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The Necessity Energizing of Regional Integration Agreements in Central Africa

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With a view of overcoming structural handicaps of their development and to reaping advantages on regional integration, Central African countries committed themselves upon independences to regional integration’s initiatives. In fact, regional integration in Central Africa has a long history, even dating from colonial era when the countries other than Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea formed the federal of “Afrique Equatoriale Française”. In 1964 in Brazzaville (Congo), the regime promoting intra-regional trade, UDEAC (Union Douanière et Economique de l’Afrique Central) was formed. Reflecting an inward-looking regionalism of the 1960’s, UDEAC resulted in the creation of a highly distorted, fragmented, and ad hoc, import-substitution trade policy under the guise of regional integration. In 1994, UDEAC was restructured to face challenges related to excessive protection, low customs revenue, intra-regional distortions in production, and the low level of trade with the rest of the world. It was also renamed the Central African Economic Union (Union Economique de l’Afrique Central – UEAC). UEAC and the “Union Monétaire de l’Afrique Central” became the CEMAC (Central Afriacn Economic and Monetary Union) under a treaty signed in 1994. So, our paper will deal with CEMAC’s countries that are the following: Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. These six (6) countries are partially linked by economies ties and more by history. With its vast geographic area of roughly 3 million square kilometres, Central Africa is the smallest sub-region of the current African regional arrangements with a population of about 31 million inhabitants.

About 40 yeas after les independences, and despite countries’ infatuation and their potentials for a regional integration, progress towards regional integration has been very modest, apart from a few tariff reductions. In this respect, our paper will propose measures aimed at revamping regional integration in Central Africa (section 2). Prior to that, we will make an evaluation of regional integration’s initiatives in Central Africa (Section 1).

Section 1 – Evaluation of regional integration’s integration in Central Africa

After mentioning forces and obstacles regarding regional integration in Central Africa, we will highlight some successes and failures.

1.1 – Forces and obstacles

1.1.1 – Forces for regional integration

A number of real positive factors for integration and cooperation exist in Central Africa.

First and foremost, the institutional architecture of CEMAC has been put into place gradually since the CEMAC Treaty was signed in March 1994 and was ratified in December 1999. Organic texts provide a blueprint of the objectives of the economic union-the creation of a common market for goods, services, capital and eventual free movement of people, and a concomitant change of strategy from inward looking import-substitution to more open regionalism. The Union's objectives are to be achieved through the customs union and the monetary union and special attention to macroeconomic policy convergence and coordinated sector policies. The common market is to be completed at the end of three 5-years phases. CEMAC's Executive Secretariat, in Bangui, is the operational branch of the Community and is under the authority of the executive organs, the Conference of the Heads of State, which meets at least once a year, and the Council of Ministers, which decides all major policies. The Executive Secretariat is different from the UEMOA Commission in that it does not include Commissioners appointed by the member states and is therefore closer to the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Executive Secretariat model.

Another institutional force for integration, and indirectly for facilitating links with UEMOA (West Africa Economic and Monetary Union), is the implementation of the unified, and modernized, business law under the OHADA[1] program which has been adopted by 16 francophones countries of Africa, including all CEMAC countries. OHADA is described as " a legal instrument conceived and realized by Africa to serve African integration and growth". With its Permanent Secretariat in Yaoundé, it is still, however, in its implementation stage.

Secondly, there exists a number of specific **cooperative initiatives and projects** which can contribute to strengthening regional integration. We can mention the US$3.7 billion Cameroon-Chad pipeline project supported by the Bank, which is one of the largest of its kind, and will create a strong link – both physical and as a cooperative framework-for integration between one of the poorer landlocked countries and the richer coastal neighbour. In a different sphere, a project for modernization of the banking payments systems (approved by the Board of IDA in July 2002) is the first truly regional Bank-supported project in that it involves all of the six countries, all the banks and, of course, the central bank. Finally, the sharing of environmental information under the multi-year Regional Environmental Information Management Project (REIMP) started in 1998, and the recently-established *Conseil des Ministres des Fôrets d'Afrique Centrale (COMIFAC),* which includes the Democratic Republic of Congo, has created a framework for regional cooperation for natural resource management.

Third, the countries of Central Africa share a number of **commonalities** (both positive and negative external economics) that by their very nature raise trans-border issues and are therefore best managed in cooperation. The Tropical forest and rivers system are the most common public goods. Among the common "bads", the HIV/AIDS pandemic has a specific

[1] OHADA (Organisation pour l'Harmonisation du Droit des Affaires en Afrique) –Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa- is a French-sponsored initiative for the modernization and harmonisation of business laws in 16 francophone countries in Africa. It was established in 1993 but the actual implementation began in 1998.

dimension in the transmission of the disease along the transport corridor – roads and rivers – that link the coast and the hinterland. Two regional health organizations exist: the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office based in Brazzaville and the (now revamped) *Organisation de Lutte Contre le Grandes Endémies*, formally a specialized agency of CEMAC.

Fourth, a unified, or at least coodinated, Central Africa region would be a stronger voice in "post Doha" and other important, international trade negotiations in the coming years. Acting in concert may improve returs; for example, CEMAC has been able to join forces with ECOWAS to help put the issue of cotton prices on the international agenda. Last and not least, the new Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) should be an added stimulus for CEMAC to accelerate the pace of integration inasmuch as regional integration arrangements are expected to be the pillars of this initiative.

1.1.2 – Obstacles to regional integration

The main economic factors – low growth, poor infrastructure, vulnerability to volatile oil prices, and disparities between coastal and landlocked countries – have created serious barriers to economic integration. Because of **the absence of a strong growth pole**, CEMAC has not generated sufficient dynamism to pull the regional economies and encourage integration. As noted, historically, growth has been sluggish, with Chad and CAR being the worst performers and Gabon the best. But Gabon is still small in the regional context and its skewed structure dominated by commodity exports provides few backward or forward linkages with the neighboring countries. Furthermore, the regional non-oil economy, including Cameroon, has fared poorly. Non-oil GDP has increased by a very modest annual rate of 0.5 percent from 1960 to 2000 and therefore declined on a per capita basis.

A severe constraint continues to be poor transport infrastructures. Due to a combination of dense forest and insufficient maintenance, the road network is inadequate, and there is not a well-developed network connecting the capital cities. The transport network still consists of a little less than 7,000 km of water, rail, and road linkages, with 1,575 km of river, 2,000 km of rail, and 3,300 km of paved roads. The landlocked countries depend on overland transport to obtain energy and other imports, and thus their vulnerability to disruptions in supply lines is heightened. The Douala-Bangui corridor and the Pointe Noire-Brazzaville-Bangui corridors are weak with both physical and informal road blocks increasing the transactions costs of doing business.

A lack of economic complementarity resulting from the dominance of primary exports, undeveloped industries (except to a limited extend in Cameroon), poor communications and the rivalries observed between the countries, translates into a very low level of intra-regional trade, labor and capital linkages despite the customs and monetary union. Intra-regional trade is currently estimated at about 5% of total trade in the region, even lower than that of CEMAC's regional counterpart UEMOA (historically around 10%, and 14% in 2000), as well as SADC (13%) and Mercosur (22%). Particularly notable and damaged are the restrictions limiting labour mobility (including the difficulties of business travel) between the CEMAC countries, despite the wage differentials between the poorer and richer countries. Fundamental factors are the very small population in oil-producting countries and, consequently, their fear that any sizeable immigration would create dangerous imbalances and social tensions in local communities. Harassment by customs officials, unemployment and discrimination against foreigners in recipient countries have acted as unofficial but powerful deterrents to immigration.

A third obstacle to regional integration is the economic **asymmetries between the richer coastal economics and the poorer landlocked economics.** Cameroon, CEMAC's largest economy, constitutes close to 50 percent of regional GDP, while Gabon makes up close to another 25 percent. In terms of populations, the terms are similar, except that Gabon's share of CEMAC's population is less than 4 percent while Chad's share is close to 25 percent. Large incomes disparities, combined with large differences in economic dynamism, have unavoidably created fears of further and perhaps accelerated inequalities between countries, and a situation of rivalry rather than a sense of shared and increased prosperity.

The most serious obstacles to regional integration, however, are **in the realm of politics and security**. First there have been open conflicts within countries. Chad, the CAR and Congo have had bloody civil wars, coups d'état, and violent ethnic conflicts over the last twenty years. Chad has seen recurring armed chashes in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country, as well as at the border with CAR. The Central African Republic has been plagued by uncertain oscillations between authoritarian and pseudo-democratic rule due to chronic military unrest. The recent battle for Bangui (October 2002) is but one manifestation of a continuing profound political crisis .The attempted military takeover has been repelled by government forces and armed groups from other countries. Such foreign interventions, reportedly, are not without links to illegal trafficking in gold or diamonds, among others. In the Republic of Congo, armed ethnic conflict in 1998 and 1999, mostly around the capital of Brazzaville, resulted in over 50,000 deaths. There are still reports of armed rebel groups active in the lower Congo, as well as border incidents at the border with the Angolan enclave of Cabinda. Also, as in many other African countries these days, numerous legal or illegal roadblocks, and in cases sheer banditry, represent costly impediments to travel and trade.

In addition to their own internal problems, Central African economies have faced contagious effects from conflicts in Nigeria, DRC, Sudan and Angola. Also, it is not clear whether Nigeria has accepted or rejected (October 2002) the recent decision by the U.N. International Court of the Hague to declare Cameroon the legitimate owner of the supposed oil rich border island of Bakassi. Finally, the two countries, Cameroon and Gabon, which have had stable regimes for many years, which furthermore are economically more developed and which therefore should have been champions for regional integration, have not yet played the leadership role that might have been expected from them. In short, important aspects of the regional political and security context are at odds with the underlying forces for integration

1.2 – Some successes and failures

1.2.1 – Successes

1.2.1.1 – Regarding trade

The unilateral and preferential trade reforms experienced in CEMAC's countries from has positively impacted on the trend of trade flows as well as on some macroeconomic variables.

In fact, export volumes posted impressive gains in CEMAC as a whole as from 1994, growing on average by about 4.08% per annum in constant US$ of 1987 and by about 20.58 % per annum in current local currency (compared to 2.26 % and –4.18 % during 1991-1993). These rates were 3.31% and 40.17 % in Gabon and 11.28 % and 48.56 % in Chad respectively (Giorgio Barba Navaretti et al, 1998). The growth of exports of manufactures was relatively strong, with the share in total exports of nonfactor goods and services increasing from 3.86% in 1994 to 5.19 % in 1996 in constant US$ of 1987 (compared to 3.95% on average for the period 1991-1993). For Sub-Saharan Africa, these rates were respectively 4.09 % and 4.20 % during the same period (Idem).

As concerns the imports of nonfactor goods and services, they also increased significantly as a share of GDP, growing from 34,5% in 1994 to 38.7 % in 2000 (BEAC, 2001).

Regarding macroeconomic variables, we pointed out the GDP growth and the investment rates. In general, figures for these variables show that, on average, the CEMAC countries fared much better as from 1994 than before as shown in Annex 1. Figures on investment rates show sufficient involvement of the private sector in economic activities in the sub-region.

Concerning trade flows within the sub-region, imports of CEMAC as a share of total imports of the community has increased from 2.31 % in 1985 to 9.6% in 1996. The percentages for exports are respectively 1.9% and 3.04%. This performance comes principally from the preferential reform whose effects on internal trade flows are positive and more important than the impact of unilateral liberalization (Bamou, E, 2001). In volumes, exports and imports for the sub-region as a whole have increased from 153.0 millions of US$ in 1985 to 393.1millions of US$ in 1997.

These successes seem to be insignificant regarding failures recorded on the way of regional integration in Central Africa.

1.2.1.2 – Regarding macroeconomic policy convergence and surveillance

CEMAC's macroeconomic policies mix seeks primarily to maintain the nominal peg and protect the real exchange rate under the regime of a fixed nominal rate with the Euro, and furthermore to achieve the objective of price stability (the central bank statutory objective). The tension between monetary and fiscal policy common to most countries is obviously complicated by the fact that monetary policy is entirely in the hands of the common central bank whereas the six different member governments are still in control of fiscal policies. Hence, the need for a regional "convergence pact", a set of four main criteria and the establishment of a system of multilateral surveillance.

Since 1994, BEAC's monetary policy has been moving from direct controls to market based instruments. It is set in the framework of periodic (bi-annual) "monetary programs" taking account of all relevant domestic and external macroeconomic parameters with a view to ensuring sufficient liquidity in the economies by re-financing banks through a combination of purchase/repurchase of central bank paper and compulsory reserves. At the same time, direct advances to governments by BEAC will be phased out over a ten-year period starting in 2004, when the first treasury bill issue (by one or more governments) is scheduled to take place. A central bank-intermediated money market has developed though still on a modest scale. Interest rates are set by the central bank for its own interventions (currently up to 8.35% with 15% penalty rates beyond a certain point) and freely by banks (with an authorized upper limit of 18% for loans and a minimum of 5% for term deposits). Monetary policy has been effective in keeping inflation low in the sub-region. As an extension to the modernization of the financial sector, preparatory steps are being taken by the central bank, commercial banks and governments to establish a market for government paper (see the section on financial sector integration below).

While the essential rationale for seeking macroeconomic convergence is protection of the fixed exchange rate, the predominance of fiscal criteria can also be traced to the serious mismanagement of public sector finances in the 1980s and early 1990s in both CFAF zones which contributed toward the CFA franc devaluation of 1994, as well more recent deviations in some of the member countries. The fiscal discipline that observance of the convergence criteria implies is thus directly complementary to the strict rules for monetary policy embedded in the Convention of the Monetary Union for Central Africa (*Union Monétaire d'Afrique Centrale – UMAC).*

Not surprisingly, performance under the convergence criteria has been mixed. Over the five years from 1997-2002, there was a pattern of overall progress, but deviations were the rule rather than the exception in every year for at least one criterion in at least one country. Each member country has been requested by the regional authorities to prepare a three-year convergence plan for 2002-2004. CEMAC's ability to enforce the convergence criteria is limited to the publicity that may accompany the bi-annual "surveillance reports" and other forms of peer pressure. These are considered by the monetary authorities the only practical sanctions with which to penalize diverging nations in the current political context. However, there is the danger of slippage with regard to the fiscal balance because of the volatility of oil revenues in the sub-region. There is thus the risk that in times of depressed oil prices, slippages would be accepted as being the result of exceptional circumstances, while in times of high oil prices, tendencies towards fiscal profligacy would not be constrained (IMF, 2002). A downturn in the oil market in the near term could result in growing fiscal deficits if public spending were to continue at the previous rate.

1.2.2 – Failures

1.2.2.1 – Insufficiency of intra-communitarian trade

In general, trade is very low among CEMAC's countries. In 2000, it counted about 1.2% of the overall exports of CEMAC and about 3.1% of overall imports. These figures don't included informal trade which is very significant in the sub-region, in particular in terms of consumption products. Its big failure since the regional integration's initiatives didn't boost trade among CEMAC's countries.

In fact, when a country committed itself in a regional integration process with a limited number of partners, it looks for two types of effects: the traffic creation and/or diversion effect (Balassa, 1975). The creation effect appears when the less expensive imports from a partner country are replacing the onerous domestic production of the substituted products (Ondo Ossa, 2005).

1.2.2.2 – Difficult establishment of a common market: the issue the Customs Union

The "common market" to be established refers to the following three markets: goods and services, capital and labour. Clearly each "market" involves different requirements and will proceed along a different calendar. The free movement of capital is inherent in the monetary union and linked to the effective integration of the financial sector discussed above. Issues related to the free movement of people are noted later. The first focus here is on the goods market, i.e., the customs union.

The implementation of a functioning customs union can be characterized as a program to move forward from the 1994 tax and customs reform, the so-called *"Réforme Fiscalo-Douanière"*, or RFD in short. The principal thrust of the reforms was to liberalizing and simplifying the system by introducing a common external tariff, eliminating country-specific temporary surtaxes, removing all intra-zone tariffs by 2000 and non-tariff barriers for locally produced products, and replacing the fragmented indirect tax system with a uniform value-added tax (VAT) by 1999. the reforms may have contributed to the 6.8% yearly increase of intra-regional trade over the 8 years to 2001 (IMF trade statistics). Unfortumately, there are no numbers for non-official trade.

The RFD was a major improvement over the previous regime. However, a late 1999 review found that although governments did confirm their commitment to the reform, they were, in varying degree, in breach of one or more provisions regarding customs duties and indirect taxes. The most frequent deviations were: (a) the persistence of ad hoc duty and/or tax exonerations; (b) misclassification of products; (c) disagreements on the definition of products of (local) origin, and general dissatisfaction with the rules of origin; (d) non-elimination or incomplete reduction of intra-regional tariffs (which were supposed to have been eliminated at the end of 1998); (e) the persistence of, or even introduction of, miscellaneous surcharges; and (f) double taxation of products in transit from the port of entry (mainly Douala) and the landlocked countries. These difficulties refer only to the tax-customs reform, not to the multiplicity of other "behind the border" impediments to trade. These are a separate and more problematic agenda, one of which the CEMAC authorities are well aware but ill-equipped to tackle. The Secretariat also noted problems with the qualifications and behaviour of customs officials and the lack of sanctions for non-observance of the new rules, whether automatic (for which there were no provisions in the reform) or case-by-case (when complains were filed from economic operators).

1.2.2.3 – Difficult establishment of a common market: the issue of free movement of people

The free movement of people is provided for in the CEMAC treaty but is to be completed only as part of the last 5-year phase of implementation of the common market. This problem has several distinct dimensions. Free travel within the region by individuals for business or other reasons would no longer be a problem in the future if and when the proposed "CEMAC Passport" is issued, available to all citizens, and the need for visas is eliminated by all CEMAC countries. These basic requirements may not be easily satisfied, since reportedly only four of the six countries have agreed to the principle. Second is the question of rights for non-nationals to take residence, work or open a business. This is also provided for in the CEMAC Treaty but reportedly would not be implemented without problems .The last aspect has to do with the unification of the regional labor market and the movement of significant numbers of workers from one country to another, more specifically from the less to the more developed areas within the sub-region. As already noted, there is severe formal and informal resistance to such movements in countries of potential immigration because of their small populations. The regional labor market may, therefore, be a desirable objective but is unlikely to materialize for a long time to come.

Section 2 – Measures aimed at revamping regional integration in Central Africa

In this respect, two (2) kinds of measures could be distinguished: political and economic measures.

2.1 – Political measures

At the political level, the main measure is to strengthen political will at the highest level in each CEMAC's country. This can be obtained through IEC (Information – Education – Communication) campaign aimed at increasing the understanding of regional integration.

Another measure is to encourage a stronger involvement of businesspeople and business institutions, including women entrepreneurs and civil society organisations I the decision-making process regarding intra-community trade policies.

Lastly, the increase of the mobility of persons within the sub-region and a large security can boost regional integration. In this regard, the project of "CEMAC passport" mentioned earlier should reach at a good end.

2.2 – Economic measures

These measures aim primarily at deepening regional integration by:

- making the custom union effective
- enforcing macro-economic policy convergence; et
- pursuing financial sector integration.

They aim also to promote cooperation on sector policies and projects.

Lastly, transport is a priority sector and CEMAC has developed a coherent regional surface transport master plan of the 2010 horizon. Of the 10,000 km of roads about 80 % will have been completed by this year, including all season links between four of the five inland capital cities. There is still a need to finance the remaining 2 000 kms, including links to Nigeria and DRC, and to improve the maintenance of the network.

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Annex 1 - Economic indicators in CEMAC member countries.

	1987	1990	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Exports of nonfactor Goods and services (% GDP)										
Cameroon	16.78	19.04	23.8	25.8	24.2	25.0	25.3	21.7	25.0	26.2
CAR	18.36	16.26	24.0	22.2	21.8	25.3	20.0	18.4	18.8	18.7
Congo	41.73	52.62	57.8	64.7	68.8	74.1	76.2	72.1	89.5	87.0
Gabon	39.78	59.16	62.3	59.4	62.7	61.3	47.4	60.3	66.0	60.3
E.Guinea	35.15	26.75	57.3	56.9	80.0	91.4	93.5	95.1	102	101.3
Chad	22.07	52.15	15.7	22.1	17.4	18.8	19.5	19.1	19.9	17.1
CEMAC			38.5	38.7	40.5	42.0	35.7	39.6	48.6	45.3
Imports of nonfactor Goods and Services										
(%GDP)	21.24	17.19	20.0	20.1	20.0	20.3	23.5	21.8	21.7	24.8
Cameroon	32.8	28.44	29.8	28.2	25.1	27.8	27.2	23.2	22.4	24.9
CAR	38.6	36.77	90.5	63.1	59.9	57.2	72.6	66.5	52.7	58.4
Congo	39.5	41.4	-34.9	-35.7	-33.0	-37.2	-48.0	-38.5	-32.7	-34.2
Gabon	58.6	56.6	-64.5	-90.9	-160	-110	-151	-114.6	-96.9	-88.8
E.Guinea	52.1	44.3	32.9	34.0	28.8	31.2	30.7	31.8	36.6	61.8
Chad			34.5	31.4	31.4	33.7	37.7	35.2	35.1	38.3
CEMAC										
Investment rates(%GDP)										
Cameroon	15.7	16.5	12.7	14.2	13.6	16.4	15.2	14.6	20.0	20.4
public	-	-	3.4	1.2	1.1	1.7	1.9	1.9	2.3	4.0
CAR	13.7	11.1	14.8	17.8	5.1	9.2	14.3	14.4	9.2	11.7
public	-	-	10.3	10.4	2.5	7.1	11.7	11.8	6.1	8.1
Congo	18.6	15.9	55.9	50.6	29.1	30.0	40.1	50.4	30.9	37.9
public	-	-	2.8	3.0	8.0	4.1	4.4	5.5	7.3	9.3
Gabon	28.2	22.4	21.6	23.3	19.7	31.5	39.1	24.9	21.3	24.3
public	3.2	4.2	5.6	5.5	5.0	11.2	13.7	4.2	3.1	3.6
E.Guinea	24.2	24.3	54.2	54.6	102	59.7	77.6	64.0	56.2	51.1
public	16.8	17.2	9.5	4.4	5.8	5.4	11.1	6.6	6.4	6.3
Chad	12.3	10.3	20.8	13.5	20.2	17.8	15.5	18.4	25.1	49.7
public	11.8	9.8	9.0	9.1	9.0	9.6	7.9	7.7	9.2	16.0
CEMAC	-		22.5	21.7	20.0	23.9	26.9	25.7	24.2	28.1
public	-		4.3	3.7	3.9	5.6	6.2	4.1	4.5	5.7
Real GDP Growth										
Cameroon	- 6.5	- 1.2	-3.0	3.3	5.0	5.1	5.0	4.4	4.2	5.5
CAR	- 3.4	3.6	4.9	6.4	-3.1	4.3	9.6	2.9	1.4	4.0
Congo	0.7	- 0.1	-4.5	2.6	6.4	-2.4	3.7	-3.3	7.5	3.6
Gabon	-18.4	5.5	3.7	5.0	3.5	5.5	3.1	-9.7	-1.2	2.2
E.Guinea	4.2	- 0.2	4.3	12.9	37.4	93.8	18.5	25.1	16.8	72.5
Chad	- 3.4	3.0	5.7	0.9	3.2	4.4	6.5	0.5	-0.3	10.2
CEMAC	-		1.1	4.2	4.4	5.2	4.9	0.1	3.5	6.5

Source: BEAC (2001) P. 8 and World Bank (1992) African Development Indicators, P. 31