



INTEGRATION OF THE CONSUMERS' VOICES IN THE SUBREGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION PROCESS

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FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION REPORT FROM GHANA AND SENEGAL

The report was issued at the end of a focus group discussion and validation workshop organization by CUTS Accra on “Integration the Consumer’s Voice in the Subregional Economic Integration Process in Ghana and Senegal.

I. Introduction

CUTS Accra on 20th February and 5th March, 2015 organized a focused group dialogue which brought together the representatives from the ministries, private sector, consumer organizations, advocacy groups, trade unions and groups to deliberate on the how best the voices of consumers in the sub-regional bloc could be integrating in the regional integration process. The same discuss was also held in Dakar on 16th February.

Trade experts from the field presented briefing notes and findings from the field on the importance of having the voices of consumers in the on-going debates on the benefits of regional integration and what it means for the West African region during the event. Each presentation from the trade and regional integration experts echoed the fact that a functional regional trade agreement will benefit consumers through lower prices and expanded range of goods and services as a result of trade creation from reduction in tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Thus, they all lauded CUTS Accra for championing this cause by organizing this novel dialogue.

II. Focus Group General Objective:

How can we consolidate and strengthen consumers' involvement in the sub-regional economic integration process?

ACCRA FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

I. Issues discussed

The focus group discussion organized in Accra, Ghana aimed to focus and discuss these policy issues:

- Strengthening consumers' voice in the public policy process
- Consumer focused organizations in West Africa and their scopes (i.e interest areas)
- Consumer interests in the regional trade policy making process
- Awareness and understanding of consumer organizations about the regional integration process
- Specific areas for advocacy- what should be done to increase awareness and the need to integrate ECOWAS trade
- The way forward to ECOWAS integration (recommendations)

II. Panel Discussions and Findings:

A. Strengthening consumers' voice in the public policy process

Representatives present discussed what could be done best to strengthen the voice of consumers.

- CSOs can't strengthen consumer voices in the public policy process when they themselves are not well knowledgeable on the mandates of the ECOWAS commission. Hence, CSOs themselves should be provided with capacity trainings by the ECOWAS commission to enable them understand the mandates of the commission and then educate citizens.
- Those consumers who are aware of the existence of the commission are not heard because of their limited understanding of their rights as ECOWAS citizens, and their disconnection with the commission.
- ECOWAS commission has distanced itself from the grassroots and CSOs must aim to bridge this gap; however, most CSOs lack information and knowledge about integration and the benefits they can derive from it.

- ECOWAS commission should work through selected members of parliament (MP's) since they are much closer to the grassroots.
- There should be election of ECOWAS parliament representatives by citizens instead of government appointed in order to make representatives accountable to the masses.

B. Consumer focused organizations in West Africa and their scopes (i.e interest areas) in the regional integration discourse:

- Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD): They are interested in ECOWAS promoting fair and effective economic opportunities for consumers in the member states. Also in promoting accountability in the government of each member state.
- West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP): Regional integration policies and laws to be implemented should aim at maintaining or strengthening peace in the region. There should be transparency and fairness in the policies and uniformity in implementations across the region.
- Ghana Youth Integrity Campaign: Youth involvement and empowerment in the regional integration focus. Mainly to bridge the gap between the older generation and the younger generation at the policy front.
- Africa in Focus: They want to use media to reach out to grassroots and the common citizen and to serve as a channel to engage the commission on social media.
- The Ghana Education Services: How best to assimilate regional integration in the formal and informal educational system of the country.
- Borderless Alliance (BA): Interest area is to increase trade across the West African Region by forming a borderless region.
- Ministry of Trade and Industry (MOTI): to use government policies and resources to promote regional trade.

- West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI): How to actively engage citizens and CSOs to get involved in the policy dialogues on integration. Also focus on citizen rights and how to push for more policies to enforce those rights.
- Third World Network: interested in equitable policies in the arena of trade and regional integration, governance and citizen rights. In Ghana, they have been active on the EPAs and its harmful effects to the regions manufacturing sector.

C. Consumer interests in the regional trade policy making process

- Consumers are interested in the elimination of trade infrastructure limits, since these limit the potential for maximizing the gains.
- CSOs present bemoaned that non-harmonization of tariffs, and trade barriers are inhibiting intra- regional trade in the ECOWAS region and making movement of goods and people difficult.
- Consumers and trade unions in the country want trade laws and policies instituted by the commission to mirror those instituted in the individual ECOWAS member states.
- Consumers are interested in a functional competition policy in the region, more specifically in the haulage sector, since the absence of competition is adding cost to moving goods from one country to another.
- Consumers are interested in standardization of products being produced both in the ECOWAS member states and also from neighboring countries.

D. Awareness and understanding of consumer organizations (CSOs) about the regional integration process

In general, CSOs understand how regional integration aims to improve the economic growth of ECOWAS member states and citizens. However, they face challenges in communicating these benefits to both policy makers and citizens:

- CSOs are faced with challenges mainly on how to get access to policy makers and the ECOWAS commission since it mostly requires a travel to Abuja to lobby on policies about the regional integration process.
- CSOs in the country are well knowledgeable on how integration in the ECOWAS will benefit consumers and member states. The challenge however is that the government does not provide much support to the CSOs as they advocate and educate the citizens on these benefits.
- CSOs advise that the governments of the member states work together in the area of trade, focusing mainly on areas where they have comparative advantage rather than trying to harness markets.
- CSOs understand well that consumers have low bargaining and purchasing power now in the region and this is due to lack of goods and also laws protecting the consumers.

E. Specific areas for advocacy- what should be done to increase awareness and the need to integrate ECOWAS trade

- **Policy Harmonization:** Trade unions in Ghana should advocate for conformity in trade or border trade policies and rules, mainly in the area of axle load and size controls.
- **Revision of the ECOWAS Treaty:** It would be helpful for CSOs in the region to call for a revision of the ECOWAS Treaty; which was developed in 1993 and has since not been revised. Current realities should be reflected in the Treaty.
- **Interest from the youth and grassroots participation:** The apathy among the youth in the region about the ECOWAS must also be addressed by CSOs to ignite their interest. This could be done by encouraging the youth to remain active on topics and issues being discussed by the ECOWAS, and should remain patriotic to the region and not only their individual country. A youth representative could be elected by the youth and the grassroots to represent the voices of the citizens during ECOWAS negotiations and meetings.

IV. Recommendations from Focus Group Discussions and Validation Workshop

After the two events (Focus Group and Validation Workshop) the stakeholders present agreed on the following recommendations on how to effectively involve consumers' voice in the regional integration process:

- The need for CSOs to be provided with capacity trainings on what regional integration means to the ECOWAS region, for effective involvement in discussions on trade and economic issues. This is to better strengthen the programmatic and advocacy programmes of the CSO's in the country.
- Negative perception that citizens have on the effect of free movement of persons and the liberalization of the business market to neighbouring nationals should be demystified through the organisation of forums and dialogues by CSO's together with the Ghana government to educate citizens on the need for a borderless region.
- For the ECOWAS to be committed to the regional integration agenda, It is highly recommended that each member state have a regional secretariat in their country with representatives elected by the grass-roots and ensure that the policies and laws of ECOWAS are being implemented effectively at the country level.
- The ECOWAS Commission should allocate funds to support the activities of CSOs in the region working on integration. Though most CSOs are NGOs and are not affiliated with any political party, it is the responsibility of the ECOWAS and the member states to allocate funds for their activities that fall in the mandate of the commission.
- CSOs and Consumer Organisations should pressure the governments of member states to create offices or departments that focus on sub-regional policies and issues in all levels, including district and local community levels. These offices should target working with CSOs and citizens to push for regional development and integration.
- CSOs should aim at working together with the government, while they still maintain their independence. This will strengthen their visibility and also provide them the platform to attend regional meetings and forums to lobby on issues pertaining to the regional integration.
- CSOs should work together with the regulatory authorities in the country, example the Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) and the Ghana Standards Authority (GSA) on how best to harmonize standardization of goods and foods across the region for safety and conformity.
- An annual high-level forum between member states, regional bodies, the consumers Associations, private sector and CSOs to evaluate the implementation of the protocols and conventions to address the implementation short falls and to correct anomalies.

- Consumers associations and civil society stakeholders should take part in meetings by regulatory bodies, the National Consumer Councils, National Committee for International Trade Negotiations (NCITN) to take ownership of legislation and build their capacities on issues of trade negotiations and sub-regional economic integration.
- CSOs must try to create and generate awareness of grass-root people on ECOWAS integration issues. There should be greater dissemination of information on consumer rights among consumers as well as policy makers in charge of sub-regional economic integration

V. List of Participants

Participant Name	Organization
Frank Ofei	ECOWAS Commission Officer- Nigeria
Emmanuel K Bensah	Africa in Focus (Radio xyz)
Noel Kossonou	Borderless Alliance
Lor Appiah Kusi Adomako d Nana Owusu	Ministry of Trade and Industry
Abdual Aziz Gomda	The Ghana Youth Integrity Campaign
Jim Chomg	WACSI
Enock Opoku Kore	Ghana Education Services
Edna Akua Serwa	The Ghana Education Services
David Acheampong	Ghana Pharmaceutical Association
Amadou Kanoute	CICODEV Africa, Pan African Institute for Citizenship,
Francis Aidoo	Regional Economic Trade Consultant
Terrah Osei Bonsu	Public Agenda
Appiah Kusi Adomako	CUTS Accra
Abubakari Zakari	CUTS Accra
Steve Yeboah	CUTS Accra
Edayatu Lamptey	CUTS Accra

DAKAR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

I. Focus Group General Objective:

- How can we consolidate and strengthen consumers' involvement in the sub-regional economic integration process?

II. ISSUES :

The focus group discussion organized in Dakar, Senegal, aimed to focus and discuss these policy issues:

- Nexus between “sub-regional economic integration and Consumers” to assess the consumers' awareness and understanding of the linkage between economic integration and the benefits expected from economic integration for consumers;
- The forms of engagement and initiatives by consumers and institutions for an effective the consumers' involvement in the sub-regional economic integration process;
- The levels and forms of consumers' involvement in these processes by public authorities: institutions set up to facilitate this involvement; issues in which consumers have been involved.

A. Nexus between sub-regional economic integration and consumers:

This theme was an opportunity for an introduction of consumer organizations followed with discussions among participants centered on the following issues:

- Consumers' organizations in West Africa/Senegal and identification of their areas of interest related to the objectives of ECOWAS: building and preserving peace, trade, economic issues, finance, free movement, etc.
- Awareness and understanding of the linkage between “sub-regional economic integration and benefits to consumers”.

B. Consumers' associations' areas of interest focus on the following issues:

- Harmonization of food standards for consumer goods marketed in the region. This brought out issue of the distortion in GMO products where Burkina is resolutely moving ahead while Senegal opts for principle of safety;

- The quality control (health, hygiene and food standards) and traceability of products marketed by businesses in the region raise concerns among consumers because the countries of the region do not have laboratories with the right equipment and resources to carry out such control in an effective and timely manner;
- How to ensure food security and sovereignty for the countries of the region while economic integration is driven by the paradigm of “Access to markets”;
- Free movement is hampered by customs and police harassment – especially for lorries carrying goods between countries (Senegal, Mali)-;
- The lack of harmonization of axle load and size controls of vehicles among UEMOA countries harms the competitiveness of transported goods as trucking drivers pay more and carry less volume from some countries of the integrated market; resulting in higher prices of goods in those countries.

B. Linkage between economic integration and benefits to consumers:

- The availability of a great variety of products in the markets of integrated countries thus offering more choice to consumers, more competition and lower prices.
- Low prices enabling consumers with a low purchasing power to meet their essential needs through access to goods and services at lower prices.
- Increased production and processing of products in a larger integrated market enable creation of added value and job creation, thus giving more purchasing power to consumers in the zone.
- The Common External Tariff (CET) enables the protection of businesses against competition from third country imports in the next five years.

B. Forms of engagement and initiatives by consumers for an effective involvement in the sub-regional economic integration process.

This theme was dealt with through presentation of consumer organizations’ individual experiences followed with discussions on the following issues:

- Forms of engagement and initiatives by consumer organizations for their involvement to influence the economic integration process: (e.g.: training workshops, conferences, engaging public authorities, etc.)
- Successes and challenges;
- Recommendations for better involvement.

C. Summary of presentations and discussions:

➤ Initiatives and forms of engagement

Consumers' associations deployed various initiatives to be involved in, and influence, the sub-regional economic integration process.

These initiatives were carried out under the following formats:

- Setting up an ECOWAS consumers' association
 - ❖ Association founded in 2012 in Abidjan
- Setting up a UEMOA Network of Associations
 - ❖ Network founded in ... in Abidjan
- Participation in thematic workshops at regional level
 - ❖ Regional Workshop "Support to competitiveness and harmonization of Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS)" and training for consumers' associations in consumerism. Organized by the West Africa Quality Program. Funded by the European Union in partnership with UNIDO, UEMOA, ECOWAS and Consumers International. (Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, 03, 04 and 05 December 2012).
- Consultation by national public authorities on trade policies.
- Participation in standards setting sessions with standards bodies.
- Organization of workshops among associations.
 - ❖ Workshop by Senegambian associations where the issue of chicken imports was raised.

➤ Success and Challenges

According to participants, the various initiatives are hampered by their ad hoc nature and lack of follow up for replication at national level after the workshop.

Reasons mentioned include:

- ❖ Consumers' associations lack means to go to various areas and find out how the market impacts consumers.
- ❖ Lack of means for consumers and their organizations, notably to carry out comparative tests on goods and services and thus influence the markets through their results.
- ❖ The quality of consumers' involvement in formulation of regional economic and trade policies by national and regional bodies; which are sometimes perfunctory, not well prepared as they received technical documents are not

given enough time for a thorough preparation .

IV. Recommendations for better involvement

- ❖ Consumers' associations should get together with associations from other countries to carry more weight;
- ❖ Capacity building for consumers' associations (on ECOWAS issues: biosafety, standardization, competition, etc.) for effective involvement in discussions on trade and economic issues, and for better knowledge of ECOWAS texts;
- ❖ Setting up a formal representation mechanism of consumers' associations at ECOWAS as a channel to scale up action at ECOWAS level;
- ❖ Foster and create information sharing mechanisms among associations in West Africa;
- ❖ States should ensure involving associations in national delegations during negotiation sessions.

V. Forms and levels of involvement in these processes: structures set up by public authorities to facilitate this involvement and themes

The Technical Advisor to the Minister of Trade made a presentation on forms and levels of involvement of consumers in the sub-regional economic integration process.

The following issues were covered, followed by discussions among participants, which led to recommendations:

- Structures and mechanisms to facilitate consumers' involvement in the sub-regional economic integration process.
- Forms of involvement and specific examples of involvement: training sessions, workshops, consultations, etc.
- Themes in which organizations were involved.
- Popular goods and services in sub-regional trade: examples of benefits from sub-regional market integration.
- Challenges in the implementation of sub-regional economic integration.
- Recommendations of areas on which consumers' organizations can work to fast track the process.

VI. Discussion on the Technical Advisor to the Minister of Trade Presentation:

Senegal, like the Economic Community of West African States, is faced with the double challenge of meeting its people's basic needs, such as food and health, of an ever-increasing population, and effective liberalization of its market to attract foreign investment.

Such a situation may generate conflicting interests with harmful effects for consumers, such as:

- The proliferation of various products in local markets, in countries mostly devoid of sufficient means of control;
- The de-protection of local markets often leading to closure of local businesses, loss of jobs and impoverishment of consumers;
- Economic reforms which may be detrimental to the protection of consumers and their environment.

Achievements made in the implementation of sub-regional integration policies include:

- The process to create a common market based on the free movement of people (community passport), goods, services and capital
- Institutionalization of national sector policy coordination
- Implementation of common actions and policies (transport and telecommunications, agriculture, energy, industry and mining)
- Harmonization of measures necessary for good operation of the common market, member States' legislation, especially the tax system.

Challenges in implementing sub-regional economic integration

Countries do not always agree on the **CET levels** for some socially sensitive products and protection levels of their local industry.

- Case of rice: Nigeria wanted 35% tax whereas Senegal wanted 10% to facilitate disadvantaged consumers' access to this consumer product, until its local production has reached a certain level of competitiveness. Many States have invested and taken steps to boost national production, but such efforts may not bear fruit if the CET levels are not favorable by taking into account the maturity time of the investment.
- Case of pharmaceuticals, which are not taxed in Senegal while Nigeria wanted a 35% tax to protect its domestic production. But the perception of safety and the certification of Nigerian pharmaceuticals are not guaranteed.

- Case of Ivorian vegetable oil whose import was banned in Senegal in 2009 over suspicions it may contain Asian oil. Until then, that vegetable oil was imported free of tax like any other community product. Senegal was nonsuited by UEMOA and ECOWAS, and was blamed for “hampering the free movement of goods”. The two organizations were supported by the World Bank, which denounced the Senegalese government’s support to a private miller (SUNEOR) to the detriment of the whole population, forced to pay a higher price for cooking oil.

VII. Recommendations from the dialogue on how to speed up sub-regional economic integration process.

- Greater dissemination of information on consumer rights among consumers as well as policy makers in charge of sub-regional economic integration.
- Integration through production coupled with certification on the safety of food products and pharmaceuticals should be a priority on a par with market access.
- Consumers associations and civil society stakeholders should take part in meetings by regulatory bodies, the National Consumer Councils, National Committee for International Trade Negotiations (NCITN) to take ownership of legislation and build their capacities on issues of trade negotiations and sub-regional economic integration.
- There should be a push for greater harmonization and consistency of community policies.
- Awareness campaigns, especially on the upcoming CET, should be carried out, as prices will rise in the initial phase.
- Organs and committees in charge of sub-regional economic integration should hold consumer training and awareness workshops on the process.
- Advocacy to ensure a network of testing laboratories is set up in the region to check the quality and safety of goods.
- Ensure producers and service providers uphold good business practices.
- Exert greater influence on policies so as to meet domestic demand before exporting.

List of participants at the Dakar Event:

Participant Name	Organization
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Amadou Kanouté	CICODEV Africa, Pan African Institute for Citizenship, Consumers and Development.
Babacar Sembène	Technical Advisor at the Ministry of Trade, Informal Sector, Consumer Affairs, Domestic Product Promotion and SMEs.
Momath Cisse	ASCOSSEN, Consumers Association of Senegal
Souleymane Ndiaye	ASCOSSEN, Consumers Association of Senegal
Souleymane Ndiaye	ECO CITOYEN
Papa Djibril Ndiaye	ASDIC, Association for the Defense Consumers' Interests
Assane Boye	LCS, Consumers' League of Senegal
Habib Kindo	Legal adviser. Human Rights Network
Bineta Diop	Federation of Women's Association
Kofi Johnson	Federation of Farmers' organisation
Mohamed Habib Kanoute	Collectif des Paysans de Diokoul
Mor Diakhate	NGO Alphadev
Mamadou Barry	Action Solidaire Internationale
Georges Deguemouvo	ADEC, Association for the Defense of the Environment and Consumers
Mansour Diagne	ENDA ECOPOP

