

The Challenge of Regional Economic Integration in Africa:

Theory and Reality

JIBOKU, Peace A

Abstract

Africa has a high concentration of sub-regional economic organisations, multilateral arrangements and institutions promoting the goals of integration. Yet, the continent has remained the least integrated of the world's major regions. Africa has remained slow in its development trajectory and harbours most of the least developed countries of the world. A large percentage of the African populace is mired in poverty while the sub-continent continues to be marginalised in global affairs. The obvious reality is that Africa is yet to benefit fully from the gains of regional economic integration and that the economic transformation of the African continent as a whole – one of the main objectives often declared in establishing regional economic integration schemes – is yet to be realised. There is, in Africa, a seemingly wide gap between the theoretical aspirations towards regional economic integration and the empirical evidence and practical reality of actual integration. Regionalism in Africa raises several issues of contradictions and debate in the world of theory. This paper examines regional economic integration challenge in Africa locating key issues within theory and practice.

Keywords: Regionalism, regional cooperation, economic integration, AU, NEPAD, SADC, ECOWAS, Africa.

Introduction

Regional economic integration became an important subject in Africa as more African countries began to achieve independence from the early 1960s. This was due to the realization that considering colonial rule and the effects of Africa's balkanization, it would be difficult for newly-created African states to make progress in an international system dominated by powerful, rich and industrialized countries of the West. African states would need to unite. As such, the quest for cooperation and integration was influenced by pan-African desires for collective self-reliance, solidarity, development, peace and unity. This led to the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and, subsequently, the formation of sub-regional groupings and institutions to promote regional integration. However, while some level of progress has been recorded at the sub-regional level in some of Africa's regional economic communities (RECs) such as the ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, the continent has lagged behind other regions in its integration efforts.

Notwithstanding the lack of satisfactory success, regional integration issues continue to feature prominently on Africa's development agenda as expressed in continental initiatives such as the OAU's 1980 Lagos Plan of Action; 1991 Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC); and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) adopted by the African Union. Considering the poor record of regionalism in Africa, the questions in the minds of many are: Will the African Union-led integration project succeed where others failed? Will integration bring economic transformation and development to Africa?

This paper examines the challenge of regionalism in Africa from the aspect of governance deficits in African countries. It argues that African leaders and policy makers easily sign regional agreements and treaties, formulate desirable objectives in establishing regional economic institutions, but, in reality, are not politically committed to the principles of regionalism and effective implementation of regional resolutions. Regionalism in Africa is problematic and influenced by political variables. The paper argues that African leaders and policy makers would need to move beyond rhetoric in furthering deeper integration in Africa.

Contextualisation of regionalism, regional cooperation and regional integration

Regionalism is a concept which refers often to formal cooperation and integration arrangements of a group of countries within a common geographical space aimed at facilitating or enhancing a sense of common identity and purpose through the creation of institutions that give shape to, and drive collective action (Lamberte 2004, p4). In defining the concept of regionalism, regional cooperation and regional integration are two distinct concepts often used together. The two concepts refer to the idea of bringing different units together for different types of economic and political interactions. However, identifying key items that distinguish these concepts enhances an understanding of the dynamism of regionalism in different parts of the developed and developing world.

Regional cooperation refers to a situation where nation-states decide to pool their efforts towards achieving specific objectives. It may not necessarily involve committing themselves to integrating their independent economies. These states are interested in actualising objectives, which may not be possible if they were acting unilaterally (Lamberte 2004, p4). Regional integration connotes a form of interdependence among nation states (Adetula 2004, p3). In establishing regional integration arrangements, sovereign states within a geographical space enter into a formal agreement to work together in order to actualise political and socio-economic benefits (Adetula 2004, pp3-4). More importantly, regional integration requires independent nation states to cede their national sovereignty, make political commitments and sacrifices, and forego certain benefits in the interest of the larger body (Adetula 2004, p3). As Lamberte (2004, p4) notes, "most initiatives are 'policy induced integration', the net result of regional cooperation."

Over the years, regionalism has attracted several debates and contestations among scholars. Perspectives on the concept and practice of regionalism have changed over time. This is also true of the theoretical explanations as highlighted by Olivier (2010, pp20-22). There are debates not only over issues of what constitutes a 'region' or who the members of a region represent, but also on the motives and interests which drive regionalism in different parts of the world. In Africa, for instance, there are also questions on 'what' should be integrated and 'how' integration should proceed. Thus, it has

become the common approach to differentiate between 'old' and 'new' regionalism and various types of regionalisation (Hettne and Soderbaum 1998, pp3-4; 2000, p3).

Old regionalism is linked to regional integration attempts between the 1950s and 1960s which were inward oriented; explicit about the objectives to be achieved; clear about the programmes and had restricted membership (Olivier 2010, pp18-19; Gilpin 2001, p341). New regionalism is inclusive, outward-looking and associated with regional integration arrangements from the 1990s (Olivier 2010, pp 18-19; Gibb 2009, p708). New regionalism establishes the reality of growing interdependence of nation states in the international political system. It makes it difficult to establish a general definition or theoretical explanation of regionalism. To this extent, there is a growing recognition of the need to develop a new regional approach towards a multi-dimensional, broadly focused perspective on regionalism (Olivier 2010, p21).

In the last decade, regional cooperation and integration arrangements have been established in various parts of the world to an extent which has ensured that almost all countries in the developed and developing worlds are members of particular regional institutions. Moreover, countries in the developing world have also shown interest in cooperation. Cooperative arrangements also exist between developed and developing countries. There has been increasing interest in cooperating to accomplish regional cooperation projects in various sectors; promoting research activities; and creating regional bodies that regulate diverse aspects of economic policy making (Lamberte 2004, p4). Thus, regional integration agreements have increasingly been established as a strategy to respond to the challenges and demands of a fast globalising world marked with technological transformations (see, Delvin and Estevadeordal 2002, p2; Olu-Adeyemi and Ayodele 2007, p214).

It is important to note, however, that regional integration within the framework of countries in the less developed world is particularly complex and different from what is obtainable in the developed world because of the socio-economic and political dynamics which impact on the process (Adetula 2004, p5). Regional integration arrangements in the African continent are established on certain philosophical premises which developed generally from the practice of countries in the Western industrialised societies and each of the different types of integration scheme has its distinct regularities, processes and method of operation (Adetula 2004, p5).

Regional economic integration in Africa: Theoretical perspectives

A review of literature shows that issues related to regional integration in Africa cannot be analysed meaningfully using one particular theoretical framework. This is a result of the complexities associated with regionalism in Africa and the changing perspectives of the concept as scholars attempt to grapple with the realities and challenges of globalisation, regionalisation and liberalisation. Africa has experimented with different types of regional economic integration arrangements and formulated different policies underpinned by pan-African ideas of cooperation and integration. While several studies provide useful analysis of economic issues as primary determining factors for the success of regional integration arrangements in Africa, many others focus essentially on the relevance of politics. As such, scholars have been preoccupied with political and economic issues on regionalism in Africa because African governments and their people desire integration and unity as a long-cherished pan-African ideal and not necessarily as a means to an end (see, Okhonmina 2009, pp89-93). It is important to take into account the ideological dynamics and political-economic challenges associated with regionalism in Africa as points of reference in any theoretical analysis.

For this paper, functionalism/neo-functionalism and neo-realism theories provide the tools for analysing key economic and political issues in Africa's quest for regional economic integration. The aim is to examine how these theories, combined, provide a comprehensive understanding of African regionalism in order to identify the theoretical gaps, contradictions and challenges with respect to economic, political and social realities in Africa.

Functionalism

Functionalism is a theory that grew largely from the outbreak of World War II, which raised concerns that the state had become moribund as an institution for social organisation (see Diiego-Castaneda 2006, p3; Ogbonna *et al* 2013, p105). Functionalism's approach was against power-politics and state-centredness in international relations. Its position is that power-politics and state-centredness lead to conflicts and wars in the international system as states battle to achieve their varied and competing national interests while also defending and protecting their sovereignty. Functionalism is, therefore, a theory that seeks conditions that promote peace and prevent disharmony among states.

David Mitrany's (1943) *A Working Peace System – An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organisation* is an influential work in the tradition of functionalism. The main premise of classical functionalism is that nationalist tendencies and regard for sovereignty threaten peace and security in the international system (Ayinde 2011, p185). Functionalism affirms that war is a universal problem that affects people and, as such, the need for world peace is shared by everyone. This need then provides a general basis for international understanding and cooperation in functional spheres of activities which do not encroach on individual state sovereignty (Gilpin 2001, p350). Functionalism believes that through a system of functional cooperation, people are brought together and a sort of community feeling is generated and sustained (Ayinde 2011, p185; Mitrany 1943, pp33-39; Gilpin 2001, p350).

Functionalism significantly explains the role of international organisations (non-state actors and transnational institutions) – rather than national governments – in addressing common problems and providing for human welfare and basic requirements such as transportation, health and welfare necessities, trade and production (Rosamond 2000, pp33-34; Ayinde 2011, p185). These responsibilities, the functionalist thesis argues, are better handled by technical experts in different structures of international organisations. The functionalist thesis thus provides a straight-forward explanation on the basis of international cooperation and the evolutionary nature of the development of international organisations. Functionalism enlightens researchers about the reasons why sovereign states, of their own volition, work together and how this cooperation progresses. Hence, functionalism views that international institutions are not complete in themselves and that they are not without weaknesses, but rather they should be seen as vehicles through which human needs could be met. As such, these organisations have to amend their activities in accordance with the needs of the day.

As an integration theory, functionalism sees international cooperation to be the first stage in the integration process. Its argument is predicated on a gradualist/incremental approach to integration that is embedded in the common conviction or need by people to pool their efforts in order to achieve a common objective (see, Rosamond, 2000; Ogbeide 2010, p484). The logic of the theory is that, cooperation and interdependence among states grow as these states integrate in restricted non-political areas -- technical and/or economic. The benefits which functional agencies deliver would draw the loyalty of the populations and motivate participation in the area of integration.

Functionalism has been employed to explain how the European Union developed from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). It is also a useful theory to analyse the processes of Africa's regional economic cooperation and integration which started with the establishment of the OAU in 1963. In some ways, functionalism could explain the circumstances which prevailed before the establishment of the OAU; that is, the felt need for African countries to cooperate. It could describe the functioning of the different organs and institutions of the organisation; the roles and functions performed by the OAU during the time it existed; the achievements and failures of the organisation; and the rationale for the process of transformation from the OAU to the African Union.

Wapmuk (2009, p652) notes, for instance, that the establishment of OAU was based on the functionalist ideal, and as a result its Charter respected the sovereignty of newly independent African states. It is possible that some of the founders of the OAU were attracted by this school of thought since it does not interrogate the sovereignty of states. To this extent, Wapmuk (2009, p652) asserts that "although the African states were not as committed as they should be to the OAU, they could not disregard the organisation either." Through the forums provided by the OAU, African countries were able to present a common front in the international community. Notwithstanding, functionalism could be questioned in relation to Africa's quest for regional economic integration considering the political imperatives which come into play in realising key integration objectives. The reality is that African leaders meddle in affairs which are not contentious and could possibly be resolved by technocrats. Hence, politicians become inappropriately involved in bringing about solutions to technical issues (see Ogbeide 2010, p484). This is unlike the situation which obtains in other regions.

Another area of contention relates to the gains and benefits of international (functional) cooperation. Functionalism argues that it is less likely that countries would go to war when they are involved in doing things together. Although this assertion renders functionalism a valuable theory of integration, it does not represent the case in Africa as regional integration arrangements (RIAs) in Africa experience different inter-state conflicts. Functionalism is criticised because of its apolitical approach to issues; the areas of cooperation explored by functionalism are not "value free" and require aspects of policy making (Ayinde 2011, p185). The view of Chen (2011, p2) underscores that: "functionalism overstated a one-way impact of economy on politics [and therefore] it cannot give people a convincing explanation of integration."

Furthermore, the technical cooperation proposed by functionalists “represents a small component of the transactions that take place between African countries” (Ogbonna *et al*/ 2013, p105; see also Ayinde 2011, p186). This is as a result of weakness of African countries, which mainly produce raw materials and import manufactured goods. Africa is yet to strengthen its policy and institutional frameworks in order to achieve the goals of regional economic integration. As Manboah (2000, p58) puts it: the “functions which need to be linked together in a network of organisations for the functionalist principle to work are non-existent and there is not yet a consensus among states or a convergence of the various regional blocs in sub-Saharan Africa.” These are some of the major challenges confronting regional economic integration projects in Africa and many scholars question how the African Union-led integration framework responds to such problems. The concern is that Africa is rich in natural, mineral and human resources which need to be exploited to achieve much needed development in the region.

Neo-functionalism

Neo-functionalism developed from functionalism. Proponents of neo-functionalism identify with the functionalists propositions on the common pursuit of welfare needs through interstate cooperation but consider the process as basically political (Biswara 2012, p31). Neo-functionalists, just like the functionalists, agree that the authority of national government is gradually eroded as people transfer loyalties to supranational bodies (Laffan, 1992:9; see Gehring 1996, p229; Ayangafac 2008, p166). Ernest Haas, in his book - *The Uniting of Europe – Political, Social and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*, argued that unlike what functionalism proposes, the process of integration is not restricted to the intensification of policy collaboration in a specific functional area, economic or technical. Neo-functionalism is based on a political approach and re-launches functionalist theory in the perspective of regional institutions. It does not however, denounce its global dimension (Dosenrode 2008, p9).

To the neo-functionalists, “interests, rather than common ideals or identity, are the driving force behind the integration process, but actors may learn and develop common ideals and identities” (Schmitter and Haas 2005, p258). The neo-functionalist model therefore points out that issues of sovereignty and frequent conflicts among states are bound to occur in the process of integration. Long-term cooperation is bound to fail when there are conflicts of national interests in the process of integration, for instance,

the conflicts between political powers such as parties and interest groups, and conflicts as a result of the attitudes of political elites. In such situations, there is need for supranational institutions that can propel the process of deeper integration (Rosamond 2000, p51-52). Neo-functionalism, in this regard, involves the political elements in the process of integrating previously autonomous entities (Ayinde, 2011).

Drawing from the assertions above, neo-functionalism attempts to be practical in explaining the process of regional integration. Its view is that regional integration is an inevitable process which could be initiated by political leaders of states who are interested in participating. In this way, neo-functionalism notes that states are important participants in the integration process but emphasises that the states are constituted by different interest groups and political parties (see, Niemann and Schmitter 2009, p4). In the view of neo-functionalists, the diverse interest groups in society would benefit from the integration process as there are supranational institutions which would facilitate economic and technical interactions across states (Anadi 2005, p139). These explanations depict the role and influence of supranational institutions as vital in the process of integration. Such institutions should be conscious of their functions in order to provide the right direction.

Essential in the neo-functionalist thesis is the idea of 'spill-over' (see, Desonrode 2008, p10). Integration possesses a spill-over effect. It is a process that begins with integration in a restricted area and as the process continues, it becomes inevitable and will "spillover" into other areas. In essence, integration would gradually extend from economic to political areas and the outcome would be a merger of states and their different constituencies (Haas 1958, p16).

Another type of spill-over associated with the neo-functionalism theory is referred to as "cultivated spill-over," which was used by theorists later on to further explain the integrative role played by supranational institutions in fostering integration ideals and ensuring the progress of the process ((Rosamond 2000, p61; Niemann and Schmitter, 2009). Thus, as an integration theory, one of the key elements underlined by the neo-functionalism thesis is 'supra-nationality' as the "only method available to the state to secure maximum welfare, underpinning the idea that there are inseparable linkages between the social, economic and political domains in integration" (Biswaro 2012, p31).

Neo-functionalism has a very significant attribute of theory which is that it informs readers about the end state of regional integration. Although envisaging a supra-

national state as the end product of integration, neo-functionalists are more concerned and interested in the “processes” of integration (Niemann and Schmitter 2009, p3). Neo-functionalists do not propose that upon the initiation of the regional integration process, deeper integration would result. Integration is not an event; rather it is a process that increasingly gains its own momentum (Ayangafac 2008, p166).

Both functionalism and neo-functionalism are able to explain how regional integration begins; how it progresses and the end result of the process. The functionalism and neo-functionalism theories derive from the regional integration process in Europe, which began with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Consequently, these theories explain how economic variables propel political integration. Regional integration in this regard is seen as a process, embodying different stages with different expectations from member countries (Caporaso 1998, p1; Chen 2011, p1). Functionalism/Neo-functionalism theories help to explain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of integration Haas (1971, p6). Also, the strengths of the functionalist/neo-functionalist approach lies in their accounts of the process of the evolution of international organisations and their explanations of the mechanisms of such organisations with focus on their institutions, secretariats and policies (Schmitter, 2004). International organisations, supranational institutions and sub-national actors, in the views of the functionalist/neo-functionalist writers, play significant roles in addressing common problems, maintaining international peace and security, furthering regional integration processes and shaping the foreign policies of nation-states.

Nevertheless, both functionalism and neo-functionalism have been criticised from different angles. For example, neofunctionalism claims that the role and authority of member states decrease as integration proceeds; however, this claim is contradicted by Africa's experiences. From both European and African experiences, the increased role of the state in national and regional affairs poses a significant challenge to neo-functionalist explanations. Particularly in the African context, neo-functionalism fails to account either for the nature and workings of the post-independence state in Africa or its influence on the process of economic integration. It does not explain the lack of effective institutions in African countries, like those of interest groups and political parties, which are supposed to propel the integration process. It does not explain the reality that while regional integration is being embraced in Africa, the status-quo (state sovereignty) is maintained.

In addition, the idea that economic integration would lead to political integration was particularly challenged by intergovernmentalist scholars. Neo-functionalism, some scholars argue, does not give explanations as to why countries which voluntarily decide to sign regional agreements and establish regional economic institutions (as it is particularly the case in Africa for example with ECOWAS, SADC, and AU) often become reluctant to implement such agreements. In other words, neo-functionalism should advance reasons for failures of regional institutions to make it a complete theory (Schmitter, 2004). As Niemann and Schmitter (2009, p10) argue, neo-functionalism "does not and cannot provide a general theory of regional integration in all settings especially not of their origins." Neo-functionalism takes for granted that participating countries in regional economic integration arrangements are economically developed and democratic. It does not account for the complexities and challenges of different regions. The theory of neo-functionalism is contradicted by the autocratic and under-developed nature and structure of the political economy of African countries.

Just as it was in Europe, the establishment of regional integration arrangements in Africa, both at the regional and continental levels is based on the functionalism/neo-functionalism idea. However, while African governments have been motivated by the success of regional integration in Europe, the continent has yet to fully exploit the benefits of integration. Much attention has been focused on establishing regional economic institutions, but not on the structures that need to be created and/or consolidated for the progress of economic integration. In order to mitigate the weaknesses of the functionalism/neo-functionalism theories and be able to examine the national political, social and economic issues which constrain regional integration efforts in Africa, neo-realism is selected as a complementary theory to enrich this paper.

Neo-realism

Neo-realism reflects the ideas of classical realism which views states as the main participants in the international system. Neo-realists agree with the position of the realists that national interests are basically the determinants of foreign policy objectives which states pursue competitively in the international system. Offensive realism conceptualises national interest in relation to power, while defensive neo-realism equates national interest to the security of states (Collard-Wexler 2006, p399). Neo-realism also sees the international system as 'anarchic' (Gehring 1996, p235). The argument is not

that the system is characterised by persistent crises or disorder, but basically that it is without any form of world government (Collard-Wexler 2006, p399).

The position of neo-realists, with respect to discourses on regional cooperation and integration, is that states endeavour to participate in cooperative arrangements as long as such efforts satisfy their best interests. However, the enthusiasm to cooperate diminishes when the arrangement conflicts with the interests of the state (Gibb 2009, p715). State interest is "often uncritically and simplistically assumed by the traditional theories of regionalism to be national self-interest" (Gibb 2009, p715). While this may be the case, the reality is that, in some cases, 'national interests' may be reflective of the interests of a few individuals in the state and not those of the civil society.

Neo-realism could explain the situation whereby sovereign nation states, confronted by an external crisis, may choose to cooperate in order to guarantee their security and as a survival strategy (Collard-Wexler 2006, p402). In this regard, the benefits which such states enjoy through institutionalising cooperation in the international system depend on the condition and issues that are involved. Neo-realism also provides insights on the limits of such cooperation (Gehring 1996, p232; Gilpin 2001, p356). For instance, states are not prepared to negotiate national security for economic benefits in a regional arrangement. However, the reality, as Collard-Wexler (2006, p402) points out, is that cooperation on socio-economic issues cannot be deepened without infringing on major concerns that obviously pertain to state survival. The case of the conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria over oil-rich Bakassi illustrates how difficult it is to promote cooperation among sovereign states. Cooperation is established for calculated reasons (Soderbaum 2002, p17). States estimate the "relative gains and distributive issues" (Gilpin 2001, p356). Cooperation is not specifically initiated to create a world order (Soderbaum 2002, p17). Nevertheless, neo-realists do not under-estimate inter-state cooperation, but they are of the view that, cooperation may not be easily established and may be difficult to maintain.

Sesay and Omotosho (2011, p14) buttress the perspectives of neo-realism on the extent to which state interests are determinants of institutionalised cooperation in the international system. These scholars note that:

The establishment of international organisations, irrespective of their geographical locations, membership size and distribution: whether they

are bilateral or multilateral, regional, continental or global; and whether they are concerned with political, economic, military, or socio-cultural cooperation or not, is informed first and foremost by broad complementarities of member states' national interests (Sesay and Omotosho 2011, p14).

International institutions, in the view of the neo-realists, have limited functions in promoting cooperation. These institutions, according to Sesay and Omotosho (2011, p15) are established to advance member states' national interests even though this is not particularly articulated as such in the states' foreign policies. Regional institutions are regarded as the products of state policies (Koukoudakis 2012, p93). They provide forums for cooperation or conflict between member-states and do not possess the needed authority to independently influence the behaviours and actions of member-states (Collard-Wexler 2006, p403). Considering these instances, therefore, the national power of each state in a regional integration institution is of interest to neo-realist scholars since participating states are not at equal levels of political and socio-economic development. It is the assumption of neo-realists that one or more countries which have achieved a level of political and economic development should be prepared to propel the integration process for success to be achieved (Gilpin 2001, p356; Collard-Wexler 2006, pp400-401). This does not, however, transform the 'anarchical' arrangement of the international system. As Gilpin (2001, p357) argues, regionalisation is not an "alternative to a state-centred international system."

The neo-realist theory has been criticised for being largely state-centred and static about governance systems without taking into consideration the fact that institutions have in place established feedback methods (Gehring 2006, p283). Also, the growing influence, roles and relevance of regional and international institutions in contemporary international politics, particularly in the case of the European integration process, has put the position of neo-realism to test (Koukoudakis 2012, p93). However, it cannot be disputed that the state still occupies a central place in determining the progress or failure of regional institutions. This point is worth noting in cognisance of the slow pace of integration in Africa and the level of conflicts within the continent's RECs. African regional economic integration arrangements have a poor record because of what Sesay

and Omotosho (2011, p16) refer to as the "primacy of politics and the cult of personality" in the continent.

The neo-realist theory is useful in analysing the political and socio-economic development challenges in African countries, which pose obstacles to the continent's regional economic integration processes. The theory also provides knowledge of capacity building in Africa in relevant areas to move the continent into deeper integration. For instance, opinions have been expressed that some African countries should provide the leadership needed to advance the integration process. The weakness of many African states significantly inhibits the pace of integration in Africa. Beyond this, however, the governing elites of African states may either not want regional integration projects to be successful or are often able to use their local political control or dominance to determine the progress of the continent's integration agenda (Gibb 2009, p715). This assertion not only calls attention to the undemocratic nature of regional integration processes in Africa, but also highlights the often questionable commitment of African leaders to implementing regional policies at the country/national level (particularly when such policies are considered by them not to be in the 'national' interest).

Attention will now be devoted to one area of concern in this paper: examining the problematic of regional economic integration in Africa using the theories which have been examined in the previous sections. The section explores seeming contradictions which form the basis of the theoretical debates on the African Union, NEPAD and APRM.

Problematic regional economic integration in Africa – From the OAU to the AU

Regional integration initiatives existed even before African countries acquired independence from the late 1950s. The South African Customs Union (SACU) was established in 1910 and the East African Community (EAC) in 1919 (Geda and Kibret 2002, p1). However, modern discourses on regional cooperation and integration in Africa are centred on how the OAU got established and its process of transformation to the African Union. The NEPAD and APRM initiatives are also examined as regional programmes of the African Union to address governance and development issues in advancing the goals of African economic integration.

It is possible to situate the development of regionalism in Africa within the functionalist/neo-functionalist explanations of the felt need for cooperation and the

perceived role of regional institutions. Whereas, Europe desired to establish a pan-regional structure to avert the occurrence of future wars (Olivier 2010, p25). African countries, as newly-independent, economically underdeveloped countries emerging from long periods of colonial rule, found it necessary to cooperate and form technical linkages in the immediate post-independence period. The formation of the OAU and other regional institutions was considered to be imperative in order to further political and socio-economic objectives in the continent.

There were, however, some 'missing' elements in Africa's regional integration process with regards to theoretical postulations. Given that African countries were newly independent, they were yet to achieve economic independence. Moreover, as political entities, states were yet to achieve a workable form of national integration. This meant that the basic structures and institutions to enable the integration process were not yet in place compared with the case of Europe (which provides a model for regionalism in Africa). The European countries were economically developed and had already achieved a level of intra-regional trade before the commencement of the integration process (Radelet 1997, p5). African states, however, sought political independence before focusing on economic development. Contrary to the expectation of the functionalist/neo-functionalist scholars that regional integration should follow a bottom-up process supported by individuals and groups in society, regional integration followed a different process. It started with the establishment of the OAU, which was a political initiative (of African leaders and policy makers). Later on, regional economic institutions focusing on economic sub-regional integration were established. However, instead of identifying priority needs and challenges in the continent and formulating deliberate policies to address them, African leaders imitated the European process, which they saw as a model for Africa.

At the time of establishing the OAU, African leaders consented to the proposal of African unity. However, they differed on how to achieve this objective. Two major groups of African leaders had different ideas. The first group referred to as the 'Pan-Africanists' was of the view that Africa should consider immediate and total political integration where there will be a single government with common continental institutions, such as those emphasised in federalist theories. The other group called the 'Gradualists/Functionalists,' preferred a more gradual approach to African integration, perhaps in consideration of the

fact that African countries were newly-independent states (Martin, 1992; ECA 2011, pp29-30). These divisions did not stop the eventual establishment of the OAU.

A seeming contradiction can be found in the OAU's Charter, signed by the African Heads of State and Government, which reflected the desire for African unity. Its principles did not address the question of national sovereignty of member states. On the one hand, African states were sovereign political entities; on the other hand, the states lacked basic elements of statehood and were ill-prepared to achieve the continental vision of African unity (Shaw, 2009, p45). These were theoretical gaps in Africa's economic integration agenda and the issues negatively affected the process of cooperation and integration. Moreover, the OAU was established during the period of the Cold War and, as this war intensified, individual African countries became relevant in the rivalry of the Superpowers (Shaw 2009, p45). African countries were, therefore, divided on several issues. As such, the OAU had to confront several external and internal political and socio-economic difficulties in its efforts at promoting African unity and development. It was successful, however, in speeding up the decolonisation of the continent (Akokpari 2003, pp2-3).

Other theoretical contradictions in the integration plan were the principle of the OAU Charter (Article II (1) which upheld the territorial integrity of African states and the declaration on non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states. These principles (which reflected key arguments articulated in neo-realism about state sovereignty) constrained the efforts of the OAU in achieving its objectives (Olivier 2010). Not only did African leaders exploit the principles to misgovern the states, poor governance led to lack of popular interests and support for the continent's integration agenda (Adejumobi, 2009). Ideally, these were key elements outlined by functionalist/neo-functionalists writers for the success of RIAs. It was not surprising therefore, that bad leadership and poor governance led to successive military coups, intra-state and inter-state conflicts, as well as poverty and development challenges in most African countries.

The OAU lacked the capacity to deal with governance and leadership failures. These issues, together with the unfavourable terms and conditions associated with international trade and economic interactions; ill-advised economic policies implemented by African leaders; lack of financial resources; skilled manpower and infrastructure; weak institutions; political instability and insecurity resulting from intra and inter-state conflicts and the economic disparities and levels of development of African states, affected the realisation of

regional economic integration objectives in the continent (Schalk *et al*/ 2005, p501). Basically, a majority of African leaders were not committed to implementing regional agreements at the national level. Their lack of commitment comprised a severe setback to the progress of RIAs.

Notwithstanding that there were several challenges in African countries which were impacting negatively on the regional integration process as identified above, the conviction, perhaps, that such challenges would be effectively addressed through effective cooperation and integration motivated the formulation of the OAU's 1980 Lagos Plan of Action. Ten years later on in 1991, the Abuja Treaty was signed by African leaders within the framework of the OAU, indicating the objective of creating an African Economic Community (AEC) (IRCD, 2003). The treaty set out to consolidate Africa's economic integration efforts through strengthening the continent's RECs and promoting collective self-reliance and self-sustainable socio-economic development (IRCD, 2003).

A decade later, in 2001, NEPAD was established. This programme would receive the support of the OAU and the African Union. Moreover, African leaders had initiated the process of transforming the OAU to the African Union from the 1990s and this was finalised with the signing of the African Union Charter in 2002. The AU and NEPAD initiatives aimed at advancing the African regional economic integration agenda. Consequently, in 2002 the Heads of State and Government of the African Union adopted a Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance in recognition of the need for African governments to emphasise good governance and socio-economic development in order to speed up the integration process (AU, 2002). These objectives were further demonstrated when the African Union decided to adopt NEPAD as the framework for strengthening regional integration institutions envisioned in the Abuja Treaty. It was the expectation that the integration of the African Union and NEPAD initiatives would lead not only to Africa's socio-economic transformation and integration, but also to more beneficial interactions with the West and multilateral institutions (Kimaryo 2013, p37). To facilitate these objectives, in 2003 the African Union established the APRM as a governance monitoring tool under the framework of the NEPAD initiative.

Theoretical debates on the African regional economic integration process

The analysis in the previous section shows that African leaders and policy makers have not and do not lag behind in formulating regional economic integration initiatives intended to address Africa's political, social and economic challenges. Even the seeming lack of adequate success has not affected the continued search for regional economic integration. However, the obvious reality is that the integration process in Africa suffers several setbacks because the governments have formulated regional integration initiatives without addressing key governance and development challenges at the national level. This led to the failure of the OAU to achieve African unity. It is also a matter of concern and an issue of debate in regional economic integration discourses in Africa.

The formation of the African Union in 2002 gave new impetus to the African economic integration agenda. The AU has been described as an improvement on the OAU. The AU aims to implement better policies and programmes towards promoting sub-regional and regional economic integration and development in Africa. The organisation emphasises popular participation of Africans in the continent's integration and development processes. These are some of the main discourses associated with the functionalist/neo-functionalist theories. As neo-functionalists predict, the vision of the African Union is to unify the continent and grant Africans a common identity (see, Adejumobi 2009, p405). The final goal of the African Union is "full political and economic integration leading to the United States of Africa" (African Union 2005: Assembly/AU/Dec.90(V), S3). The NEPAD and APRM are pan-regional programmes working together to ensure the realisation of the AU objectives. Since the AU's development programmes are futuristic in nature, with the RECs as "building blocks" to continental integration (Wapmuk 2009, p659), Africa's economic integration agenda aligns with the functionalist/neo-functionalist gradualist and bottom-up blueprint.

With the various integration frameworks in place, the contending governance issues and development challenges at the national level in African countries constitute a paradox in the continent's integration agenda. The intra and inter-state crises and conflicts in the continent; state sovereignty versus supra-nationalism phenomenon; challenge of nation-building and national integration; and several other socio-economic and political challenges at the national level pose a challenge to the theory of

functionalism/neo-functionalism. These problems at the national level also make neo-realism a relevant theory in regional economic integration discourses in Africa. A salient question to ask, therefore, is: considering the impediments at the national level, how will the objectives of the African Union/NEPAD be realised?

Currently, there are on-going debates and contestations among scholars, media commentators writers, civil society representatives, policy makers and implementers centred on when, how, and the pace at which the objectives of the African Union will be achieved. Adogamhe (2008, p4) underscores that:

Once again, the renewed debate on African integration is whether the objective of building the United States of Africa should support the processes of socio-economic and political transformation of African states and societies either through a process of immediate creation of a central government (federalism) or through 'gradual-incrementalism' or functional evolution of African state-system.

In other words, how to actualise the vision of African integration is still a contentious issue between integration theorists (see, Wapmuk 2009, p647). For several years, critics have questioned the commitment, determination and willingness of African leaders and policy makers towards making the vision a reality. While some scholars argue that such important issues need to be debated and deliberated extensively, the amount of time and resources committed to such debates and the fact that there still exist divergent opinions and lack of consensus on issues, are matters of concern and doubts as to the realisation of the vision of the African Union. To this extent, therefore, how do we reconcile the neo-functionalist ideals of supra-nationalism with contending issues of sovereignty and nationalism enunciated in neo-realism? How will the gap between supra-nationalism and state sovereignty be bridged in Africa?

It is worth underscoring that the differing views on issues featuring on the debate agenda have arisen because of the 'unique' factors inherent in African regionalism and the poor record of RIAs in Africa. However, the fact of general acceptability of regionalism as strategy for Africa's economic development has remained a constant variable in regional initiatives such as the RECs, African Union/NEPAD.

Conclusion

This paper examined regional economic integration discourse in Africa from a political-economic perspective within the purview of functionalism/neo-functionalism and neo-realism theories. In relation to these theories, the argument is that regional economic integration faces a plethora of economic and political problems which pose challenges to the African Union/NEPAD and APRM initiatives. While the theoretical gaps and challenges have been identified, they do not indicate that the AU-led initiatives are not linked to Africa's integration and socio-economic development efforts. The analysis shows that Africa's desire for regional economic integration and to achieve the goals of integration has not been matched by the required sacrifice and commitment to propel such efforts. Issues of power politics, state sovereignty and parochial interests of African governments are critical issues in the discourse. Consequently, these issues have constantly provided the bases for frequent debates and deliberations on the African Union-led integration process.

The crux of this paper is that African leaders and policy makers need to embrace good governance; responsible and accountable leadership; democratic norms and values; and effective state-society relations at the national level in order to make regional economic integration a reality.

Note

Intergovernmentalism does not accept the spill-over effect suggested in the neo-functionalism theory. It also does not agree with the thought that supranational organisations are laced with the same form of authority as national governments (see, Diiego Castaneda, 2006, p8).

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

JIBOKU, Peace A.

International and Public Affairs Cluster
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Email: jiboku.peace@gmail.com