

# What is the Future of African Regionalism?

Written by Haoyu Zhai

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Much discussion in the literature concerns the study of regionalism in Africa, which suggests the concept's continued importance to both analysts and practitioners (Akokpari, 2008: 85-6; Grant and Söderbaum, 2003). Yet the continent's poor historical record of regional cooperation and integration in the past has led many in the field to claim that regionalism in Africa is doomed to failure (Chazan et al. 1999: 312; Francis, 2006: 1-3). However, this essay disagrees with such statement, since empirical evidence tends to suggest that the possibility of some success in regionalism in contemporary Africa still exists, even though such success would most probably be limited in its scope. It will thus be argued below that judging from historical experience and contemporary conditions, regionalism in Africa a) is not subject to permanent failure, but b) has at best limited scopes of development given the challenging conditions it faces. The structure of the essay is as follows: first, clarity will be offered on the concept of 'regionalism in Africa'; next, the most important factors affecting the performance of regionalist projects on the continent post-independence will be discussed; finally, these factors will be used to examine the contemporary conditions in Africa with respect to regionalism's practice. This three-step process will show the possible but limited prospect of regionalism in Africa.

### Conceptualising 'Regionalism in Africa'

This essay defines 'regionalism in Africa' as an essentially political project aimed at increasing and deepening regional cooperation and integration among African states. Conceptual clarity is needed since the term 'regionalism' has been given a variety of meanings: for instance, scholars like Bhagwati (in Sbragia, 2008: 32) and Thonke and Spliid (2012) treated regionalism mainly as an economic project involving preferential regional trade arrangements, while others have conceptualised it as political or security projects (Mansfield and Solingen, 2010: 152). Likewise, clarity would also be required on the geographical scope of regionalism, as the term 'region' can refer to different levels of territorial units, from the local and subnational to the supranational (Grant and Söderbaum, 2003: 5). Furthermore, it is also necessary to distinguish between 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation': whilst the former mostly implies more top-down, political processes driven by state actors, the latter usually refers to more bottom-up, socio-economic processes led by non-state actors (Mansfield and Solingen, 2010: 147; Shaw et al. 2003: 195).

In light of these three main conceptual issues in the literature, the definition adopted in this essay thus provides three corresponding clarifications: first, 'regionalism in Africa' is conceptualised within this essay as a political project driven by African political decision-makers; second, it refers to the supranational level of territorial dimensions; third, it focuses on the top-down processes led by African states and governments. It must be said that such selective standards are more instrumental than ontological: that is, this article does not dispute the validity of other, different definitions of 'regionalism in Africa' adopted by other research, instead only focuses on the political, supranational and top-down dimensions of the regionalising projects and processes in Africa. With the concept thus defined, this essay now progresses to analyse the main factors affecting the performance of regionalist programmes, in order to demonstrate the possible but limited prospect of regionalism in modern day Africa.

### Main Factors Affecting Performance

Numerous explanatory factors have been given as to why regionalist projects fail or succeed in Africa (Meredith, 2006: 680-1). With respect to political regionalism, four main factors have most affected its performance in the post-

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colonial era. Firstly, the traditional reluctance of African states to cede sovereignty to supranational organisations considerably obstructed political cooperation and integration. This is because without some transfer of decision-making and intervening power to the regional level, member states (in effect their governing elites) could pursue their own national interests with few institutional constraints, often at the cost of obstructing the broader integration agenda (Herbst, 2000: 102). This problem is particularly seen in the failure of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to establish an African Defence Organisation (ADO) in 1965: whilst members like Sierra Leone advocated closer cooperation, others like Nigeria were against such proposal. Lacking effective supranational decision-making power, the OAU thus failed to create the ADO (Franke, 2006: 6-7).

Secondly, the political and ideological differences among national leaders was also problematic. Disagreements among leaders due to political and ideological divergence often lead to failure to reach common position on further cooperation or integration (Tordoff, 1997: 275). For example, the collapse of the first East African Community (EAC) was to a large part due to the politico-ideological difference between the leaders of Kenya and Tanzania: Kenya's capitalist president Kenyatta and Tanzania's socialist president Nyerere were frequently at odds over socio-economic policies of the region, which created much difficulty for the EAC's progress and contributed to its eventual demise (Pinkney, 2001: 202).

Thirdly, the weak economic and infrastructural base of most African countries and the perceived unequal gains from regional integration was another factor obstructing regionalism. In particular, the limited intra-regional trade among African states, their similar thus competitive products, their export-oriented infrastructures and differential benefits from regional integration offered little economic incentives for sustained regionalism (Chazan et al. 1999: 317-8). Such problem is most evidently seen in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where homogeneity of the monocrop product of cocoa, limited intra-regional trade (annually 10-15% on average), export-biased infrastructure connecting productive centres to the coast not neighbouring areas, and member states' fear of Nigerian economic domination at their cost all contributed to the organisation's slow regionalist progress (Chazan et al. 1999: 317-8; Metzger, 2008: 25; von Uexkull, 2012: 418).

Finally, the overlapping memberships of many African states in multiple regional bodies led to conflicts of loyalty and confusion of commitment, which again obstructed regionalism's development. To illustrate, Tanzania had memberships in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Market for Eastern and Southern African States (COMESA) and the EAC, whilst Botswana belonged to both the SADC and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), and both countries were also members of the OAU (Akopari, 2008: 99). The political implication of such overlapping membership is the lack of concentrated effort or commitment to develop any single regionalist organisation, which consequently led to little progress in regionalism.

Hence it is only through genuine improvement in these factors that regionalism in Africa can have increased chance of success; and as shown below, compared with its past, present day Africa's observable but insufficient enhancement in such conditions means that it is not doomed to perennial failure yet still limited in its scope of development.

## Prospect of Regionalism in Africa

Overall, in each of the four main aspects discussed above, contemporary Africa has made some encouraging progress, which increased the possibility of successful regionalism on the continent; however, at the same time such progress appears to be limited and moderate, which means regionalism still has only limited scopes of prospect in the foreseeable future.

First, there has been observable progress in the area of sovereignty transfer and supranational intervention, though the extent and exercise of such power by regional organisations remain constrained. This is seen, for instance, in the African Union (AU)'s adoption of the 'African Union Non-Aggression and Common Defence Pact' (AUNACDP) in 2005 and its establishment of the African Court for Human and People's Rights (AfCHPR) in 1998: the former acknowledged the AU's right of intervention in its member states to restore peace and security against 'armed groups, mercenaries and other organized trans-national criminal groups', and the latter was charged with the

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supranational judicial protection of 'human and peoples' rights' (Møller, 2009: 9-12). These represent African states' clear commitment to some form of supranational, pan-regional political and legal authority, and a considerable departure from their previous obsession with protecting sovereignty, which presents a greater opportunity to regionalism's success. Nonetheless, such achievement remains limited: for example, the AU's military intervention in Somalia from 2007 was constrained by the fact that by early 2009 only Uganda and Burundi managed to send a deployment of 3,750 troops; and by 2008 the AfCHPR had not heard a single case (Møller, 2009: 15). Hence in the area of sovereignty transfer, Africa has made some limited progress, and regionalism in Africa has a possible but limited prospect.

Second, contemporary Africa's leaders and states have less political or ideological differences than their predecessors, but certain disagreements remain in place. For instance, countries like Mozambique and Angola have more or less abandoned their previous Marxist policy paradigms, Zambia and Tanzania have largely dropped socialist programmes and South Africa is no longer politically apartheid (Schraeder, 2004: 265). Decreased politico-ideological divergence provided regionalism with a more favourable context since it is easier for similarly minded leaders to reach consensus on cooperation and integration and thus push regionalism forward. However, such convergence has somehow been constrained by the contrast between persistent dictators like Mugabe of Zimbabwe and democratically-elected modernisers like Mbeki (then) of South Africa (Meredith, 2006). Therefore with respect to leadership and ideologies, regionalism has an improved but constrained prospect.

Third, compared with its past Africa's economic condition has had some improvement, yet still remains challenging for regionalism's development. According to the data provided by the AU, from 2000 to 2010 intra-African trade has been growing at a high annual rate of 14.4 percent (AU, 2012), which suggests a much improved and continuously expanding intra-regional economic base for regionalism to succeed. In addition, data by the World Bank (2015) show that Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP has been growing at an average annual rate of 5.7 percent over the same period with continued infrastructure investment, which further confirms the improving economic condition for regionalism. Nevertheless, such advantageous effect is partially reduced by several factors, most especially the recent oil price slumps, the negative historical impact of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and the continued dependence on extra-regional trade, with outward exports occupying an average 3.6 percent share of total world export and intra-African exports having only 0.26 percent share between 2000 to 2010 (AU, 2012; Harrison, 2002; World Bank, 2015). As a result, the contemporary economic condition for regionalism is mildly encouraging but still challenging, and regionalism in Africa is thus possible but limited in its scope from this perspective.

Last but not least, the problem of overlapping membership remains largely unresolved, although some signs of improvement could be discerned. This is seen, for example, in the AU's adoption of the '2008 Protocol on Relations between the RECs and the AU', which established a formal framework for the political coordination of the functions and activities of the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (AU 2015). This provides an institutional opportunity for member states of these overlapping groupings to direct their loyalty and resources more effectively to political integration, by integrating the traditionally conflictive purposes and directions of these regional arrangements into a single structure. But the issue of multiple membership remains an obstacle to further regional integration, and unless the counterproductive situation of each sub-region having three to four organisations (except North Africa) is fundamentally changed (Mistry, 2000: 567-8), regionalism in today's Africa has at best a limited future. Hence with respect to overlapping regional arrangements, contemporary Africa has made some moderate but insufficient progress, so the scope of regionalism in Africa is only possible but not extensive.

Taken together, these evidence suggests that present day Africa has had at least observable progress in the four main aspects affecting regionalism's performance, and is consequently in a better position to achieve political integration and unity than ever before. Yet the insufficient and bounded nature of such improvement also means that regionalism on the continent still faces much difficulty and only narrowly escapes the fate of recurrent failure.

## Conclusion

This essay has discussed the proposition that regionalism in Africa is doomed to failure. It has argued and demonstrated that regionalism in Africa a) is not subject to permanent failure, but b) has at best limited scopes of

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development given the challenging conditions it faces. Improvements in the aspects discussed above are thus recommended to enhance regionalism's prospect.

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