

Can regionalization in Africa present an alternative to dominant development policy approaches? The case of ECOWAS

Regional economic communities in Africa have a history that is defined by self-determination and actualization in economic and socio-political terms rooted in the independence struggles of the 1960s. The 1980 Lagos Plan of Action that was adopted by the continental body, the Organization of African Union, now the African Union, was a statement that is emblematic of this with its focus on rejecting economic dependency on the Global North and strategic rebuttal of the World Bank's Berg report. However since then, with the global rise of neoliberalism, ideologically and in policy terms, the influence of locally determined/driven development policy has failed to attain earlier heights. On the one hand, policy frameworks that have posed a major challenge to the orthodoxy such as the UN Economic Commission on Africa's African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes have passed unnoticed, on the other hand those that have flourished have subscribed fully to the mainstream such as the African Union's New Partnership for African Development. This paper will interrogate the relevance of the developmental policy framework of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) as a viable alternative to the continued dominance and resilience (in terms of capacity for reinvention, redefinition and transformation) of neoliberal development policy in Africa from the Washington Consensus's Structural Adjustment Programmes, the Post Washington Consensus's Poverty Reduction Strategies and to the most recent Inclusive Growth agenda. In this regard, ECOWAS has a record of resistance in its negotiation of the Economic Partnership Agreements (that argues for trade liberalization between Africa and Europe) with the European Union, bringing the process to a standstill as it requested a more favourable trade arrangement for West Africa in 2008. The paper will examine the ECOWAS Common Agricultural Policy alongside the ECOWAS West African Common Industrial Policy vis-à-vis classical development economics interpretation of development as structural transformation of the economy. In doing so, it will consider the underlying economic, political and social factors that have informed the conceptualization and implementation of these policy frameworks. The extent to which ECOWAS can/does convey influence in thought and practice on agricultural and industrial policy, as a basis for economic transition, will be based on several factors including its supranational character, its norms-setting agenda, the extant Francophone West African Monetary Union and its ultimate reliance on the acquiescence of member states.