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Policy Effectiveness and Regional Trade: A Study of the BIAT Action Plan in West Africa, 2012–2022

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[0182] Abstract
This study critically examines the effectiveness of the Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) in promoting intra-regional trade in West Africa between 2012 and 2022. Despite the long-standing recognition of trade integration as a driver of regional development, intra-regional trade in West Africa remains comparatively modest, accounting for a limited share of total trade flows. The BIAT Action Plan, adopted by the African Union in 2012, was designed to address structural barriers to trade by focusing on policy clusters such as trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade-related infrastructure, finance, and market integration. Using a mixed-methods approach, this paper combines documentary analysis, trade statistics, and secondary literature to evaluate the extent to which BIAT has influenced trade flows, reduced barriers, and fostered integration across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Findings suggest that while the Action Plan has generated awareness of the need for harmonized trade policies and has spurred some progress in customs cooperation and infrastructure development, its overall effectiveness in significantly boosting intra-regional trade has been limited. Persistent challenges—including inadequate transport and energy infrastructure, overlapping regional trade regimes, low productive capacity, and the prevalence of informal cross-border trade—continue to constrain progress. The paper argues that the BIAT Action Plan has laid an important policy foundation but has not yet translated into transformative trade outcomes in West Africa. Strengthening implementation mechanisms, addressing structural bottlenecks, and ensuring greater synergy with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are critical for enhancing its future effectiveness.
Keywords: **BIAT, economic growth, regional integration, trade policy, West Africa.**

Introduction

West Africa, a region of diverse cultures, economies, and natural endowments, has long been recognized for its potential to foster economic growth through regional integration and trade. Comprising 15 member states under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the region presents both opportunities and challenges for intra-regional commerce. Economies such as Nigeria and Ghana serve as resource-driven powerhouses, while Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and others are emerging markets with growing potential. Efforts by ECOWAS—including the Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET)—have contributed to lowering trade barriers and facilitating cross-border flows, laying the foundation for regional integration.

Despite these initiatives, intra-regional trade in West Africa remains relatively low. Official data suggest that intra-ECOWAS trade accounts for only 8–13% of total trade, compared to much higher levels in other regions. Moreover, estimates indicate that as much as 75% of trade occurs informally and is therefore excluded from official statistics (Shuaibu, 2015). This informal trade, often dominated by staple foods such as maize, millet, sorghum, and livestock, plays a crucial role in livelihoods and food security, with women disproportionately represented among traders. However, the lack of reliable data on informal flows obscures the true patterns and volume of trade, complicating the design of effective policies (Torres and van Seters, 2016; Uwakata and Aregbeshola, 2023).

The region's trade dynamics are further constrained by structural challenges. Persistent dependence on raw material exports, particularly oil in Nigeria, limits diversification into value-added industries (Osabuohien, Efobi, Odebiyi, Fayomi and Salami, 2019). Inadequate infrastructure, cumbersome border procedures, and inconsistent regulatory frameworks impede the free movement of goods and services. While major trade corridors—such as the Trans-Sahelian Highway and the Trans-Coastal Highway—facilitate cross-border commerce, many significant trade flows also occur outside these corridors, particularly in border communities, underscoring the need for localized infrastructure investments (Olofin, Salisu, Ademuyiwa and Owuru, 2014; Torres and van Seters, 2016). Empirical evidence shows that, despite decades of policy interventions, the share of intra-regional trade has remained stagnant, averaging 10–15% of total exports over the last two decades, with Nigeria's oil-dominated exports skewing the aggregate figures (Von Uexkull, 2012; Okoro, Ujunwa, Umar, Ukemenam, 2020; Fontana and Kamara, 2023). For smaller economies, intra-regional trade plays a much greater role in economic resilience, suggesting that effective regional policies could deliver broad-based development benefits.

Against this backdrop, the Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT), launched by the African Union in 2012, represents a renewed attempt to address longstanding constraints by promoting trade facilitation, productive capacity, infrastructure development, and harmonized trade policies. Evaluating the effectiveness of the BIAT Action Plan in West Africa is therefore critical to understanding whether recent initiatives have succeeded in shifting the region's trade trajectory and in bridging the persistent gap between policy ambition and trade performance.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative policy analysis with quantitative evaluation of trade data. This approach is justified, as a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the BIAT Action Plan extends beyond mere statistical trends, necessitating an in-depth contextual analysis of institutional reforms, implementation challenges, and the dynamics of the regional political economy. To enhance the validity of the findings and mitigate bias, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing quantitative trade data with qualitative reports. Data from a variety of international sources, including UNCTAD, the World Bank, and ECOWAS, were compared to address discrepancies in reporting, particularly in light of the prevalent issue of underreported informal trade. Through the triangulation of these diverse sources of evidence, the study aims to deliver a more holistic assessment of the impact of BIAT on intra-regional trade in West Africa.

The research utilizes both secondary quantitative data and qualitative documentary sources. The quantitative data encompasses trade statistics from the ECOWAS Commission, the United Nations COMTRADE database, UNCTAD, and supplementary information from the African Union Commission on trade finance and BIAT-related initiatives. In contrast, the qualitative data comprises key policy documents, including the BIAT Action Plan, ECOWAS trade protocols, industrial strategies, and customs modernization frameworks, alongside peer-reviewed literature and case studies focused on informal trade, border governance, and trade facilitation within the West African context. Descriptive statistics are employed to monitor the evolution of intra-regional trade flows (expressed as a percentage of total trade) both prior to and following the implementation of BIAT. Concurrently, documentary analysis is conducted on BIAT implementation reports, ECOWAS communiqués, and national trade policy reviews to evaluate the extent of alignment with the established BIAT clusters.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Paul Krugman's New Trade Theory (NTT), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding international trade dynamics that extends beyond the traditional paradigms of absolute and comparative advantage. Unlike classical economic theories that prioritize discrepancies in factor endowments and productivity levels, NTT elucidates how trade can prosper even among nations with analogous resource profiles. Crucial elements of this theory include economies of scale, product differentiation, and the notion of imperfect competition (Krugman, 1979; 1980; 1994).

At its essence, NTT accentuates the significance of economies of scale, in which average production costs diminish as output increases. This phenomenon encourages firms to pursue market expansion beyond their national confines, thereby enhancing efficiency and competitive viability. In tandem with this, the principle of product differentiation reflects consumers' desire for variety, which fosters intra-industry trade—where nations concurrently import and export akin categories of goods, such as textiles, processed foods, or manufactured products. NTT further incorporates concepts such as monopolistic competition (as proposed in the Dixit-Stiglitz model) and the home market effect, which asserts that countries that exhibit greater domestic demand for specific goods are more likely to emerge as their exporters (Krugman, 1980). Additionally, the theory addresses strategic trade behaviors, wherein firms within similar economies engage in reciprocal trade flows through diverse pricing strategies and practices such as product dumping (Brander & Krugman, 1983). When applied to the context of West Africa, NTT serves as a valuable analytical tool for interpreting intra-regional trade dynamics under the framework of the BIAT Action Plan. Although larger economies like Nigeria and

Ghana may initially dominate export markets, the effects of economies of scale and product diversification can facilitate the involvement of smaller nations through regional value chains. Notably, NTT emphasizes the critical role of policy interventions—such as investments in infrastructure, implementation of subsidies, and enhancement of trade facilitation measures—in fostering an environment conducive to production expansion and the realization of scale economies. Consequently, NTT not only elucidates current trade patterns but also offers insights into strategies aimed at bolstering intra-regional trade integration across West Africa.

Understanding the BIAT Framework

The Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) initiative is a comprehensive strategy devised by the African Union to enhance economic integration and trade among African nations. Within the overarching BIAT framework, there are typically seven clusters that encapsulate various focus areas and strategies. Through a comprehensive action plan, BIAT aims to address the intricate challenges hindering intra-African trade and foster sustainable economic development across the continent.

Trade Policy: The Trade Policy cluster focuses on harmonizing trade policies and regulations across African countries. This involves the standardization of customs procedures, rules of origin, and other trade-related regulations to create a more predictable and conducive trading environment. The aim is to reduce barriers and complexities that impede the smooth flow of goods and services. The boosting of intra-African trade requires the adoption and implementation of coherent and efficient trade policies at the national, regional and continental levels, which should be specifically geared to the promotion of intra-African trade. Although intra-regional trade liberalization constitutes a key element of the integration programmes of most of Africa's regional economic communities (RECs), the implementation of the relevant trade protocols rarely accords the priority that is necessary for the attainment of market integration. Significant differences still exist in trade regimes within and between the RECs. The boosting of intra-African trade requires that the trade policy of African countries be designed or differentiated in such a way that no other African country would receive a less favourable treatment than is given to a non-African country, whether the latter is developed or developing (African Union Commission, 2012). The main objective of the trade policy cluster is the fast tracking of intra-African trade development. It includes the following activities: (a) Mainstreaming of intra-African trade in national trade and development strategies. (b) Enhancement of the role of the organized private sector, informal private sector and women in trade policy formulation. (c) Boosting intra-African trade in food products. (d) Undertaking commitments to liberalize trade-related service sectors – transport, professional, financial and ICT. (e) Commitment to harmonize rules of origin and trade regimes. (f) Promoting 'Buy in Africa' and 'Made in Africa'.

Trade Facilitation: This cluster centers on improving the facilitation of trade by addressing logistical challenges and enhancing transportation infrastructure. The low level of intra-African trade has been primarily due to the numerous trade facilitation constraints. Thus, the removal of these constraints is critical to boosting trade among African countries. Measures may include the development of efficient border facilities, upgrading transportation networks, and implementing technologies to streamline customs procedures. By facilitating the movement of goods, this cluster aims to reduce transaction costs and boost the overall competitiveness of African nations (African Union Commission, 2012; 2021). The main objective is to expedite the movement of goods across existing trade corridors, that is, to reduce the time it takes to move goods across borders and within and between regions by 50%. **Table 1** provides a list of trade facilitation programmes and activities whose implementation over a short-term period are necessary for the boosting of intra-African trade.

Table 1: TRADE FACILITATION PROGRAMMES

Programme/Activity	**Output/Target**	**Responsibility**
Reduction of road blocks	All unnecessary road blocks are removed	Member States (MS)
Harmonizing and simplifying customs and transit procedures, documentation and regulations	Number of customs documents are reduced; Key customs documents are harmonized within RECs; Border operation hours are harmonized	RECs, MS
Establishment and operationalization of One-Stop Border Posts	One-Stop Border Posts at all key border posts established;	RECs, MS

	Border time crossings of goods are reduced by 50%	
Integrated Border Management (IBM)	Customs procedures, standards, regulations and documentation are harmonized and simplified	AU, RECs, MS

***Source**: African Union Commission (2012)*

*Productive Capacity***:** The Productive Capacity cluster is concerned with enhancing the economic capabilities of African countries. This involves promoting policies and investments that support innovation, technology transfer and industrialization. The insignificant share of Africa in global trade and the relatively low level of intra-African trade can be attributed, to a large extent, to the inadequacy of productive capacity, especially in the dynamic sectors of global trade. By strengthening the productive capacity of nations, BIAT aims to increase the diversity and value-added nature of goods and services traded within the continent. Additionally, this cluster aims at encouraging investments/FDI through established frameworks for the strengthening of regional and continental complementarities, and the development of regional enterprises and value chains.

*Trade-Related Infrastructure***:** Infrastructure development is crucial for the success of intra-African trade. This cluster involves significant investments in transportation, energy, and digital connectivity. The inadequacy of basic infrastructure has been a major factor in the lack of diversification and competiveness of Africa's economy, continent's marginalization in the dynamic sectors of global trade, and its relatively low level of intra-regional trade. Compared to the other regions of the world, both developed and developing, the impediment to production and trade arising from the underdevelopment of infrastructure is more severe. Developing these essential infrastructure components is integral to reducing trade costs, improving connectivity, and facilitating smoother trade flows. Some of the progammes and activities that need to be implemented in the short, medium and long-terms to develop Africa's infrastructure for the enhancement of product competitiveness, regional interconnectivity, and boosting of intra-African trade include: **(a)** Prioritizing the implementation of Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA)**. (b)** Mobilizing resources for the preparation of multi-country infrastructural projects. (c) Preparing high-quality multi-country infrastructural projects. **(d)** Enabling environment for private sector participation in the development of infrastructure. **(e)** Development of innovative legal, financial and other mechanisms for multi-country infrastructure and industrial projects (African Union Commission, 2012).

*Trade Finance***:** Another major constraint on the growth of Africa's trade, especially intra-regional trade, is the inadequacy of financing mechanisms. The Trade Finance cluster addresses the challenge of limited access to finance for businesses engaged in cross-border trade. This involves initiatives to improve access to credit, reduce financial risks, and promote innovative financing mechanisms. By strengthening trade finance, BIAT aims to empower businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to participate more actively in intra-African trade. Trade finance cluster seeks to develop and strengthen African financial institutions and mechanisms to promote intra-African Trade and investment through the following activities; (a) Strengthening the capacity of existing regional and continental financial institutions. **(b)** Providing enabling environment for financial service companies to supply export credit and guarantees. **(c)** Improving payment systems. (d) Speeding up the process of establishing the three functional institutions.

*Trade Information***:** Information is a critical component of trade, and this cluster focuses on improving access to relevant and timely trade information. Adequate, easily accessible and timely information is necessary for taking full advantage of the opportunities for intra-African trade. This includes the development of trade information portals, databases and other tools to help businesses make informed decisions. By creating inter-connected centers of trade information exchange, promoting transparency and providing access to trade-related information, BIAT seeks to reduce uncertainties and barriers to trade.

*Factor Market Integration***:** The Factor Market Integration cluster addresses the free movement of factors of production, including labor and capital, across borders. Intra and inter regional mobility of factors of production (labour, enterprise and capital) can contribute significantly to the deepening of African integration and the boosting of intra-African trade. Adopting measures to harmonize labor policies, facilitate the movement of skilled professionals, and encourage cross-border investment contribute to creating a more flexible and dynamic economic environment (African Union Commission, 2012; 2021). This cluster is expected to operationalize the existing policies and protocols on free movement of people and of labour migration; encourage and facilitate policies that increase the freedom of movement for business people; harmonize rules on cross border establishment; and establish agreements on mutual recognition of qualifications. The implementation of the framework is designed to be led by the African Union at the continental level, by RECs at the sub-regional level and by member states at the country level, building on and working with existing institutional and coordination mechanisms and structures. Other key stakeholders in the implementation process will include the private sector, civil society and development partners. The implementation of the Framework will require substantial investment from all key partners, repurposing of available resources where necessary and other innovative financing mechanisms. It is expected that each REC has a customized framework, including a tailored roadmap that reflects national and regional priorities and context (African Union Commission, 2021).

Assessing the Implementation of BIAT in West Africa

The Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) framework represents a pivotal initiative aimed at fostering economic integration and enhancing trade among African nations. In particular, within the West African context, BIAT holds significant promise for promoting regional cooperation, economic growth, and socio-economic development. This section critically evaluates the progress made in the implementation of the BIAT framework in West Africa, especially as it affects enhancing intra-regional trade within the region.

Since its inception, the BIAT framework has catalyzed efforts to reduce trade barriers, harmonize trade policies, and promote intra-regional trade within West Africa. In principle, BIAT is well aligned with existing ECOWAS trade integration instruments, including the Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the Common External Tariff (CET), and the Protocol on the Free Movement of Goods and Persons. ECOWAS has incorporated BIAT objectives into its regional trade and industrial policies, creating a synergy between continental and regional frameworks. Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Customs Code, the modernization of customs administrations, and regional industrial strategies have been promoted in line with BIAT's objectives. However, policy alignment has not always translated into effective implementation. Overlapping commitments—between ECOWAS, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), and national trade policies—often generate regulatory inconsistencies and dilute institutional effectiveness (Uwakata and Aregbeshola, 2023). Furthermore, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which builds upon the principles of BIAT, offers a comprehensive framework for deepening intra-African trade integration and expanding market access for West African economies.

Akwei (2020) explains that Customs Union as a trade policy involves the suppression of discrimination in the field of commodity movements within the union and the equalization of tariffs in trade with non-member countries. Free trade leads to the efficient allocation of economic resources in all trading countries and hence to the highest amount of world output. Customs Union among less developed countries (LDCs) will not automatically lead to economic development in member countries but rather it facilitates economic development. Thus, though by no means a sufficient condition for economic development, it may well be a necessary condition for such development in many of the ECOWAS countries. This is because of its beneficent role in industrialization-which is increasingly becoming a handmaiden, if not a prerequisite, of economic development. However, the conditions which are favorable to trade creation are the opposite of those typically found in developing countries, whose existing external trade is usually large relative to their domestic production and whose intra-trade is a minor component of their total trade.

Trade creation effects of customs unions are likely to be realized in either of two ways: the conventional theory of comparative advantage and the new trade theory of increasing returns in differentiated markets, both resulting from decrease in transaction costs that should occur with freer trade (Hanink and Owusu, 1998). The new trade theory emphasizes that increasing returns in differentiated markets will lead to members of the sub-region liberalizing trade through specializations within the customs union based upon variations in market preferences rather than on variations in factor costs. The increasing returns in differentiated markets arguably through trade liberalization and specialization will generate a wider market and surplus revenues for industrialization and facilitate economic development. Whilst the full implementation of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the ECOWAS is still ongoing, the ECOWAS Heads of States have decided to fast-track the regional integration process through the implementation of the ECOWAS CET from January 1, 2015. This is indeed a significant development towards laying the ground for the establishment of an effective

Customs Union. However, ECOWAS has not yet completed the design for its common trade policy which is the second precondition for customs union enforcement. In general, a common trade policy does not only define the trade relations with the third-parties but also with the member States within the internal market (Akwei, 2020).

The ETLS and the CET are strong commitments by ECOWAS to promote free trade and remove obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital. With the introduction of the BIAT Action plan, these tools have factored in the activities that form the clusters of the plan. The ETLS has been in operation since 1979, and the CET was launched in 2015 after ten years of negotiations. These tools have created a Free Trade Area in West Africa, allowing agricultural commodities and artisanal handicrafts to circulate freely without customs duties and charges. The CET is organized into five tariff bands of 0%, 5%, 10%, 20%, and the 35% band that was added after intense negotiations to protect sensitive products. Agriculture is relatively more protected than other sectors, except for rice, which is in the 10% tariff band (Roquefeuil, Plunkett and Ofei, 2014). The ETLS is poorly respected by ECOWAS Member States, and the implementation of the CET is also patchy so far. Despite slow progress in implementing these commitments at the national level, there is still hope that ECOWAS Member States will respect the ETLS and implement the CET more effectively. These tools are essential for promoting trade and economic growth in West Africa, and they have the potential to remove many barriers to trade.

The challenges faced by some ECOWAS member states in implementing regional commitments can be attributed to several factors. A lack of administrative structures, necessary to carry out these commitments effectively, is among the major issues. Moreover, officials and private sector operators often lack knowledge of regional customs and trade regulations, leading to a lack of awareness regarding their obligations and rights. This is particularly true for women involved in cross-border trade, a substantial proportion of whom may be illiterate and, therefore, not cognizant of trade regulations. For instance, according to Yusuff (2014), many women engaged in cross-border trade are not well-informed about their rights. Another major issue is the absence of a monitoring mechanism for trade policies in both the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and ECOWAS. Similarly, there is no active dispute and binding sanctions mechanism in place.

In accordance with the World Bank's report, informal trade in food staples is the predominant form of intra-regional trade in this sector. The driving forces behind this phenomenon are the porous borders, which are linked with weak governance and the existence of areas of excess supply and demand that cross national borders. This fragmentation of supply chains and the efforts to evade regulatory and transaction costs give rise to informality. Small traders, many of them women, engage in this type of trade, which is fraught with high uncertainty and costs, rendering it economically inefficient. As a result, investment and economies of scale are hindered, which impedes the growth and productivity gains of small agricultural businesses. Furthermore, it limits the expansion of regional trade. In the absence of inputs such as financing, transport, and warehousing logistics, as well as better integration into more efficient value chains, there is little room for growth and development. Nonetheless, permitting these traders to prosper and gradually integrate into the formal economy would enhance trade and establish a solid base for the private sector's future growth and development (World Bank, 2015).

The overlapping memberships in Regional Economic Communities (RECs) can have significant implications for the implementation of regional policies at the country level. Given that RECs often promote overlapping agendas, countries are required to make deliberate decisions regarding which aspects of the REC agenda to prioritize and implement, with little to no repercussions for non-compliance. Additionally, the absence of authentic political commitment to the regional integration process can also be a contributing factor (World Bank, 2015; Torres and van Seters, 2016). West Africa's trade policy is based on the implementation of the ETLS. Consequently, the index relating to the implementation of the ETLS captures the effect of trade liberalization. During 2016, the ECOWAS Commission focused its efforts on the effective implementation of Customs Union through the application of the CET and the formulation of a strategy for enhanced implementation of the protocols and regulations of ETLS. Thus, the establishment in the course of 2016 of a new mechanism, the Task Force on the Trade Liberalization Scheme helps a better application of community texts by the member States (ECOWAS, 2016). Until October 31, 2016, ten (10) of the 15 member states applied the ECOWAS CET. These are Benin, Burkina-Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. From 1978 to 2012, the number of protocols and conventions signed by the ECOWAS countries is 53. From 2013, this number increases to 54 (Mamba and Balaki, 2020). ECOWAS countries have the potential to increase their trade performances by relying on their trade liberalization policy in all its manifestations, and in particular, on their regional trade policy. This is fundamentally by enhancing their efforts in the implementation of the ETLS by promoting good practices of the CET and its complementary measures, in particular, the rules of origin.

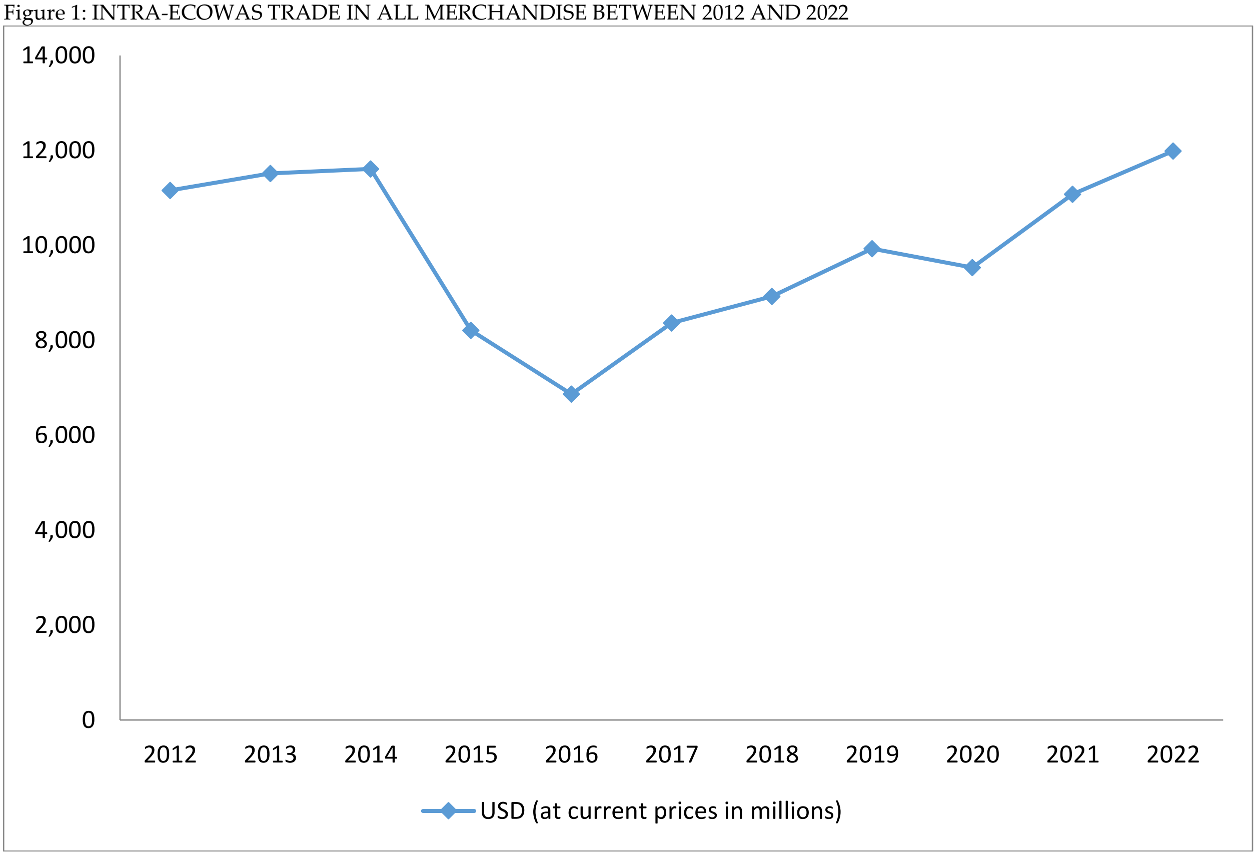
According to the UNCTAD database, intra-regional trade within the ECOWAS region accounts for a share of about 7% to 11% of the total ECOWAS trade (see **Table 2**). This percentage has remained relatively constant over the past decade. However, experts argue that official data does not accurately reflect intra-regional trade volumes, as informal trade is not included in the data, despite accounting for a significant proportion of trade between ECOWAS countries. In a recent survey conducted by USAID, it was revealed that between 66% and 80% of intra-regional staple food trade is not accounted for in official statistics. The reliability of trade data is a major concern, as it poses significant challenges for the validity of any analysis based on imperfect and incomplete information. The difference in reporting of intra-regional exports and imports is likely due to variations in how countries record their trade transactions, such as differences in the accuracy of reporting, time lags, and custom valuations. This discrepancy is also evident in the UN Comtrade database. (Torres and van Seters, 2016).

Table 2: PERCENTAGE OF WESTERN AFRICAN ANNUAL TRADE IN ALL MERCHANDISE BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022

Year	Intra-regional Trade (%)	Trade with the rest of Africa(%)	Trade with the rest of the world (%)
2012	7.11	46.24	92.89
2013	8.54	43.96	91.46
2014	7.81	48.01	92.19
2015	9.38	41.00	90.62
2016	9.60	38.01	90.40
2017	9.04	36.65	90.96
2018	7.90	45.90	92.10
2019	8.55	43.15	91.45
2020	10.10	40.06	89.90
2021	9.65	36.95	90.35
2022	9.00	37.63	91.00

Source: *(UNCTAD, 2023)*

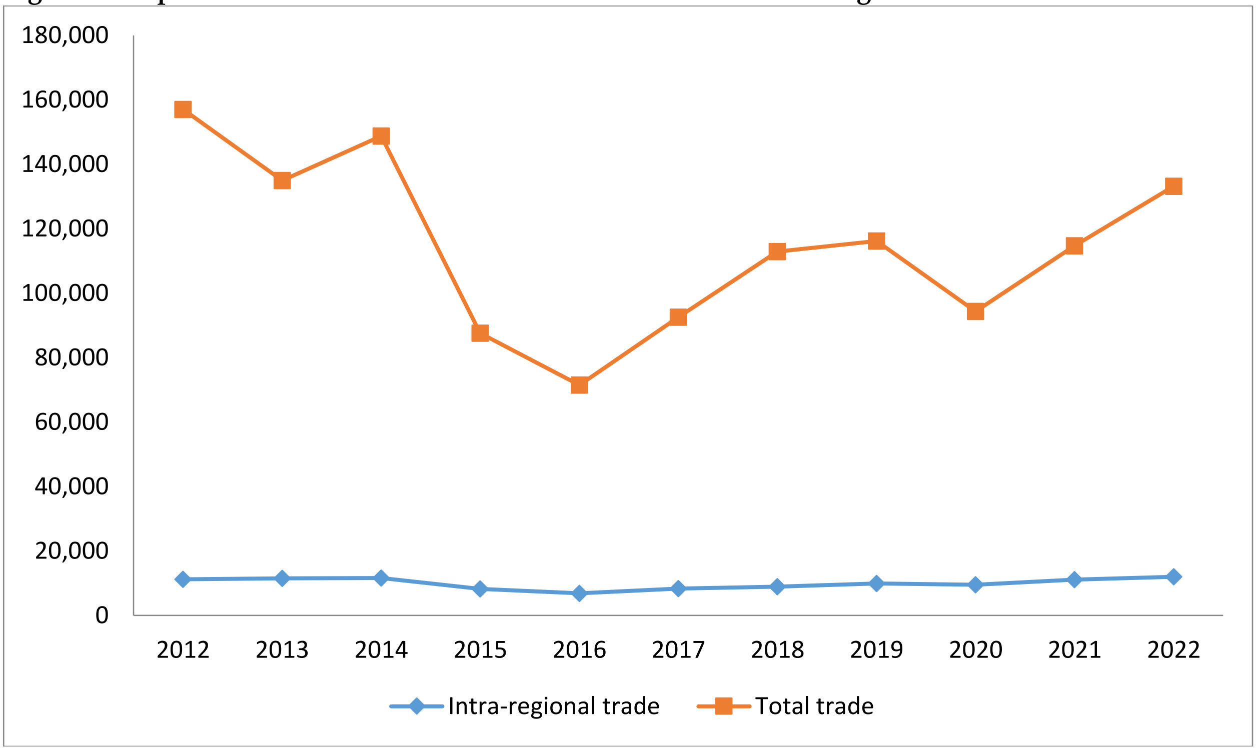
Figure 1: INTRA-ECOWAS TRADE IN ALL MERCHANDISE BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022



Source: (UNCTAD, 2023)

Looking at trends, **Figure 1** shows that official record of intra-regional trade of the ECOWAS countries have not significantly increased within the period under study. The low level of intra-regional trade becomes glaring when compared with the total trade of the region (i.e. trade with rest of Africa and the rest of the world (see **Figure 2**). However, while trade in some products such as livestock has decreased according to official data, the official intra-regional trade of processed food (edible products and preparations), milk products and, more modestly, fish, have slightly increased. Torres and van Seters (2016) explain that this is because most of the livestock trade in the region is believed to be informal and undocumented.

Figure 2: Proportion of intra-ECOWAS trade to the total trade in the region



Source: (UNCTAD, 2023)

Overall, the official intra-regional trade of all commodities remains modest and do not show a significant increasing or decreasing trend during the 10 years under study (UNCTAD, 2023). Put differently, between 2005 and 2011, the intra-regional trade within ECOWAS maintained an average of 10.3% of total trade, primarily driven by Nigeria's oil exports alongside a limited selection of commodities. Following the implementation of the BIAT in 2012, the region experienced modest fluctuations in trade performance; however, a clear upward trend was not established. From 2012 to 2022, intra-regional trade averaged 11.5%, indicating a slight improvement but remaining within the historical range of 10–15% (Fontana and Kamara, 2023; Okoro, Ujunwa, Umar, Ukemenam, 2020). In the West African region, Nigeria's prominence as the primary food importer is notable. However, the rankings reveal that two of the three largest economies, Nigeria and Ghana, as well as three landlocked countries, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, are among the top five food importers. Conversely, Côte d'Ivoire leads as the primary food exporter, with the top five food exporters comprising of the four largest economies, namely Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Senegal, and landlocked Niger, which serves as the primary livestock exporter to the region. The observation that Nigeria's main food exports to other ECOWAS countries are processed food products, including milk and milk products, edible products and preparations, non-alcoholic beverages, and sugar, highlights Nigeria's performance in the regional trade. It is worthwhile to note that the primary intra-regional trade flows within the region occur from coastal countries with the largest economies to landlocked countries, and vice versa in the case of livestock exports. This suggests that there is a need for more collaboration and strategic partnerships between countries to optimize intra-regional trade ((Torres and van Seters, 2016).

It is pertinent to mention that the COVID-19 pandemic which had caused a notable impact on the global economy also disrupted trade within the ECOWAS region. The intra-regional trade within

ECOWAS has traditionally been limited, informal, and poorly documented, with agricultural exports accounting for most of the trade flow at around 7.9% in 2018. In comparison, trade with other African RTAs accounted for 45.9%, while trade with the rest of the world accounted for 92.1% (**Table 2**). Nonetheless, there is significant potential for intra-regional trade expansion that aligns with ECOWAS's ambitions. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging to achieve this objective in the short term. In 2018, the region's total exports were valued at USD110.4 billion, with total imports standing at $99.9 billion and $108.2 billion for 2018 and 2019, respectively (UNCTAD, 2023). The region's trade balance was estimated at $7 billion and $2 billion for 2018 and 2019, respectively, with Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana accounting for the bulk of the surplus. The region's trade with external partners, mainly the US and China, plays a crucial role in the ECOWAS regional value chain. The lockdown measures implemented by these major external trading partners have significantly impacted the region's supply and demand chains.

It is worth noting that the outbreak of the pandemic led to the ECOWAS Member States implementing stringent measures like physical distancing, quarantine, closure of schools, shops, and places of worship, as well as a complete or partial ban on public transport in urban areas, similar to measures taken by other countries across the globe. The primary response of these states was to restrict cross-border movement and limit air transit. Regrettably, these rigorous measures have had an adverse impact on the transport sector, trade, and intra-community exchanges within the ECOWAS region (Mba-Kalu, Ojo and Busari, n.d.). Implementation of BIAT clusters requires strong political commitment, institutional coordination, and stakeholder engagement at the national, regional, and international levels. Governments, regional organizations, development partners, and the private sector must collaborate effectively to overcome challenges and realize the full potential of boosting intra-regional trade in West Africa. Regular monitoring and evaluation of implementation progress are essential to track outcomes, identify gaps, and adjust strategies as needed to achieve the overarching goal of promoting economic growth, development, and prosperity in the region.

Conclusion

The BIAT Action Plan has faced numerous implementation challenges, and is constrained by a lack of institutional structure, the absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and a lack of sufficient resources (UNECA, 2017). Advances in the process of trade liberalization are currently underway in all regional economic communities including ECOWAS. However, the removal of tariffs within these communities has been slower than anticipated. This is attributed to a lack of human and institutional capacity to implement trade policies, as well as a failure to enforce the agreements made between these communities. According to the Abuja treaty, all regional economic communities should have established a common external tariff within customs unions and fully functional free trade agreements by the end of 2017. Nonetheless, this objective remains unfulfilled. It is important to note that reducing tariffs among regional economic community members or countries in Africa will not necessarily lead to increased intra-regional or intra-African trade. This is because some member countries may not be able to fully benefit from the reduced tariffs due to weak export supply capacities in these areas, high non-tariff trade costs, or high costs of compliance with the rules of origin associated with these products (UNCTAD, 2019).

Finally, despite notable progress, the implementation of the BIAT framework in West Africa has encountered various challenges and limitations. The data suggest that BIAT’s implementation in West Africa has not significantly altered the structural features of intra-regional trade. While there have been improvements in corridor efficiency and modest gains in formal trade flows, the persistence of informality, infrastructural deficits, and commodity dependence has limited transformative progress. This highlights the need for complementary interventions under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), with stronger focus on productive capacity and formalization of informal cross-border trade.

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