on the actual economic consequences of the ECOWAS custom union has hitherto been lacking. With special attention to the English-speaking ECOWAS countries (which have lowered their external tariffs as a consequence of the introduction of the CET), concerns are being raised about the effects on food security and key industrial productions, for instance of pharmaceuticals products.

Finally, regional integration should be judged according to the benefits that it can bring to Africa, and not in relation to the achievement of symbolic milestones. It is the responsibility of the African elite to find a model of regional cooperation adapted to the region's needs and of the added value of external partners to support, or at least not to pose obstacles in the attainment of set goals.

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