

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT IN REGIONAL INTERGRATION PROCESS: ECOWAS

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ECOWAS at a Glance

- **Member nation:** 15
- **Headquarters:** Abuja, Nigeria
- **Population:** 340 million (2013)
- Nigeria almost contains half of th
- **GDP** US\$ 1,322 billion (2013)



Consumers, CSOs and Private Sector Involvement in ECOWAS decision Process

- The ECOWAS has so far not been able to effectively mobilise its citizens to form strong pillar behind the regional integration process.
- Consumers associations, CSOs, industrial players and other Private Sector Organisations must be allowed to contribute to trade policy process with both supporting and opposing views in order to help shape the policy to make it all embracing and all inclusive.
- CSOs collaboration with ECOWAS was inadequate because some CSOs lack information and the capacity to collaborate and also majority of CSOs were not aware of the history, policies and institutions within the ECOWAS as an organisation.

Benefits of RI to Consumers/ Citizens

- The enhancement of the ECOWAS regional integration process leads to increased investment inflows into the region, enhanced productivity, employment generation, as well as reduced incidences of corruption.
- Harmonization of regional investment policies into a singular code removes obstacles to “doing business” and provide efficient and effective legal, as well as regulatory frameworks that promote a healthy competition and growth of the regional private sector.
- RI leads to a better allocation of resources which in turns leads to decrease in prices of goods in favour of consumers. Better allocation of resources makes producers to be efficient and thus produce at least cost.

Benefits...

- Consumers in ECOWAS gain because trade liberalization within the region allows for the creation and expansion of trade and improves the terms of exchange of the member countries and this leads to lower prices. Consumers thus benefit from reduced prices which increase their welfare.
- Regional trans-border migration contributes to socio-economic advancement citizens and nations by increasing household incomes. Cross-border remittances, which are increasing, contribute to poverty reduction in the region through investment activities.

ECOWAS Regional Trade Policy Making and Involvement of Citizens

- *Trade Policy Making and Implementation:*
- The decision-making power officially lies in the hands of the Heads of States and Governments, the Council of Ministers and other bureaucrats alone, who design the course of the ECOWAS Community.
- ETLS has been a very good step toward expanding trade within ECOWAS and still has great potential to increase trade among members.
- EPA negotiation in some member countries of ECOWAS received private sector and CSOs participation largely due to the media and the CSOs.

- ***Reasons why ECOWAS Trade Policy Does Not Involve Citizens***
- The large critical mass account for very little in trade policy making outcomes, which was inherited from the colonial masters and this translated into the policy making process after independence.
- The national policy making institutions were seen as main actors in shaping trade policy and thus trade policy reflects the interest of national bureaucrats and other senior officials.
- There is a little of mention of ECOWAS at the grassroots level.
- The public have been disconnected about the idealism of ECOWAS

The Perceptions of the Citizens on Involvement in Trade policies

- For ECOWAS regional integration process to be successful, it is very important to have a functional regional trade agreement that includes the views and opinions of the citizens of the region.
- Consumers/citizens are beneficiaries of trade through lower prices and wide variety of goods and services and thus must be included in policy process.
- Some consumer groups in Ghana were rather worried about the extent to which the citizens were relegated from policy making process that concerns regional integration.
- According to some CSOs, ECOWAS work through selected members of parliament who are not closer to the citizens. As a result many consumers in Ghana were not well informed of the mission, mandates and the benefit that that can be derived from ECOWAS as an organisation. This led to a lack of knowledge which limits the extent to which consumers actively participate in dialogues concerning how best the ECOWAS region could be integrated.

Limitations to consumer participation in Regional Integration Process

- The ECOWAS Treaty is weak in addressing the engagement of CSOs in any effective way.
- CSOs play diverse roles in peace building and political issues than trade issues. This makes it more difficult to broadly involve and allow them space to participate in the ECOWAS regional trade integration process.
- **National Governments and other politicians do not talk about RI issues to consumers because they think that does not bring them votes.**
- The CSOs and other private organisations do not undertake awareness campaign among citizens especially in the rural areas where majority of the poor live.

Strengthening Consumers' voice in policy process

- CSOs and private sector associations should seek to appreciate the need to include the views and opinions of consumers in the policy arena and move forward by taking advocacy actions to bridge the gap.
- From observation, ECOWAS Commission is ready to partner with the CSOs but still doubts the capabilities of some CSOs in the matter of trade policy making as CSOs and citizens do not sometimes know what is beneficial for them.
- CSOs should garner support from the ordinary citizens and identify others that share similar views for partnership in other member countries and establish consumer watch dogs to fight the course of citizens involvement in the policy making process.
- Through active CSOs, the youth in the region could be mobilise to remain active on topical issues being discussed by the ECCAS and remain patriotic to the region and not only their individual

Winding up

- The existing barriers to intra-regional trade some of which include inefficient trading procedures, transport facilities and underdeveloped infrastructure present more cases for importing goods from Europe leading to low intra-ECOWAS trade.
- Welfare loss by consumers is also seen with a reduction in their purchasing power from price fluctuations caused by high inflation rates and exchange rate fluctuations.
- ECOWAS commission still has a lot to do, especially in the area of regional integration and service to the citizens in the region because it has been rather worrisome the extent at which consumers have not been properly involved at the policy front on issues concerning the ECOWAS region.
- Despite the delayed progress, ECOWAS has achieved positive feats in the following areas: the existence of a vibrant free trade area, free movement of people as seen with the significant use of ECOWAS passports, trade facilitation initiatives such as a uniform and simplified customs declaration form, the adoption of a CET and common statistical nomenclature with the WCO harmonised system.

- Lack of knowledge about the ECOWAS integration among the broad masses. The responsibility now remains on the community's CSOs to educate and generate awareness among citizens in order to get mass support from the grass root for advocacy.
- The interests of most West African consumers and producers are centred on harmonization of food standards for consumer goods marketed in the region, the quality control (health, hygiene and food standards) and traceability of products marketed by businesses in the region has been a source of concern to some citizens in the region.

Thank for your attention!

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