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Importance of Borders in West African Economic Space

Anani Lazare Sossou-Agbo*

Abstract

The aim of this study is to show how the borders between countries in West Africa hinder their economic integration. The movement of goods and peoples is essential for every country in the interest of its economy. Obstacles of any kind make the circulation of products difficult. We have examined commercial exchanges in the West African economic space and show how this can, in particular cases, happen. The procedure used was to follow exchanges by road transport between Mali and Benin via the Ivory Coast and at each crossing to determine where the problems occurred. The results show that, at present, full economic integration in ECOWAS¹ is not feasible.

Introduction

The end of the Second World War was an opportunity for nations which had been enemies to group together to solve their various economic problems. However, the creation of international organizations and the intensification of international relations did not improve the economies of the countries of West Africa. The French speaking colonies formed the West African Economic and Monetary Union. The British colonies each had a central bank and their own currency. The heads of state and governments of West Africa, in the interest of community integration of the three language communities (French speaking, English speaking and Portuguese speaking) created the Economic Community of the States of West Africa in 1975, after more than a decade of independence. Since then, this sub-regional grouping is a market with a population of 261 million in 2006, growing at an annual average rate of 2.67 per cent. The community is the most populated regional economic association in Africa, covering 17 per cent

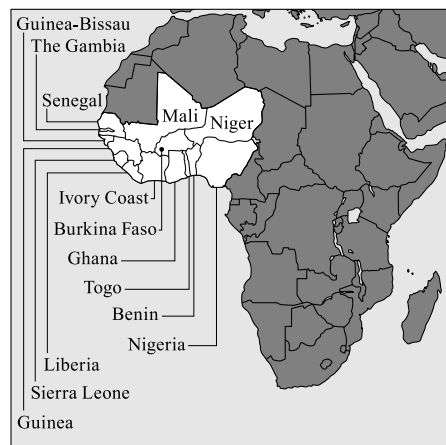


Figure 1: States of West Africa

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¹ ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

(Figure 1²) of the total land surface of the continent.

This study was carried out in 2009 on the main highway between Bamako-Cotonou (Bamako-Sikasso-Bobo-Dioulasso-Sinkare-Pogo-Yamoussokro-Abidjan-Noe-Accra-Aflao-Lome-Hilacondji-Cotonou). The length covers about 2,170 km. The highway takes about three days and four nights to traverse, using local bus services. At each crossing drivers and passengers waiting to cross the frontier were questioned about their journey and the controls they had encountered. The road system is badly maintained in places and controls are real obstacles to the integration of communities.

This paper will consider firstly the geopolitical context of the sub-region, and the role which ports play in providing access to world trade; and secondly the land borders, and the various obstacles which slow down the economic evolution of the West African sub-region.

Context of Economic Integration of the States of West Africa

The West African community is a vast territory of six million km². This is a big market centered on the mobility of the people and the import and export of consumer goods; all within a free trade area and customs union. Article 40, paragraph 4 of the Revised Treaty (1993) emphasized the conditions of imports and exports within the community: “Member states make a commitment to be connected by the strengthened entrance fees reproduced in the Tariff of the ECOWAS with the aim of the liberalization of the exchanges within the community.”³

Article 35 of the same document eliminates administrative obstacles and also the taxation of products coming from within the Union: “Within this Union, the customs duties and the other taxes of equivalent effect on the imports of products within the community are eliminated. The quantitative or similar limitations and the associated natural bans as well as the obstacles administrative in the business between member states are also eliminated.”⁴

The Borders of Integrated Territories or Access to Integration?

Regional integration in the geopolitical context, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, is marked by borders unsuitable for socioeconomic life. The notion of border in the dictionary of geography and space of societies⁵ states that “in a demilitarized world opened to exchanges, the border loses its sense.” The border can be conceived through a territorial relationship by creating spatial artefacts and by specifying member countries. In this context, the concept of territoriality can be seen as all the relations which a society maintains within its borders and the outer world.⁶ It represents a way of organizing the world, which therefore, categorizes regions of identities and

² Dago Legbre, “ECOWAS Sub-regional Integration: Structure and Obstacles,” *Master Memory, CERAP-INADES* (2010): 6.

³ *Ecowas, Revised Treaty* (Cotonou, Benin, 1993): 22-34, available at: www.africa-union.org

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jacques Levy and Michel Lussault, *Dictionary Geography* (Paris, 2003).

⁶ Claude Raffestin, *Espaces Jeux et Enjeux, Review* (Hyperge, 1986), 2.

otherness. It becomes a space built within limits and by these limits; the territory is modified in its configuration and in its nature.⁷ Integration should be therefore the interrelation of territories through the study of border areas. The new meanings given to borders and their integrating functions should contribute to our understanding of territories. In spite of the integrating nature, which we attribute to borders in West Africa, they appear as symbols of inaccessibility, far from an expression of nearness, and of cooperation, even less as a means of maintaining a union.

If the frontier is taken as bridge and link of passage, the effect of differentiation and asymmetry due to the frontier, has twin dynamics for exchanges, which simultaneously limits natural exchanges and the emergence of speculative exchanges related to the profitability of these exchanges. The study of the profits of international exchanges, illustrates the many benefits of these exchanges; which are not imposed, and open borders where comparative advantages and economies of scale balance harmoniously business connections. Hence, spaces where flows are concentrated play the role of an interface between the inside and the outside.

Ports and the Import and Export Space of the Union

The member countries of the community, whether they are coastal or inland, benefit from important harbor installations which facilitate the exchanges with the outside. These ports play a very important role in the connectivity of states, especially those of the Sahel. The ports of Lagos, Abidjan (16.6 million tons of goods in 2011) and of Dakar (10.2 million tons of goods in 2010) represent a sign of the globalization of the exchanges between Africa and the rest of world.

To this well-developed group, adapted for container transport (11,000 EVP),⁸ the ports of Tema, Takoradi, Lome and Cotonou may be added. These have been added very recently to the list of seaports, even if they are smaller than those built to ensure the globalization (Figure 2).⁹ In 2007, these main ports of West Africa had only 2 million EVP¹⁰ of intercontinental flow. Even if they are not classified at a world level, they remain competitive in exchanges between the African continent, Asia and Europe.

The ports of the various countries, both English and French speaking, had to adapt to the increase in the volume of trade between: Europe-Africa, Asia-Africa and U.S.-Africa. All this is related to the increase of demand for raw materials for industries and for consumption. If West Africa, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries dominated trade in certain products (e.g. timber, ivory, groundnuts, rubber, wax, gum), it is still true today for tropical products such as: pineapples, cotton, mahogany, karity butter, coffee, cocoa, bananas, groundnuts, etc. To these may be added: gold from Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Ivory Coast; Uranium from Niger; and oil from Nigeria and Ivory Coast.

⁷ Marie-Christine Fourny and Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary, *After the Borders with Border* (Paris: L'Aube Editions, Collection Essai, 2006), 169.

⁸ EVP: L'Équivalent Vingt Pieds ou EVP (TEU: Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit).

⁹ Jean Varlet and Pierre Zembri, *Atlas des Transports [Transportation Atlas]* (Paris, Autrement Editions: ADEME, 2010).

¹⁰ Ibid.

These ports are warehouses where truck drivers play an intermediary role for suppliers and customers. All the harbor activities are centered on the loading and unloading of goods for other countries or on re-exportation. The provisioning of markets is subordinated to the flow of these goods and to delivery deadlines. The economic health of states connected to government management, does not allow the customs officers in the various ports to apply texts of treaty governing domestic and international trade. A transporter who leaves a port will be confronted with diverse obstacles.

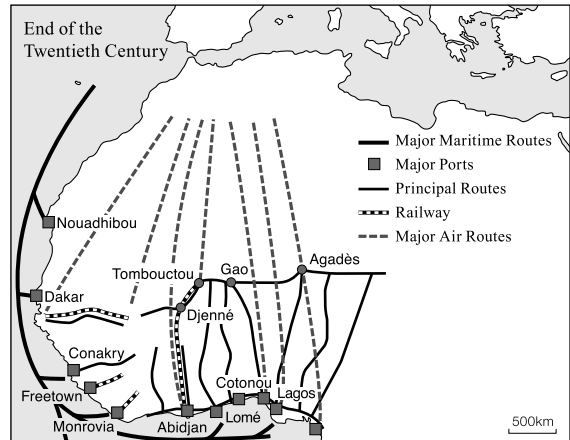


Figure 2: Ports and Maritime Flows in West Africa

Source: Jean Varlet and Pierre Zembri, *Atlas des Transports [Transportation Atlas]* (Paris, Autrement Editions: ADEME, 2010).

Land Barriers

The main obstacle of integration is the political instability in each country. Countries which are unstable or have experienced a civil war impose strict border controls and random controls along roads inside the country. In the following section we examine the controls between different countries from this point of view.

A border space can be an entry on a certain number of international traffic routes, but border regions are obviously access regions. They control the flows of economic and financial exchanges associated with transport logistics. This sub-region presents various areas of contact. Borders on maps draw little attention from the authorities pushing for modernization, in spite of their economic role.

The borderline instead of being a handicap, should lead to community integration and to the globalization of the sub-regional economy. It should pass from the role of a barrier to that of link between institutional actors (e.g. police officers, customs officers), between populations and between cultures. But, when it is an obstacle for society, its management escapes all controls by the administration and its governance is complicated.

The main highways of West Africa expose the users to risks. These international means of transport are unattractive because of their neglected state and “death traps” for the freight carriers and other users. They do not encourage movement.

The attractiveness of a road affects the psychology of the users. Regions can facilitate accessibility to increase their attractiveness. These images show the various border roads which connect entrance regions with the hinterland. Yet, Article 32 of the Revised Treaty, paragraphs 2 and 3 commits states “to develop within the community a vast network of reliable all the year round roads by granting the priority to inter-states roads; but also, to elaborate plans to improve and to assure the

integration of the railroad and road networks of the Region.”¹¹ Two decades later, users continue to suffer. The lack of road infrastructures and connections between the various parts of a country, the length of the borders and the badly assured interstate connections represent many additional obstacles to the management of the borders. The nature of the environment (e.g. desert zones, forests, stretches of water or swamp) greatly influences the efficiency of the mechanisms of control and surveillance which have been set up. The areas of integration are still far from the reality of the economic cooperation preached by the authorities. These degraded, easily flooded and deadly routes create all kinds of corruption and checkpoints exist along the transport arteries.

Checkpoints

The Bamako-Abidjan corridor is the most spectacular due to its numerous compulsory controls for carriers. Between Bamako-Sikasso there were only three controls, 2.4 per 100 km, two on the road and one on each side of the frontier. But, between Sikasso and Abidjan, the number of controls increases, because of the political instability in the Ivory Coast, where policemen, customs officers, gendarmes and the labor unions (syndicates) of long-distance truck drivers intervene against drivers of all kinds. The frequency of these controls is 3.2 per 100 km (Figure 3 and 4). Every journey requires on average 38 stops where officials do not improve the mobility of the carriers, in spite of trucks being in good condition, and the drivers and the goods respecting the rules of the transport administration. These pauses sometimes last longer than 24 hours, when the driver is uncooperative and contests the payment of bribes. The penalty is more severe, when the driver is transporting perishable goods. These institutional actors in the management of the roads forget or overlook their role in the application of the traffic rules by thinking only of their own interest. The deterioration of political authority leads these persons to illegal enrichment by decreasing in a way the purchasing power of the populations for whom the goods are intended. From this point of view, an effective management of border crossings can be considered as a symbol of the implication of the government in the protection of the population. The corridor created by every country in association with its hinterland, does not reduce the corruption of road officials: “The level of the harassment on the main

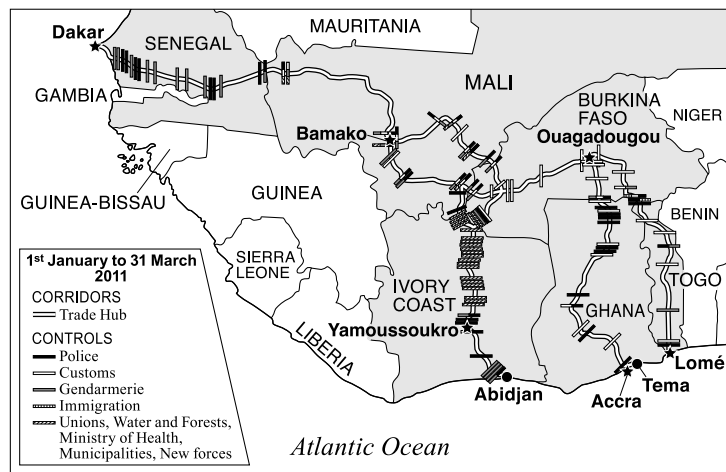


Figure 3: Checkpoints on Certain Corridors

Source: <http://www.borderlesswa.com/resources/21st-usaid-uemoa-road-governance-map>

¹¹ Ecowas, *Revised Treaty*

highways is the reflection of a system which does not simply work for the companies which try to face competition on the world markets. Every minute trucks pass at checkpoints and every additional dollar which they pay in bribes make more difficult the transport of goods to the market by the exporters. All this adds up.”¹²

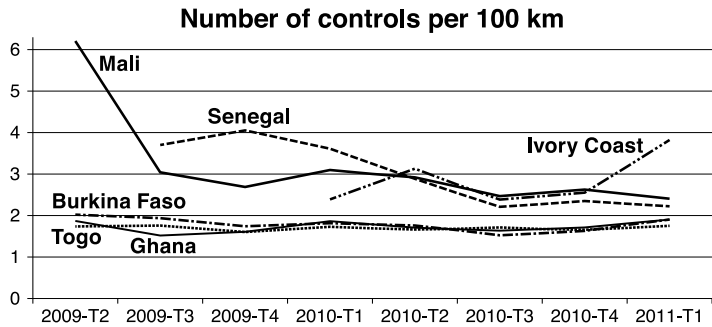


Figure 4: Controls per 100 km between 2009 and 2011

Source: http://www.uemoa.int/Pages/PUBLICATIONS/rapports_OPA.aspx

The political situation of Ivory Coast in the first quarter of 2011 explains the 50 per cent increase in the controls in the country. All the services are concerned on the various axes of the country. Waiting times are very high in Mali more than in any other country. It is important for a country to find a balance between mobility and control, between “access and barriers.”¹³ The balance between “access and barriers” must be respected in order to allow the development of legal economic activities in and beyond the border regions. The simple perception of the border by every state also has implications for the degree of cooperation between states in the management of their main highways and their common border.

The Question of Corruption on Main Highways and at the Borders

On the West African borders, corruption is still rife. In spite of the current community texts, the citizens of the ECOWAS are sacrificed on the altar of the corruption organized and maintained by immigration authorities, which deters the free movement of people and goods. “You think that it is enough to have a passport to cross the border freely! You’ve got to give us 20,000 cedi [ie.1,000 f CFA],” the agent said, visibly disappointed that the passport was in order. At another checkpoint, the agents get straight to the point. They say “give us some money!” The technique varies by country and the category of agents in service. Aflao (the Togo-Ghana border) is not an exception in the sub-region. Before crossing the border of Krake (Benin-Nigeria), the passenger has to cross several checkpoints where the passage negotiates in Naira or in CFA francs.¹⁴ This situates the background to the behavior of agents on our borders. How can we define it then?

It seems therefore that corruption is constituted by any function using official or private authority for the purposes of personal enrichment of individuals in charge of the dependent services.

¹² Nils Rasmussen, “Survey Results for the First Quarter, the 15th Report of the OPA,” *BORDER-ESS, UEMOA* (2011): 24.

¹³ Jihan Seniora and Cedric Poitevin, “Land Border Management and Illicit Trafficking,” *GRIP Report* (2010): 24.

¹⁴ Gisèle Afangbédjé, “West African Borders: the Corruption, Enemy of Integration,” *Cotonou, Nation News Paper* (2010).

This definition integrates the one proposed by the World Bank and by the Convention of the United Nations. These debates also highlight that corruption is clearly recognized as being a national plague which increases and branches out in all sectors, damaging the governance of a country.¹⁵ The existence of corruption is thus an indicator of the bad governance and by “rebound” should have a negative impact on development. This link is generally recognized more or less theoretically, but rarely verified by means of empirical data, in spite of the general recognition that corruption is widespread. This is understandable as far as corruption is hidden and is difficult to measure.¹⁶

Usually it appears when two conditions are combined: the existence of permanent jobs and the ineffectiveness of governance. It is this search for easy income that makes officials turn to this behavior. Also ineffectiveness in the application of the rules and regulations is a determining element for the appearance and the expansion of corruption. Indeed, if control is efficient, if the application of the laws is guaranteed by the magistrates, and if transparency is real, any act of corruption will be detected and punished. Impunity is one of the major factor of corruption. Overall, corruption affects the possibilities of the state to deal with the needs of the population in many social domains.

Consequences on Poverty and Human Development

The economic integration of the states of West Africa still suffers from a slump, the recovery from which will take time. This problem decreases the level of resources allocated to social sectors. It certainly handicaps the measures taken to reduce poverty and to give to the poor new economic possibilities, which promote human development. Indeed, it is possible to connect a relative reduction in tax revenue to tax evasion (to a certain extent tax evasion on cross-border business), and to the pressures to become competitive by offering useless fiscal incitements to attract capital investment or because of the activities of the underground economy. Hence, the daily losses permanently undermine development. The health of the truck drivers is in danger when they stay longer. The sad news is that AIDS kills more truck drivers than malaria and road accidents: “In 2001, a study showed that more than half long-distance truck drivers were HIV-positive in South Africa on the main transport routes. They are on the road sometimes one month, they sometimes have to wait on the borders, they see prostitutes, their working conditions make them very vulnerable...”¹⁷

This study has shown that monetary integration is difficult within ECOWAS because of the difficulties associated with transport between the different member states. Political instabilities do not encourage a serious debate on regional problems. Anarchy dominates not only controls in road transport but also in many other sectors, leaving the populations at the mercy of illegal practices which plunge them deeper into poverty.

¹⁵ UNDP, “Social Responsibility, Corruption and Sustainable Human Development,” *National Report on Human Development in Benin, Cotonou* (2008): 218.

¹⁶ Albert Honlonkou, “Corruption, Inflation, Growth and Sustainable Human Development: Is there a Link?” *Review Developing World*, 31-3, no.123 (2003).

¹⁷ Joe Lamport and Lacina Pakoun, “Road Maps to Help African Truckers,” *Report: Health/Fight against AIDS, Broadcast by RFI* (March 15, 2010).