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Expert Comment

The role of the European Union in overlapping regionalism in Central Africa

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The Role of the European Union in Overlapping Regionalism in Central Africa

Regional integration projects in Africa progress at different paces. The continental level, embodied in the African Union (AU), has achieved significant advances with the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Areas and ambitious reforms of its central institution. In eastern Africa, the East African Community is fostering economic integration through large-scale cross-border infrastructure plans. In western Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has established mechanisms to prevent backlashes against democracy, which have proven effective in several instances such as during the transition in Gambia in 2017. While all of these organisations suffer from inadequate means and disputes among member states, their achievements are significant on a continent where since the 1960s grand announcements of regional integration plans have routinely disappointed.

Yet, some regions continue to fall behind; most concerned are North Africa and Central Africa. The two regions rank last in the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa's regional integration assessments (African Union, African Development Bank, and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2016; UNECA, 2019) and evaluations of the African Development Bank (2018) support the impression that they are lagging behind or even disintegrating. With respect to North Africa, the lack of integration appears to coincide with an absence of regional projects. The AU has supported the formation of a regional economic community, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), but there has been little progress towards institutionalisation or implementation. The AMU essentially constitutes an empty shell. Other regional integration projects, such as the G5 Sahel group, the northbound

expansion of ECOWAS and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership programme, cut across the region. Thus, they contribute to contesting the demarcations of North Africa as a political entity and its dissolution into different regions.

While the weak state of regional integration in North Africa thus coincides with the landscape of regional organisations, the situation is more ambiguous in Central Africa. Central Africa might not be making sizeable advances in term of integration, but it is home to numerous regional institutions. It has a monetary union with a common currency and a central bank. There are two regional political organisations – the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) – with centralised bureaucracies in the shape of general secretariats. And there is a regional security community that has organised interventions, for instance, to appease the violent conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR; Meyer, 2009). Despite the weak state of integration, institutional forms of regionalism seem to be well in place in Central Africa (Mattheis and Eriksson, 2016).

Inside and outside the region, potential explanations could be explored for the stability of the regional institutional order despite the low integration status and consequent weak demand for institutions. The first possibility would be the existence of a regional power. In several regions across the world, one state – or a small group of states – takes it upon itself to spearhead regional organisations. This state, or group, can act as a paymaster and shoulder a disproportionate amount of expenses related to running the regional bureaucracies and integration activities. It can also provide political leadership by personal investment of the government, for instance, in the hosting of summits and the dispatching of the head of state and senior cabinet members to events of the regional organisations. Moreover, the state or group of states can coerce other states in the region to participate in integration initiatives. However, there is no distinguishable regional power in central Africa

(Ben Hammouda, Bekolo-Ebe, and Touna, 2003). A number of countries, including Cameroon, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola, have in the past aspired to use some of their economic, financial, or political clout to play a leading role. Yet, none have managed to establish leadership in regional matters, let alone create a stable followership.

In the absence of a regional power driving or imposing regional organisations in central Africa, external actors need to be taken into account (Doidge, 2007). Although the external position means that they do not hold the same formal rights as a member state, they can still play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining regional integration. The EU stands out in this respect as the most relevant extraregional actor (Kotsopoulos and Mattheis, 2018).

In order to contextualise the clout of the EU in Central Africa, the role of Europe's colonial legacy needs to be considered. The main colonial administrations of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), Spanish Guinea, Portuguese West Africa, and the Belgian Congo do not constitute coherent regions in their right but rather an imperial expansion with territorial demarcation. Between 1958 and 1960, the AEF was split up into five nominally independent states (Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, the CAR, and Chad), abandoning the idea of a regional federation in favour of a colonial regionalism. The Equatorial Customs Union of 1959 and the Central African Customs and Economic Union (UDEAC) of 1964 conferred a formal status to France as a quasi-member (Mbaku and Kamerschen, 1988). The common currency, the Financial Cooperation in Central Africa Franc (CFA Franc), was installed in 1959, with France as a guarantor and administrator of a fixed exchange rate to the French Franc (Tsangarides and Gulde, 2008). During the 1960s and 1970s Central African regionalism underwent numerous reconfigurations with changing memberships.

The first serious contender to UDEAC emerged in 1983 in the shape of ECCAS. This organisation was created in response to the call for the Organisation of African Unity to create regional economic communities that would form customs unions to converge towards a pan-African common market. However, UDEAC was not abolished by its members and retained a monopoly over monetary issues (Bongyu, 2009). In the 1990s, the devaluation of the CFA Franc as well as changes in the global order triggered institutional reforms (Fomin and Forje, 2005; Avom, 2007) and a new name – CEMAC – but the regime has since been a stable form of governance for African and European political elites. France, via its Ministry for the Economy and Finance, has remained a quasi-member of CEMAC by guaranteeing the stability of the Central African regional currency (Banque de France, 2011). The stability has been provided through a fixed exchange rate with the Euro since the abolishment of the French franc. Hence, the European Commission and the European Central Bank set up the monetary policy not only for their own region but also for Central Africa (Bach, 2015).

In addition to the relevance of interregionalism for monetary regionalism in Central Africa, security and trade interregionalism also plays a key role but with ambiguous results for regionalism. The EU incorporates the strong military presence of France in the region via a regional security approach and intervention missions, such as in the Central African Republic or Lake Chad (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International, 2014). The EU has supported both regional organisations and has shown a preference for ECCAS, which has a stronger mandate in the area of peace of security to stabilise the volatile political situation and violent conflict (Guicherd, 2012; Gnanguenon, 2013). Economic relations between Central Africa and the EU, its key trading partner, are currently governed by the Cotonou Agreement that applies to the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific group (ACP), a larger group of former European colonies. The creation of the World Trade Organisation has required the end of these trade agreements in order to comply with

non-preferential treatment. Consequently, the Cotonou Agreement devised seven interregional trade agreements to be concluded between the EU and subgroupings of the ACP. The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) would establish more reciprocity by opening up the European agricultural market as well as ensuring access for European goods and services in ACP countries. One of these regional groups is the Central African group. The Economic Partnership Agreement with Central Africa started with ECCAS as the interlocutor on the Central African side (European Union, 2003; European Union, 2009a). However, the member states pursued different interests and disagreed on fundamental aspects of an agreement. A cohesive position of ECCAS proved difficult to achieve. Some countries are petrostates, others rely on agricultural production, and still others fall into the group of least-developed countries that the WTO will continue to allow to be granted preferential access to the European market (Dikoume, 2008). Trade within the region is also notoriously low (Dramani, 2011). Some ECCAS members chose to become part of a different EPA group (Ngeleza and Muhammad, 2009). Eventually, CEMAC took over as the main negotiating partner for the EU, bringing forward its institutional capacity in economic matters as a monetary union. Nevertheless, diverging economic interests on a national level could not be overcome, and no interregional agreement has been put into place. The only agreement that has taken effect is a bilateral one with Cameroon, the country that is most dependent on privileged access to the EU for its export products. So far, it has not served as a stepping stone for the region, although the intention of the agreement being extended to the CEMAC region remains in place. As such, trade interregionalism with Europe was set up to strengthen at least one regional organisation in Central Africa, but in practice it has exhibited the existing economic fragmentation of the region.

The effect of aid interregionalism is more straightforward in this respect. Large parts of the budget of ECCAS are financed by Western donors – led by the EU – as well as by

the African Development Bank, which in turn plays a decisive role in setting up and monitoring the activities of the regional organisation. Each external actor concentrates on policy areas that are close to its preferences and intentions. For instance, the EU has emphasized the areas of security and natural resource management while the African Development Bank has supported projects that focus on infrastructure and capacity building (African Development Bank, 2011; Fond Africain de Développement, 2012). Aid interregionalism has had a visible impact on institution-building. The secretariat of ECCAS developed diplomatic ties beginning in 2000 by setting up delegations outside of the region, starting with the European Union and the African Union – its most important political partners. ECCAS also accredited extraregional ambassadors stationed in Libreville, where its headquarters are located, as representatives to the regional organisation. The EU and its member states dominate the field, but other donors such as China, Japan, and the African Development Bank also have formal ties (ECCAS, 2013b). Providing substantial support to ECCAS has yielded modest successes for the EU (European Commission, 2012).

In sum, while a focus on interregionalism should not suggest that internal actors such as national governments are secondary players in their regional organisations, it becomes evident that external actors also play a crucial role. They can act as quasi-members and contribute to the ideas, means, and forms of integration. In Central Africa, regional integration is very weak in most fields, such as trade, infrastructure and migration. Thus, demand for and influence by societal actors tends to be low, and external actors are important contributors to the continued existence and even expansion of regional organisations. Their involvement also helps to explain the coexistence of two regional organisations with an overlapping mandate within the same region (Awoumou, 2008). The EU and its member states maintain close ties to both of them, as they fulfil different purposes. ECCAS corresponds to the EU's strategy to support the African Union and its

sub-regional pillars, and it has a more substantive political and security mandate (Elowson and Wiklund, 2011). At least for formal interactions, it is thus difficult to circumvent ECCAS (European Union, 2009b). By contrast, CEMAC contains a strong colonial legacy that manifests itself in a strong linkage between monetary regimes and bureaucracies. Political elites on both sides are reluctant to dismantle the set-up, as it provides a vehicle for privileged access and material gains (Koukoku, 2008).

However, the influence of external actors also has clear limits. CEMAC and ECCAS have defined objectives that recall key elements of European integration, such as the creation of an economic union, a regional parliament, and a commission (ECCAS, 2013a; CEMAC, 2009). Yet, the implementation falls short of a significant delegation of power or the creation of influential central bureaucracies (Meyer, 2008; Okoya and Carson, 2010). The formal, though inconsequential, commitment to similar objectives creates legitimacy and recognition between the EU and regional organisations in Central Africa, even without substantive impact (Fioramonti and Mattheis, 2016). The limits of the EU's influence are also evident when it comes to the planned merger of CEMAC and ECCAS. The EU, along with other interregional actors, has pushed for a rationalisation of the overlap and tried to set up trade negotiations with a single, coherent group on the Central African side. Yet, the regional order, including the institutional overlap, has proven to be resistant (Mattheis, 2016). An EPA for Central Africa looks very distant; even an institutional crisis of CEMAC that involved changing headquarter locations several times between 2016 and 2018 did not propel a merger with ECCAS. Given the importance of interregionalism for Central African regionalism, as outlined above, the stability of the current regional configuration is due not only to evident internal divisions (Chouala, 2008; Lemarchand, 2009) but also to those proposing mergers and realignments. As long as both CEMAC and ECCAS fulfil specific

purposes for the EU and its member states, both their dismantling and their merger will be difficult to achieve.

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