

**A critical analysis of Africa's efforts at
regional integration**

By Marvin Leshaba¹

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEC	African Economic Community
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AU	African Union
CEEAC	Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)
CEPGL	Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries
COMESA	Common Market for East and Southern Africa
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FOSAD	Forum of South African Directors-General
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SACU	South African Customs Union
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UDEAC	The Central African Economic and Customs Union
UEMOA	l'Union Économique et Monétaire a Quest Africaine
UMA	Arab Maghreb Union

INTRODUCTION

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU)'s success in achieving the political independence of the continent has not brought with it economic freedom. Thus the continent still faces major challenges of poverty alleviation and development. However, this can be explained by the deficiencies of the post-independent African states in achieving economic development for its citizens, a major challenge for the African Union (AU) and its New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) program. Throughout the world, regional integration has gained momentum and is seen as the panacea to dealing with the shortcomings of the state. This does not in anyway render the state irrelevant. However, the new reality is that states need joint effort in dealing with issues affecting the region, from unemployment or fighting cross border crime.

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This paper seeks to examine Africa's efforts and challenges at building coherent regional groupings and offers lessons for the AU. The paper will further provide an analysis of the Abuja Treaty, which paved the way for the establishment of an African Economic Community (AEC) and later the AU. The AEC can be interpreted as the *sine qua non* for building consensus for strong regional integration in Africa. The Constitutive Act of the AU has now replaced the Abuja Treaty. A careful analysis will be provided as to why most regional groupings have failed to produce the desired result, which is economic development, despite the remarkable desire for regional integration. Such desire still lingers in the hearts and minds of the new crop of African leadership.

THE TWO WAVES OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Since independence African leaders have seen regional integration and cooperation as a way to replace links with former colonial countries.² According to Nomvete³ post-colonial Africa was, and still is, a disintegrated continent with fragmented national markets, more so than any other region in the world. However during the colonial period Africa survived through its direct economic links and technical assistance with its colonial masters. Therefore African leaders' desire for regional integration and cooperation can be interpreted as a means of striving to attain economic independence, promoting regional stability and guaranteeing African influence in international affairs.

Kennes⁴ argues that the drive towards regional integration in Africa can be divided into two waves. The first wave took place during the post-independence period; that is in the 1960s and early 1970s with an extension for Southern Africa to around 1980. The second wave is quite recent, this is around the signing of the Abuja Treaty on the AEC in 1991. Furthermore, the second wave extended into the mooted out of the idea of an AU.⁵ The first wave of regional integration saw the birth of the OAU and many other regional organisations, but

with less tangible results. These two waves occurred at a time when the world was going through radical changes. The first wave took place when most African countries gained independence and at the height of the Cold War. The second wave occurred at the time of the demise of the Cold War in 1989. One needs to take recognition of the ideologies that prevailed during these historical periods and the way in which they influenced events worldwide as well as in Africa.

From whichever position one looks at both waves as well as the influence towards regional integration itself, one needs to recognise that:

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No African State is economically large enough to construct a modern economy alone. Africa as a whole has the resources of industrialisation, but it is split among more than forty African territories. Africa as a whole could provide markets able to support large scale efficient industrial complexes the only way to achieve the economic reconstruction and development essential to fulfil the aspirations, needs and demands of the peoples of Africa is through a sustained shift to continental planning, so as to unite increasingly the resources, market and capital of Africa in a single substantial economic unit.⁶

It is therefore not surprising that Abuja espouses a more continental approach to integration. This is the challenge faced by the AU and its continental recovery plan NEPAD. Such challenges will prove whether the AU will be able to strike a balance between economic and political issues. The OAU was mostly preoccupied with political issues. Even though the AEC was formed in 1991 economic issues still took a back seat.

REASONS FOR THE SLOW PACE OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Since African countries began achieving independence in the late 1950s onwards, two conflicting predispositions have influenced their efforts at regional cooperation and integration.⁷ The first has been to adhere rigidly to the colonial borders drawn up in imperial European capitals, although these borders militate against the economic, political and social viability and coherence of the African nation-states thus artificially created. Their second inclination has been to emphasize from the outset the indispensability of economic integration across Africa's sub-regions and the continent as a whole. The consequence however is that despite this emphasis on the vitality of economic integration and the continent's natural and mineral resources, most states have proved to be economically unviable. The reliance on one commodity has played a role in weakening economic integration and intra-African trade. Here the work of the AU in addressing the economic challenges faced by member states is clearly crucial.

There are few achievements in some areas of integration in Africa. However the results in terms of progress and a move towards closer integration, as other

regional groupings in the world have done, is still minimal. As mentioned in the above paragraph, the other problem associated with the failure of regional integration in Africa is that there is less intra-African regional trade. This poses a serious challenge to the AU. Table 1 illustrates this phenomenon. Kennes⁸ argues that a more plausible explanation for the low level of intra-African trade is that the regional groupings have not yet been able to abolish customs duties or more generally the barriers inherent in doing business across borders. Roadblocks between borders and constraints on payments, investment and movement of persons are still issues that need to be dealt with thoroughly in order to facilitate intra-African trade; the AU will grapple with these difficulties. Resolving these difficulties means a large expenditure on infrastructure, something that has substantial budgetary implications on the AU's financial capabilities. NEPAD with its emphasis on building infrastructure on the continent provides a perfect fall back plan in this regard, hence its funding becomes very vital. It is ironic to note that across borders of African countries there is a high level of unrecorded trade between ordinary citizens of the continent. This is a reflection of the continent's potential to flourish if regional integration is well coordinated.

Table 1: Basic facts on intra-regional trade ⁹			
Organisation	Number of members	Total Exports*	Intra-trade share*
UMA	5	26.8	3.2
ECOWAS	16	19.2	8.6
UEMOA	8	4.3	10.4
CEEAC	10	5.6	2.5
UDEAC	6	5.1	2.3
CEPGL	3	0.5	1.1
COMESA	22	13.0	7.0
SADC	14	10.9	5.1
* In billion dollars			
♦ As % of total exports			

Moreover, there are two reasons that can be ascertained as to why measures that can facilitate intra-African trade have not been implemented; these are at the national level and regional level. At the national level inappropriate economic policies, inward looking development strategies emphasising import substitution behind high barriers, lack of political will, local conflicts and civil strife, insufficient knowledge and capacity to implement integration measures, as well as the lack of involvement of civil society and the private sector have all played negative roles. At the regional level, the lack of implementation of

regional integration can be explained by insufficient coordination of national policies, overlapping of membership and inadequate institutional arrangements, unrealistic, over-ambitious agendas and lack of resources of the integration organisations.¹⁰ This is one of the more serious lessons for the AU and an issue to be tackled.

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Furthermore, insufficient transport and communication networks have also had a detrimental effect on regional integration. Lack of transport and communications infrastructure certainly constitutes a formidable constraint on economic activity in sub-Saharan Africa, virtually as much within as between countries.¹¹ The big question is: what steps will the AU take to resolve these thorny issues? That said there are some countries that have made efforts to ensure that integration amongst them runs smoothly. The recent Maputo corridor between South Africa and Mozambique, and the trans-frontier park between South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe are a case in point. In certain regions where such passages existed, they have been badly maintained and civil wars have caused damage to such infrastructure, thus making cross-border business very risky and dangerous. This means that the AU will have to address domestic and regional impediments to the development and integration of the continent. Addressing these issues at a continental level through the AU structures might bring to the fore the question of sovereignty: will African states allow the AU and its structures a role in domestic politics?

THE ABUJA TREATY OF 1991

The Abuja Treaty is a landmark development in African politics and paved the way for the creation of the AU and its Constitutive Act. This treaty was signed on 3 June 1991, in Abuja, Nigeria by 51 heads of state. This treaty committed African leaders to create an AEC by the year 2000. The AU was formed eleven years after its signing. The objectives of the AEC are clearly captured in Article 4, paragraph 1 of the treaty as follows:

- To promote economic, social and cultural development, and the integration of African economies in order to increase economic self-reliance and promote an endogenous and self-sustained development,
- To establish on a continental scale a framework for the development, mobilisation, and utilisation of the human and material resources of Africa in order to achieve a self-reliant development,
- To promote cooperation in all fields of human endeavour in order to raise the standard of living of African peoples, and maintain and enhance economic stability, foster close and peaceful relations among member states and contribute to the progress, development and economic integration of the continent,

- To coordinate and harmonise policies among existing and future economic communities in order to foster the gradual establishment of the Community.¹²

This treaty was signed at a time when regional integration in most parts of the world was accelerating at a fast pace. Thus this created a renewed interest within Africa in revitalising and resuscitating regional economic groupings.¹³ By recognising the sheer enormity of the changes that took place on the global scene, African countries have called for a re-examination of the present policies and strategies regarding regionalism. Moreover, African countries have also called for the adoption of new initiatives that will respond effectively to the challenges of the emerging world of trading blocs, globalisation of world production, liberalisation of world trade and the rapid changes in technology.¹⁴ The Abuja Treaty was adopted against the background that the current global change was going to increase Africa's marginalisation in world affairs. Therefore certain external factors were at play when the Abuja Treaty was signed.

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Mukisa and Thompson¹⁵ further point out that three other main factors can be associated with the need for change, namely international debt, domestic crises and as mentioned the impact of global change. The issue of Africa's indebtedness is well known and has been widely researched and written about by scholars of both political science and international relations, thus the paper will not dwell on it. The domestic crises were characterised by a number of factors, varying from one country to another. These include military coups, social cleavages, civil strife as well as the fact that Africa has an abundance of resources, which regrettably its leaders have not utilised to the benefit of the general African population. However recent indications, especially by those few African countries that are willing to be assessed by the African Peer Review Mechanism of NEPAD show commitment to the principles of good political and economic governance. Clearly more African countries need to volunteer for peer review in order to move the process forward.

There have also been positive factors coming from within the continent that led to the signing of the Abuja Treaty. Thus Abuja came out as a result of a number of conferences held in the early years of independence. Such conferences are worth mentioning here:

- Firstly, the adoption of the OAU Charter in 1963 of which the treaty itself is an integrated part,
- Secondly, the decisions, resolutions and declarations adopted at the Algiers summit in September 1968, and the Addis Ababa summits of August 1970 and May 1973 which made economic integration an essential condition for the achievement of OAU objectives,
- Thirdly, the Libreville summit of 1977 endorsing the Kinshasa Declaration of 1976 on the establishment of an African Economic Community,

- Fourthly, the Monrovia summit of 1979 at which was adopted the Monrovia Declaration of Commitment to the Guidelines and Measures to be taken to achieve national and collective self-sufficiency in economic and social development with a view to establishing a new international economic order and which, among other things, called for the establishment of an African common market as a prelude to the creation of an African Economic Community,
- Fifthly, the source of inspiration is reflected in the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos (1980) reaffirming the commitment to establish an African Common Market by the year 2000,
- Finally, the OAU Declaration reaffirming the commitment and determination to accelerate the establishment of the proposed African Economic Community.¹⁶

It appears that the AEC sought to address economic issues since there was already a perception that the OAU was more of a political than an economic organisation. The treaty therefore makes no reference to political integration, except when reference is made to the AEC. It is often argued that for economic decisions to be made there should be the necessary political will; after all politicians are seen to make such decisions on matters of regional integration and other spheres of governance. Coming back to the treaty itself, Article 6 gives six stages on the modalities of the establishment of the community, with different time frames, which will not exceed 34 years. The transition from one stage to another is to be determined when the specific objectives set in the treaty or pronounced by the Assembly for a particular stage are implemented and all commitments fulfilled.¹⁷ Moreover, the Assembly on the recommendation of the council shall confirm that the objectives of a particular stage have been attained, and shall approve the transition to the next stage.¹⁸ The implementation of the six stages is indispensable to the success of the AEC. The establishment of the AU is a key point in that transition.

The first stage

This stage advocates the strengthening of existing regional economic communities and, within a period of 5 years from the date of entry into force of the treaty, establishing economic communities in regions where they do not exist.¹⁹ The AEC sees Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as the building block for realising its objectives, a view adopted by the AU. The problem that emerged was that the AEC lacked the mechanism or did not define any mechanism for ensuring that RECs would be locked into the community agenda and compelled to accept or respect community decisions and regulations.²⁰ Perhaps there is a perception from the political leadership that the current RECs are sufficient, though the reality proves contrary.

Despite the fact that this problem was addressed by signing a protocol articulating the relationship between the RECs and AEC, the RECs do not seem prepared for continental integration.²¹ Furthermore, although the Protocol also empowers the AEC Assembly and Council "to give directives to any REC whose policies, measures and programmes are at odds with the objectives of the treaty", there were no firm indications of the political will within some of the RECs party to the Protocol, to submit regional concerns to the overriding imperatives of the AEC.²² The AU will most likely experience this problem if not properly addressed.

The second stage

Most African countries have multiple memberships to many of the existing RECs. As a result the same country will therefore find itself progressing towards economic integration at different paces in different communities to which it belongs

There are three issues that the second stage sought to deal with.²³ Firstly, at the level of each regional economic community and within a period not exceeding 8 years, there should be a stabilisation of Tariff Barriers and Non-Tariff Barriers, customs duties, and internal taxes existing at the date of entry into this treaty. Secondly, there shall be prepared and adopted studies to determine the time-table for gradual removal of Tariff Barriers and Non-Tariff Barriers to regional and intra-Community trade and for the gradual harmonisation of customs duties in relation to third states. Thirdly, strengthening of sectoral integration at the regional and continental levels in all areas of activity, particularly in the fields of trade, agriculture, money and finance, transport and communications, industry and energy is seen as vital.

Moreover, there should also be a co-ordination and harmonisation of activities among the existing and future economic communities. The problems as well as the challenges to the AEC in this stage are enormous. As mentioned in the preceding sections most African countries have multiple memberships to many of the existing RECs. As a result the same country will therefore find itself progressing towards economic integration at different paces in different communities to which it belongs.²⁴

Despite the fact that countries like Lesotho and Mozambique have indicated that they would withdraw from the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), this will not be enough to reduce the cult of overlapping membership.²⁵ Moreover countries like Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have recently revived the defunct East African Community (EAC), now the East African Cooperation. It can be ascertained right from the beginning that these three countries are already pushing further ahead, as is the South African Customs Union (SACU), than other regions as far as their integration is concerned. Note that all African states have joined the AU, except Morocco, which had withdrawn from the OAU due to the recognition of Western Sahara in the 1980s.

The third and fourth stages

The third stage committed member countries to establish a Free Trade Area through the observance of the timetable for the gradual removal of Tariff Barriers and Non-Tariff Barriers to intra-community trade and the establishment of a Customs Union by means of adopting a common external tariff.²⁶ This was to be done at each regional economic community within a period not exceeding 10 years. The fourth stage like all the other stages had its time frame as well. This stage would take 2 years. It called for the coordination and harmonisation of tariff and non-tariff systems among the various regional economic communities with a view to establishing a Customs Union at the continental level by adopting a common external tariff.²⁷ The African Union will have to take these further.

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The fifth stage

An establishment of an African Common Market was envisaged. This would take 4 years. There were certain issues that were seen as significant for the establishment of a common market. These included the adoption of a common policy in several areas such as agriculture, transport and communications, industry, energy and scientific research.²⁸ Moreover, monetary, financial and fiscal policies also need to be harmonised as well as the application of the principle of free movement of persons and the provisions herein regarding the rights of residence and establishment.²⁹ Lastly, an African Common Market also required the proper resources of the community as provided for in paragraph 2 of Article 82 of the Treaty.³⁰

The sixth stage

The Sixth and final stage is the defining moment in the efforts to create an AEC. The AU will have to oversee the implementation of this stage. This stage stipulates that within a period not exceeding 5 years, certain objectives should be met. These include the following:

- There should be a consolidation and strengthening of the structure of the African Common Market, by including the free movement of people, goods, capital and services, as well as the provisions herein regarding the rights of residence and establishment,
- There should also be an integration of all sectors; namely economic, political, social and cultural, as well as the establishment of a single domestic market and a Pan-African Economic Monetary Union,
- Implementation of the final stage for the setting up of an African Monetary Union, the establishment of a single African Central Bank and the creation of a single African Currency,

- Implementation of the final stage for the setting up of the structure of the Pan-African Parliament and election of its members by continental universal suffrage,
- Implementation of the final stage for the harmonisation and coordination process of the activities of regional economic communities,
- Implementation of the final stage for the setting up of the structures of African multi-national enterprises in all sectors,
- Implementation of the final stage for the setting up of the structures of the executive organs of the Community.³¹

The composition of the six stages as the crux of achieving the goal of the AEC, poses a serious stumbling block as Asante noted:

Progress towards the formation of the AEC could very well depend on the speed at which the slowest groupings moved towards attainment of the basic objectives marking each stage

The completion of one stage is the start of the next one and so on, forming a chain. However, if one or more of the sub regional groupings is not able to meet the conditions of say, the third stage, then the whole process is likely to be blocked. The idea of sequencing reflects the expectation that all members of sub regional groupings would simultaneously attain the objectives of each stage, and preferably as rapidly as possible within the time frame accorded. Progress towards the formation of the AEC could very well depend on the speed at which the slowest groupings moved towards attainment of the basic objectives marking each stage.³²

The point is that African countries are at different stages of development, mostly with limited resources except for a few. This has had a tendency of affecting the regions. As a result the country with the slowest rate of implementation has consequently determined the integration process, and if this problem is not averted, the AEC and AU progress would once again be at a snail's pace.³³

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE AEC

The most critical issue is the fact that the AEC fell under the OAU Secretariat. This has made the AEC just an economic division of the politically orientated OAU, hence recently the OAU was also tasked with the transition of the AU. As a result not too many AEC summits were held on economic integration and cooperation, as is the case with SADC, COMESA and ECOWAS. An observation by Asante³⁴ was that the AEC had no identity and its functions were completely dominated by those of the politically oriented OAU Secretariat, as is evident in the deliberations of the annual summits of the OAU. In addition, the AEC lacked technocratic staff that could oversee the smooth implementation of economic integration in the continent. Also because of rivalries, it never managed to use properly the impressive expertise that was available within the Economic Commission for Africa.

It can also be pointed out that political responsibilities including conflict prevention, management and resolution, a role which the OAU assumed in the 1990s, were burdensome to an organisation that commanded insufficient levels of financial, material, staffing and logistics support from its members.³⁵ As a result not much effort had been put into the AEC. Hopefully such tendencies will change as the AU seeks to combine both economic and political integration in its operations. It must be stressed that budgetary constraints will still be prevalent. It is against this background that, since its inception, the AEC did not achieve tangible results, hence its emphasis on RECs as building blocks. Here the AU has its work clearly cut out for itself, since it is a proponent of both economical and political integration.

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CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a critical analysis of regional integration in Africa. The paper divides Africa's efforts at integration into two waves. The first wave consisting of the formation of the OAU and other regional groupings, whilst the second wave encapsulates the Abuja treaty up to the formation of the AU. Regional integration in itself has not failed in Africa, but rather progress has been hampered by the lack of political will in implementing and accumulating the necessary resources for the success of it. As a result whilst the world has been reaping the fruits of regional integration, such benefits have eluded Africans. It needs to be said that the Abuja Treaty spelt out clearly Africa's desire for change. The Abuja Treaty can be interpreted as the landmark of change in the policies and implementation of regional integration, but lacked proper support at OAU summits. This treaty further paved the way for a debate in moving to a closer form of continental integration, unlike the loose organisation of states, which prevailed under the OAU.

In addition, the paper has further assessed how African countries' practice of multiple memberships has constituted an obstacle in the success of regional integration. Issues such as civil strife, conflicts and the lack of transport and communications infrastructure have played a negative role and have delayed progress in regional integration. Such are the challenges faced by the Abuja's AEC which now has been converted into the AU. In reality these are just some of the lessons and challenges that the AU will have to contend with.

The paper has also highlighted events and issues that lead to the Abuja Treaty. Thus it emerged that internal and external factors were at play when the Abuja Treaty was signed. Internally the debt crisis, conflicts, as well as the number of conferences that were held within the continent influenced Abuja. Such conferences emphasised the need for an AEC. Therefore an assertion that Abuja was a positive reaction in trying to deal with the debt crisis and civil wars within the continent can be made. Externally, global change characterised by the increasing number of

regional organisations was also an all-important factor in the signing of the AEC treaty. Thus the perception was that with a growing number of regional organisations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU), just to mention a few, Africa would be marginalized both economically and politically. As a result, the AEC would hopefully serve as the guiding force in Africa's regional economic integration, since the OAU was preoccupied with political issues. The AU will now have to focus on both political and economic challenges on the African continent, a task that will be riddled with complexities and difficulties.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Marvin Leshaba is Assistant Director for the Forum of South African Directors-General (FOSAD) Secretariat in the Presidency. This paper is extracted from his Masters Research Report entitled 'The African Union: Challenges and prospects for continental integration.' It was submitted to the University of the Witwatersrand in 2002.
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- ³ Nomvete D, Bax. 'Regional Integration in Africa, a path strewn with obstacles.' *The Courier*. November-December 1993; 142: 49.
- ⁴ Kennes Walter. 'African regional economic integration and the European Union.' Bach C. (ed). *Regionalisation, Integration and Disintegration in Africa*. Oxford: James Curry Ltd, 1999: 27.
- ⁵ The idea of an African Union came to the fore in late 1999, at an OAU summit held in Sirte, Libya.
- ⁶ Danso Kwaku. 'The African Economic Community: Problems and prospects.' *Africa Today*. 1995; 42(4): 35.
- ⁷ Mistry PS. 'Africa's record of regional co-operation and integration.' *African Affairs*. October 2000; 99(397): 553.
- ⁸ Mistry 29.
- ⁹ Kennes 27.
- ¹⁰ Kennes 30.
- ¹¹ Ibid.

- ¹² Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, Backgrounder, 1992: 8.
- ¹³ Asante SKB. *Towards an African Economic Community*. Africa Institute Research Paper, 2001; 64: 1.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Mukisa RS, Thompson B. 'Prerequisite for economic integration in Africa: An analysis of the Abuja Treaty.' *Africa Today*. 1995; 42(4): 59.
- ¹⁶ Asante SKB. *Regionalism and Africa's development*. Great Britain: Macmillian Press Ltd, 1997: 91.
- ¹⁷ Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community 14.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community 11.
- ²⁰ Asante *Towards an African Economic Community*. 9.
- ²¹ This Protocol was signed at the AEC's first summit of African Heads of State and Government held in Harare on 3 June 1997.
- ²² Asante 10.
- ²³ Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community 11.
- ²⁴ Asante 10.
- ²⁵ Both Lesotho and Mozambique declared their intentions to withdraw from COMESA in 1997. Egypt has been a member of COMESA since 1998 and Mauritania has not been a member of ECOWAS for several years.
- ²⁶ Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community 12.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Paragraph 2 of Article 82 stipulates that the budget shall be funded by contributions made by member states in accordance with the scale of assessment of the OAU (Now AU). Upon the recommendations of the council, the Assembly shall determine the conditions under which the financial contributions of member states may be supplemented, or where necessary, replaced by the proper resources of the community.
- ³¹ Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community.

³² Asante *Regionalism and Africa's development* 103.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Asante *Towards an African Economic Community*. 7.

³⁵ Asante *Towards an African Economic Community*. 8.