ISSN: 2977-814X
ISSUE DOI: https://doi.org/10.51596/sijocp.v2i1
Volume 2 Issue 1
journal.spacestudies.co.uk

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To cite this article:

Pretorius, O. R., van Aswegen, M., & Drewes, J. E. (2022). Trends in Regional Economic Integration in the SADC and Global South: A Mixed-Method Approach. SPACE International Journal of Conference Proceedings , 2(1), 46–55. https://doi.org/10.51596/sijocp.v2i1.54

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Article History:
Received May 5, 2022
Accepted June 18, 2022
Published Online July 25, 2022

https://doi.org/10.51596/sijocp.v2i1.54

Abstract

Economic integration through trade liberalisation constitutes a central objective of regional integration arrangements (RIAs) in the Global South. This seeks to foster increased economic interdependence and stimulate trade between member countries. In the Southern African Development Community (SADC), economic integration is a pillar of regional economic development, with reference to industrialisation and long-term socio-economic growth and development. Regional development policy, such as the Protocol on Trade, emphasises increased trade liberalisation to unlock the growth potential inherent to regional value chains. While a linear regional integration process, consisting of the eventual creation of an economic and monetary union, is envisioned in the SADC, the implementation of measures to further economic integration has stalled. The creation of a free trade area (FTA), earmarked for 2008, has failed, with preferential trade agreements in place. This paper aims to investigate trends in economic integration in the SADC and other developing country RIAs. Objectives include determining the extent to which trade liberalising policies have stimulated intra-regional trade growth and delineating recommendations to foster this outcome further. A mixed-method approach is utilised, which includes a qualitative case study analysis of economic integration policies in nine RIAs in the Global South and a quantitative analysis of the intra-regional merchandise trade growth (as a portion of total merchandise trade) per RIA in the sample (1995-2020). The findings indicate that while most of the RIAs have developed policies to support economic integration, there is divergence in current levels and growth of intra-regional trade. Two RIAs, including the SADC, have experienced more than 5% growth in this variable, while four experienced lower growth. Intra-regional trade declined in three RIAs. Applicable interventions include capacitating regional institutions to support relevant policy formulation and implementation, in addition to improving both physical and non-physical regional infrastructure to foster trade growth.

Keywords: regional integration, economic integration, regional development policy, SADC, mixed-method

1. Introduction

Economic integration has long been heralded as an instrument to stimulate increased trade

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and interdependence between partnering countries (Sapir, 2011). One of two pillars of regional integration, economic integration seeks to ease the flow of production factors, including goods, services, labour, and technology, among countries and is seen as pivotal in fostering economic growth (Mevel et al., 2016). The latter is facilitated by integrating national markets into larger regional units that enhance economies of scale, investment, productivity growth, and increased manufacturing output. This is of particular importance to developing countries and the SADC, which seek to implement policies relating to economic integration to lower tariff barriers to trade [3], including import taxes and quotas. While being central to regional development policies and objectives in the SADC, economic integration targets, which include the creation of a free trade area, customs union, single market, and an economic and monetary union (as part of the linear process of integration), has not been achieved [4]. Similar limitations to attain more profound levels of integration are also apparent in other RIAs among developing countries (Bala, 2017).

The paper aims to investigate the trends of economic integration in developing countries and the SADC. The objectives include (i) to provide an overview of the nature of policies to further economic integration and (ii) how these have stimulated intra-regional trade growth as an indicator of increased interdependence and interaction between member countries, as well as (iii) to identify factors that contribute to current trends and delineate recommendations and areas of future research toward the achievement of economic integration objectives. A mixed-method approach is applied to achieve these objectives. The qualitative component is centred on a case study analysis of the economic integration policies of nine RIAs in the Global South, including the SADC, while a quantitative analysis of the intra-regional trade growth in the selected RIAs is applied to determine the extent of economic integration.

This research contributes to the current literature by applying a mixed-method approach to investigating economic integration within the mentioned spatial contexts. Existing research on the theme is centred on the impact of increased intra-regional trade on specific sectors (Fadeyi et al., 2014), fostering resilience through regional integration (Pretorius et al., 2017), the role of regional integration in stimulating economic development in southern Africa (Piazolo, 2002), and the nexus between selective trade liberalisation, market access, and integration into the world economy (Robles, 2008). The structure of the paper includes a review of relevant literature, an extended discussion of the methodology, the findings of the analysis and the related discussion, as well as the conclusion and recommendation.

2. Literature Review

Regional integration depends on two crucial pillars: economic integration and spatial integration. Supporting both economic and spatial integration is important for developing countries aiming to foster trade and increased interaction between one another within the framework of regional integration (Lakshmanan, 2001). The focus of this paper, being economic integration, seeks to eliminate tariff barriers to trade and stimulate trade and economic interaction between member countries and their activity centres (Pretorius & Drewes, 2016). As an equally important facilitator of regional integration, spatial integration supports the development of cross-country infrastructural linkages. These infrastructural linkages facilitate the physical movement of traded goods and consumers between countries, a direct consequence of economic integration ([1]; Lakshmanan, 2001:8). Trade between participating countries in the regional grouping is referred to as intra-regional trade.

The process of economic integration involves linear stages of trade liberalisation, policy harmonisation, and initiatives promoting intra-regional factor mobility [2], which Peters-Berries (2010:34) refers to as the neoclassical model of integration. From this point of view, economic integration is initialised by the establishment of the FTA, which entails the removal of all tariff barriers to trade between the signatory countries. In many cases, however, a Preferential FTA is initially signed to remove tariffs on selected imports, gradually allowing complete trade liberalisation (Clausing, 2001). While the countries in the FTA undertake measures to liberalise trade among themselves, participating regions retain sovereignty over trade policy with non-FTA regions, allowing them to construct and retain tariffs charged on imports from third-party countries not part of the agreement (Krishna, 2005:2). FTA is usually followed by the establishment of a customs union, which necessitates the harmonisation of tariffs charged on imports from third-party countries, with member countries agreeing on a common external tariff (Mattli, 1999:32). The establishment of customs unions allows member countries to harmonise their trade policy and to form a single trading entity on the global stage. In this process, member countries forfeit a degree of policy-making ability to regional planning agents on a supranational level (Caporaso, 1998).

In the neoclassical model, the customs union is a prelude to establishing a single market (Dorrucci et al., 2005:220). This establishes the freedom of movement for production factors between member countries (Peters-Berries, 2010:33). The creation of a single market necessitates considerable policy harmonisation in several policy areas, including economic policy, trade, and transportation (Mattli, 1999:36). The drive for economic integration culminates in the establishment of the economic and monetary union (Feldstein, 1997). This includes the creation of a single regional currency and harmonised fiscal policy, eliminating fluctuations in exchange rates of member states and their effect on intra-regional trade (Mattli, 1999:36). As policy harmonisation is key to accomplishing comprehensive economic integration, relevant policy-making functions of member states are absorbed by regional supranational institutions overseeing the integration process (Pretorius & Drewes, 2016).

Tumwebaze and Ijjo (2015:74) state that integration initiatives may enhance growth-inducing factors, such as capital formation and inflows, which may contribute to regional economic growth. Schiff and Winters (1998:184) note that integration's effect on market enlargement, capital formation, and industrialisation constitutes a significant contribution to regional economic growth. According to Devlin and French-Davis (1999:277), regional integration supports an economic environment conducive to foreign direct investment, as increased integration illustrates the willingness of public entities to pursue liberalised policies. Developing regions heavily depend on investment from external countries to stimulate capital accumulation for increased productivity (Rosenstein-Rodan, 1943). However, the inflow of foreign direct investment is influenced by confidence in the economy and public sector policies. Schiff and Winters (1998:180) add that economic integration, which merely fosters trade liberalisation, may decrease the movement of FDI between member states, as reduced transaction costs increase the attractiveness of trade relative to investment. On the other hand, deeper integration may stimulate capital inflows as external regions seek to extract opportunity from an integrated regional market, with foreign entities often having a presence in one member country while servicing the entire regional grouping (Schiff & Winters, 1998:190). While economic integration may be attractive to FDI, comprehensive public sector policy is necessary to sustain investment inflows.

3. Methodology

The methodology is centred on a mixed-method approach that includes both a qualitative and quantitative component. The former includes a case study analysis where the policies relating to economic integration in RIAs among developing countries, one of which is the SADC, are studied. This relates to the research objective of providing an overview of the nature of current policies and how RIAs have sought to foster increased interaction and cooperation among member countries through applying economic integration and, inter alia, related trade liberalisation. The criteria used to identify the appropriate RIAs that form part of this analysis are that (i) participating countries proactively seek to increase mutual interaction through the implementation of policies that support economic integration, (ii) participating countries are developing countries, (iii) the RIAs seek to implement a linear approach to economic integration, and (iv) supranational institutions coordinate the implementation of economic integration objectives within a larger framework of regional development policy. Through the application of this criteria, nine RIAs are identified and included in the analysis, including the SADC, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Central American Common Market (CACM), the Andean Community (CAN), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC), the East African Community (EAC), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). The second component of the methodology is the quantitative analysis of economic integration in the sample RIAs. The aim here is to analyse the growth of intra-regional merchandise trade among participating countries in each RIA as a portion of the total regional merchandise trade. Intra-regional trade is used as a proxy of economic integration (Pretorius et al., 2017) and is seen to have a direct proportional relationship. A 25-year time period is delineated to investigate the trends in this variable (1995-2020), with the data sourced from the UNCTADstat [5] database. This component relates to the research aim of determining the trends in economic integration and discussing the effects of policy on integration.

4. Findings

This section integrates the findings inherent to the qualitative case study analysis and the quantitative analysis. The first RIA discussed is the SADC. The economic integration objectives of SADC include the creation of the Preferential FTA in 2000, an FTA in 2008, a customs union in 2010, a single market in 2015, and an economic and monetary union in 2016 [6; 7]. Despite these objectives, the trade liberalisation in SADC equates to its function as a Preferential FTA [8], with tariffs eliminated for selected goods traded intra-regionally. However, attempts to increase market access have been stymied by the pronounced role of national planning authorities and national transport sectors, negating investment and physical infrastructure development [9]. Improving interoperability is prioritised by the Protocol on Trade, which supports the development of a regional network of transport networks seamlessly connecting SADC member countries [10].

On the other hand, economic integration in the ASEAN is motivated by several objectives, including increased competitiveness and innovation within an integrated regional market, increased connectivity and inter-sectoral interaction, and resilience in regional economic growth [11]. In this regard, a preferential free trade agreement was established in 1993 with the aim of liberalising trade between member countries. In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was established to encourage increased functional integration between the member countries within a single ASEAN market, easing the movement of traded goods and production factors in the region [12].

The CACM forms part of the institutional framework of the Central American Integration System (SICA), a system of governmental arrangement and supranational institutions that promote and oversee different aspects of integration between member countries (Genna, 2017:167). These supranational institutions and intergovernmental arrangements contribute to regional integration in the CACM through their advisory roles in policy and information-gathering capabilities that inform decision-making. However, these institutions and arrangements have had limited success in fostering deeper economic integration in the region as there has been limited coordination and harmonisation of monetary and fiscal policy between member countries (Genna, 2017:167).

In 2005, the CAN single market became operational as trade and factor mobility between member countries was enhanced through visa-free regional travel. In addition, 2006 saw Peru wholly incorporated into the free trade area, which was first conceived in 1993 [13]. Increased functional interaction is a long-standing objective of the predominantly small island economies of the CARICOM region. The objective of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) is to increase investment, the competitiveness of regional manufacturers, economies of scale, the regional economy's growth, and enhance the economic prosperity of the regional population. The single market is to "provide the foundation for growth and development" in the region [14].

Within the CEMAC, the economic integration objectives include intra-regional trade stimulation to harness increased investment and economic growth in the region [15]. The CEMAC's preceding regional integration arrangements succeeded in creating a customs and monetary union, wherein a common external tariff was created, and a single regional currency was utilised. However, the freedom of movement of production factors was not guaranteed in the customs and monetary union [15]. Accordingly, the CEMAC created an economic and monetary union in 1994 (ratified in 1999), constituting a single, integrated market with a shared currency [15].

The first economic integration objective reached by the EAC was the establishment of the EAC Customs Union in 2005 [16]. The second economic integration objective was reached in 2010 with the establishment of the single market or the EAC Common Market. This common market ensures various freedoms and rights for residents of member countries, including the freedom of movement for labour, goods, services, capital, and people within the regional market, as well as the right of establishment and residence for the region's residents. The common market was established with the objective of accelerating regional economic growth through increased functional interaction and intra-regional trade [16].

The objective of regional integration in the SAARC is to increase functional interaction to foster stability, peace, and economic growth in the member countries of the South Asian region [17]. The formation of an Economic Union (SAEU) is the final objective of the SAARC, which is to be preceded by establishing a free trade area, a customs union, and a single market [18]. After the formation of the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1995, the next step of economic integration and trade liberalisation was achieved with the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2006 [19].

Within the WAEMU, a regional common currency is in operation to create an economic union between the member countries (Thiam, 2014:2047). In this regard, while a common currency is in place, the WAEMU is still seeking increased trade liberalisation and the establishment of a common external tariff inherent to a customs union (Thiam, 2014:2047). Currently, there is a substantial deficiency in national and regional transport infrastructure to enhance trade facilitation in the WAEMU, with Thiam (2014:2047) identifying said infrastructure gaps as essential to address to achieve improved regional economic integration and growth.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of total merchandise trade per RIA that can be attributed to trade between member countries from 1995-2020. This is used to indicate the trends in economic integration between participating member countries during this period (see section 3).

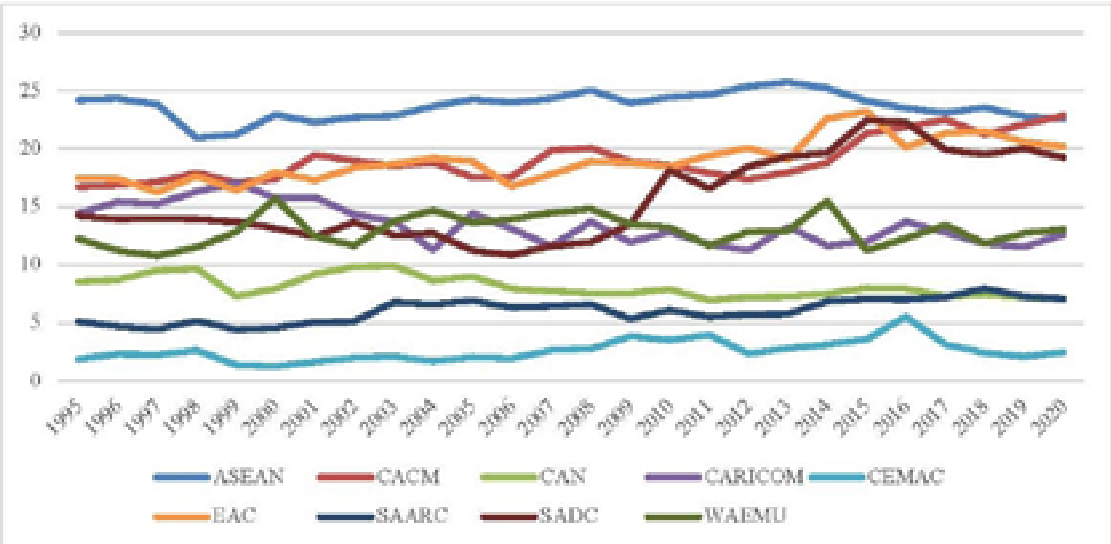

Figure 1. Intra-regional merchandise trade trends per RIA (Authors, 2022)

In terms of the current levels of intra-regional trade (as of 2020), the average portion of trade that is intra-regional among the sample RIAs is 14.12%, of which the leading RIAs are the CACM (22.83%), the ASEAN (22.62%), the EAC (20.18%), and the SADC (19.24%). This is followed by the WAEMU (13.05%) and the CARICOM (12.60%). The RIAs with the lowest portion of intra-regional trade as a percentage of total trade are the SAARC (7.04%), the CAN (7.01%), and the CEMAC (2.47%). The remainder of the trade is attributed to extra-regional trade, which is trade with countries outside each defined RIA. In terms of the growth trends of this variable, intra-regional trade has increased, on average, by 1.37% in the sample during the delineated period. As evident in Figure 1, the CACM (6.09%) and the SADC (5.03%) are the only two regions where intra-regional trade growth increased by more than 5%. This is followed by the EAC (2.67%) and the SAARC (1.95%), while the WAEMU and the CEMAC saw marginal growth of 0.83% and 0.64%, respectively. Intra-regional trade decreased over this period in three RIAs, with the most significant downturn in the CARICOM (1.81%), followed by a decrease of 1.58% in the ASEAN and 1.50% in the CAN. The downturn in intra-regional trade in the ASEAN may be due to a substantial increase (7.20%) in trade with other Asian countries over this period. To the same end, trade between the CAN and countries outside its continental and regional vicinity (i.e. the rest of the world) has increased by 1.50%, the same number by which intra-regional trade decreased between 1995 and 2020. In the context of the SADC, while Figure 1 illustrates that intra-regional trade increased by 5.03%, the trends among member countries differ and range from an increase of 30.38% in Eswatini, 29.05% in Zimbabwe and 20.30% in Lesotho, to 0.31% in Madagascar and a decline of 5.94% in Mozambique. South Africa, the dominant economy in the region, saw an increase in SADC trade of 3.74% in the delineated period.

5. Discussion

Findings from the case study analysis indicate that economic integration is widely implemented among developing countries as an active measure to eliminate barriers to regional trade, stimulate trade between regional partners, and share in the economic benefits of increased functional interaction. It is, however, evident that the degree of economic integration differs between the sample RIAs, both in terms of the objectives and policy measures they implement and the effects of said policy mechanisms in stimulating increased economic cooperation in the form of increased intra-regional trade. The latter finding relates to the quantitative analysis, which indicates that while some RIAs display a degree of intra-regional trade, mostly with reference to the ASEAN, the SADC, the CACM, and the EAC, the marginal growth that did take place in this variable over a 25-year period is mostly limited to the SADC and the CACM. Table 1 indicates the level of economic integration per RIA, their current levels, and growth in intra-regional trade.

Table 1. Economic integration levels and intra-regional trade trends (Authors, 2022)

Region	Degree of economic integration	Current intra-regional trade (%)	Intra-regional trade growth (%)
ASEAN	Preferential free trade agreement	22.62	-1.58
SADC	Preferential free trade agreement	19.24	5.03
SAARC	Free trade area	7.04	1.95
CACM	Customs union	22.83	6.09
CAN	Single market	7.01	-1.50
CARICOM	Single market	12.60	-1.81
EAC	Single market	20.18	2.68
WAEMU	Currency union	13.05	0.83
CEMAC	Economic and monetary union	2.47	0.64

As illustrated in Table 1, there is a limited relationship between the level of economic integration and the extent of intra-regional trade, both in terms of its current quantity and growth over time. This may indicate that factors other than the level of integration inherent to the neoclassical model, and the related economic integration policy measures, influence growth in intra-regional trade. To this end, Bala (2017:29) states that there are certain factors that influence member countries "adhering to regional arrangements", which consequently influence the success of these initiatives in fostering economic integration. This includes limited physical infrastructure to facilitate increased trade as a result of trade liberalisation, lack of coordination in funding interventions toward increased cooperation, lack of political leadership and willingness to cede a degree of national sovereignty to supranational institutions and policymakers; revenue dependence of member countries on taxes and duties levied on imports that limits appetites to liberalise trade and reduce tariff barriers; different currencies among member countries that make transactions between different countries more difficult; and export markets among member countries are underdeveloped and unable to leverage stimulating effects of trade liberalisation (Bala, 2017). While the SADC has seen some growth in intra-regional trade, this RIA has also experienced challenges in furthering economic integration. This includes setting unrealistic integration targets, which create a perception of failure of the region's initiatives and limits future political buy-in (Mapuva & Muyengwa-Mapuva, 2014); lack of export diversity and industrial capacity to stimulate intra-regional trade (Tanyanyiwa & Hakuna, 2014). In addition, an often-emphasised factor attributed to limited intra-regional trade growth in the SADC is the lack of physical infrastructure in the region to facilitate trade between member countries. Relevant here is the need for increased spatial integration to support economic integration, with the former supporting the movement of production factors between countries through developing physical (transport infrastructure and trade corridors) and non-physical (interoperability and market access) infrastructure (Pretorius et al. 2022). The lack of a regional development fund to coordinate investment into spatial interventions to improve trade facilitation (Pretorius et al., 2022) is another factor limiting intra-regional trade in this regard. Central in overseeing this holistic process of integration are supranational institutions and their role of harmonising various national policies into a regional directive, which requires a degree of centralisation of policy formulation and decision-making at the supranational level (Caporaso, 1998). However, the SADC supranational institutions are seen as incapacitated or "weak" (Tanyanyiwa & Hakuna, 2014:113), a consequence of which is the limited implementation of regional development policy and frameworks.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate the trends of economic integration in developing countries and the SADC. The case study analysis indicated that RIAs have policies centred on supporting economic integration, ranging from preferential free trade agreements created in the SADC and the ASEAN, a customs union in the CACM, and single markets in the CAN, the CARICOM, and the EAC. The quantitative analysis indicated that while some regions display a degree of intra-regional trade, growth in this indicator has been limited in the sample and has declined in three RIAs over a 25-year period. It is also found that the level of economic integration (with reference to the neoclassical model) does not indicate the degree of trade cooperation between member countries. This may illustrate that other factors potentially hinder further economic integration and intra-regional trade. Recommendations toward achieving integration objectives in the SADC and other developing country RIAs include the development of physical infrastructure linkages through spatial integration to facilitate increased interaction and mobility of traded goods and factors of production. Although not the focus of this paper, integration initiatives are dependent on both economic and spatial integration to foster increased interaction between the economic centres of member countries. Creating a regional development fund in the SADC would enable the coordination of investment for spatial interventions and projects. Non-physical trade facilitating infrastructure is also required, including coordinating transport policies between the member countries, harmonising regulations relating to transnational transportation, and standardising the safety and technical standards of the respective participating countries. To coordinate this process and the broader policy harmonisation required for increased economic integration, supranational institutions ought to be adequately funded and capacitated to achieve their mandate successfully. The latter would also require a degree of regionalisation of policymaking functions – from the national to supranational level. This requires buy-in from political leadership in individual member countries. Future research should investigate additional factors limiting intra-regional trade growth in developing countries' RIAs. This includes the effect of external economic disturbances, the role of regional supply chains and the linkages to global value chains, and how economic divergence between member countries may influence trade relationships and outcomes of economic integration initiatives.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2022 on City Planning and Urban Design.

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