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Political and Economic Drivers of Regional Integration in Africa: A Case Study of the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

African regional economic communities have not generated expected benefits. Regional integration in the African continent has faced several obstacles. One of the major obstacles is overlapping memberships that generate the problems of low level programme implementation and meeting attendance, and difficulties paying subscription fees. As a member of four Regional Economic Communities, the Democratic Republic of Congo, like many other African countries, also experiences these problems. Given its economic potential, the country was supposed to be the driving force of the regional integration process in the central African region. The aim of the paper is to assess the role the Democratic Republic of Congo has played in the different economic communities and the real drivers surrounding its participation in them.

Besides the Democratic Republic of Congo's strategic geographical position, which makes it a link between eastern and western Africa on the one hand and northern and southern Africa on the other, its membership of several regional economic organisations is also a result of the lack of interdependence among its various provinces. The different economic poles of the country are more integrated in the economies of its neighbours than they are in the national economy. Therefore, it is difficult for it to belong to only one Regional Economic Community, as different parts of the country could be penalised by such a decision.

The paper demonstrates that, besides the multiple membership problems, many other factors explain the low level of the Democratic Republic of Congo's regional integration, namely poor diversification of its industrial sector, political instability and the lack of a clear and well defined strategy for a regional integration process. Most importantly, the paper points out the fact that regionalisation of the country has been driven more by political interests and opportunistic behaviour than a well-defined economic policy. The lack of an economic vision in its integration process may explain why the country is currently emphasising its integration in the central regional communities, whereas all indicators show that it is well integrated in the southern and eastern regions, and should logically focus its integration in those relevant economic communities.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADB	African Development Bank
BAD	Banque Africaine de Développement
BCC	Banque Centrale du Congo
CAEC	Central Africa Economic Community
CEEAC	Communauté Economique des Etats d'Afrique Centrale
CEMAC	Communauté Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale
CEPGL	Communauté Economique des Pays de Grands Lacs
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East African Community
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central Africa States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Area
GDP	gross domestic product
GoC	Government of the Republic of Congo
IMF	International Monetary Fund
REC	Regional Economic Community
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UEMOA	Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africain
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in the 1960s, African countries have considered regional co-operation and integration as one of the strategies to accelerate their development process. Several initiatives have been undertaken to create regional communities whose main objective is to enhance intra-regional trade[1]. However, these initiatives have not generated expected benefits.

To benefit from a Regional Economic Community (REC) a country must be ready to undertake a number of trade reforms to increase its level of trade with its partners. Empirical evidence[2] has in fact shown that regional integration, through trade policy reforms, could benefit a country by increasing its exports and trade-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio as well as income levels. Therefore trade reforms, by increasing exports and facilitating cheaper imports, may generate sustainable growth and reduce poverty, on the condition of course, that benefits of the economic growth are distributed equally among the population (i.e. if the economic policy is a pro-poor one).

During the past two decades, interest in regional integration has increased among African leaders despite poor results of the regionalisation process for many African countries. This new interest can to some extent be explained by globalisation, increased levels of investment, and economic growth. It is largely based on successful economic integration experiences in Europe, America and Asia, which have led African countries to rethink their development strategies, focusing more on inter-regional trade and the need to revitalise existing RECs.

Although African RECs have been unable to increase intra-regional co-operation significantly, they present different degrees of inefficiency. Compared to other parts of the continent, the regional integration in Central Africa has been the most ineffective. Some countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), given its position at the heart of Africa and its economic potential, were supposed to be the driving forces of the regional integration process, but have not met these expectations. The aim of this study is to assess the role the DRC has played in the different RECs of which it is a member, and analyse the drivers of its participation in those RECs.

In Africa, the regional integration process is often driven by political rather than economic factors. This hampers the efficiency of the process. Furthermore, the overlapping memberships of African countries have created several problems, including low level programme implementation, low level meeting attendance, and difficulties in paying subscription fees or contributions to different organisations. As a member of four RECs [the Economic Community of Central Africa States (ECCAS), Communauté Economique des Pays de Grands Lacs (CEPGL), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)], the DRC also experiences these problems.

The African Union, through the Lagos Treaty, has recognised the importance of rationalising economic integration in Africa by reducing the number of recognised RECs from 14 to five. The DRC has been seated in the Central Africa Economic Community (CAEC[3]). In fact, with nine neighbouring countries, the DRC is subject to influences from the eastern, northern, southern and central parts of the continent.

It appears that the DRC was placed in the ECCAS-Communauté Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC) region, according to geographical and linguistic criteria. This raises the question of whether CAEC is the optimal REC for the DRC from an economic perspective.

To address these issues, the following questions guide this study:

- Why is the DRC's role in the different RECs negligible despite its important demographic and economic potential?
- Is the membership of the DRC in the RECs a result of a well-defined rational economic policy?

The paper is organised in four major sections: an introduction; an overview of the DRC's political and economic contexts; an analysis of the role the DRC plays in the different regional economic communities; and finally, a section focusing on the political economy of the DRC's regional integration process.

OVERVIEW OF THE DRC'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Political context in the DRC

When the DRC became independent in 1960, it was considered the second strongest economy in Africa after South Africa. However, 32 years of dictatorship and the authoritarian regime of former President Mobutu led to the deterioration not only of all economic sectors, but also the administrative capacity of the state, resulting in widespread corruption. This situation worsened with the political instability the country faced for over a decade as a result of coups and armed political conflicts in which both external and internal forces were involved. Six African countries were directly involved in the DRC's conflicts: Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. These conflicts, considered by many political analysts as the first African war, plunged the country into a critical situation that fragmented political institutions and led it to a state of insecurity, poverty and deteriorating social conditions. The humanitarian situation in the country was also catastrophic during that period; about 2.4 million persons were displaced internally and the number of people who lost their lives is estimated at between 1.5 million and 3 million[4].

As a result of this instability, the DRC collapsed politically and economically. At present, its survival largely depends on informal small-scale economic initiatives. Several statistics show the severity of the economic crisis in the country during the past three decades. The GDP per capita decreased from $530 in 1980, to $256 in 1993 and $163 in 2009. Production of basic goods also decreased substantially. For example, production of copper decreased from 494 109 tonnes in 1986 to 26 389 tonnes in 2005, and that of palm oil dropped from 176 715 tonnes in 1968 to 17 531 tonnes in 2004.

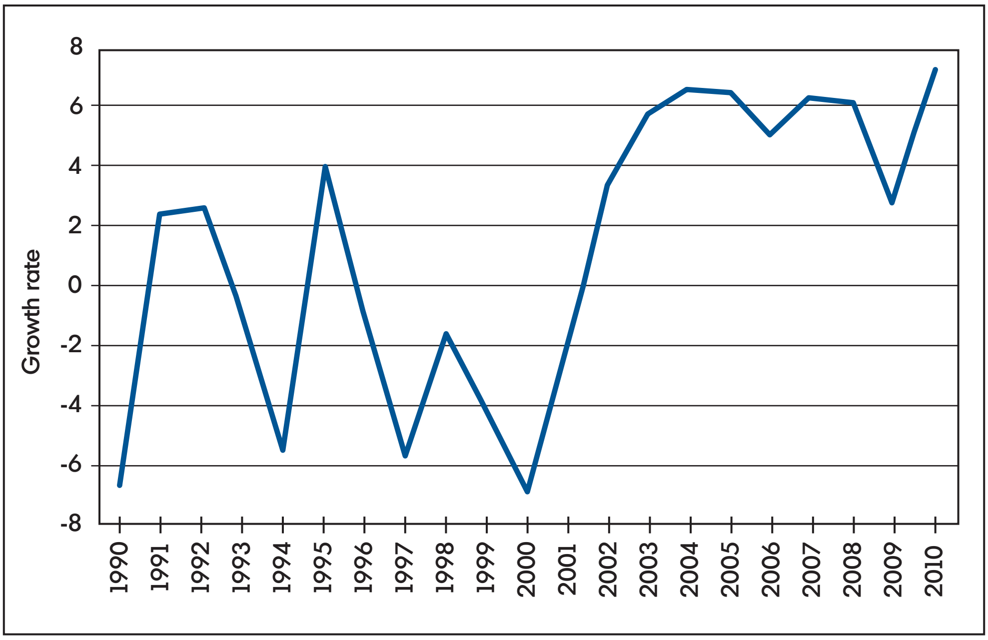
On a positive note, the first democratic elections organised in 2006, constituted a milestone in the political history of the DRC by establishing democratic institutions that have allowed the country to improve its reputation in the international community. However, the resumption of war in the east, especially in northern Kivu, between the national army and the rebels of General Laurent Nkunda, strained the young democracy.

The presence of both national and foreign militias (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda and National Army for the Liberation of Uganda) in the eastern provinces exacerbated insecurity in the country and undermined the government's peace efforts.

Economic context

The negative economic impacts of the wars in the DRC are clear. The 1990s in particular, were characterised by economic instability with recessionary growth at -13.5% in 1993. However, since the end of the war in 2003, the DRC has experienced an average economic growth of 5.3% per year. This is in part due to increases in the world market price of minerals and the return of private investors in the export sector[5]. Consequently, exports of many mineral products, such as cobalt, have increased, as have the imports of capital and consumer goods, stimulated by the reconstruction of the economy.

Figure 1: The DRC's economic growth from 1990 to 2010



Source: World Bank Database

Figure 1 illustrates the existence of three periods: the pre-war period (1990–1995), the war period (1996–2002) and the post-war period (2003–2010). While the first period is characterised by both economic growth and recession, during the second period the country experienced a strong recession that terminated with the end of the war. The last period is characterised by increasing economic growth. However, the problems of corruption and lack of governance prevented the population from benefitting from this economic recovery. More than 70% of the population[6] still lives below the poverty line and the country is ranked 168th out of 177 countries in the Human Development Index.

The Transparency International Report in 2010 considered the DRC as one of the most corrupt countries in the world: the country ranked 168th out of 178 countries; in 2009, the business environment was the worst in the world, at 179th place out of 179 countries. Statistics also show that only 12% of the population in rural areas and 37% in urban areas have access to potable water, and this figure drops to only 3% in Banalia in Province Orientale[7].

The unemployment rate is high, especially among young people. Only 24% of youth under 24 years old work for salaries, which are low and irregular – particularly in public administration. In 2011, the monthly wage of a border officer was estimated at $37, whereas their Rwandese counterparts earn around $900. In this context, it is not astonishing that law enforcement is weak due to low motivation. This also fosters corruption as people exploit every opportunity to ensure their own survival. As a heritage of former President Mobutu (‘*debrouillez-vousvous memes!*’ in English: fend for yourself), corruption is endemic in the country.

With regard to international trade, the DRC has limited diversification of exports, with mineral products representing the main source of revenue. In 2006 for example, they represented more than 80% of the country's exports, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Main exports of the DRC in 2006

Products	Share in percentage
Diamonds	57.8
Cobalt	23.9
Copper	10.6
Tobacco	0.8
Zinc	0.6
Coffee	0.6
Other products	5.6
Total exports	**100**

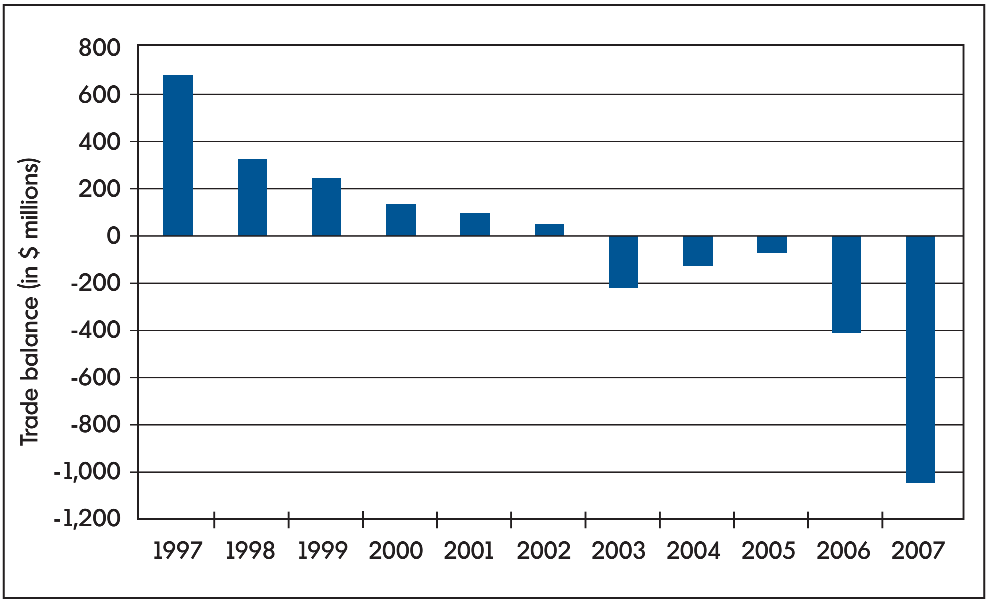
Note: percentage rounded to 100.

Source: DRC, country profile, COMESA 2007[8]

This poor diversification could explain why the country trades more with developed countries. The European Union (EU), Belgium in particular, is the DRC's largest market, and in 2002, Belgium accounted for 55% of the DRC's exports[9]. The official statistics reveal an insignificant trade with the DRC's neighbours. However, given the governments' inability to control its borders, informal cross-border trade has thrived. This is visible at the border between Goma and Gisenyi, one of the busiest borders in the region, where goods, including manufactured products; foodstuffs; minerals such as columbo, tantalite and cassiterite; and timber are smuggled regularly.

While its exports are limited to a small number of products, the DRC imports manufactured goods and foodstuffs. The destruction of its industrial sector during the Mobutu era, and exacerbated during the war, progressively increased the DRC's dependence on imports. This in turn led to the deterioration of its trade balance which became negative from the start of the past decade. Figure 2 below illustrates how the the DRC's trade balance deteriorated from the beginning of the war in 1997.

Figure 2: The DRC's trade balance from 1997 to 2007



Source: Banque Centrale du Congo (BCC), Annual Report 2007[10]

The declining trade balance was due to decreases in exports, mainly minerals. During the war, the mining sector was subject to pillaging by rebels who were fraudulently exporting minerals. The situation has not improved in the eastern DRC, where many rebels still operate and illegally exploit mines. Without control and proper regulations of the mining activities in the country, the Congolese government continues to incur losses in export revenues.

ROLE OF THE DRC IN REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

Despite its geographical, economic and demographic importance, the DRC still plays a minor role in the RECs. Factors which explain the DRC's limited participation in regional communities are analysed below and demonstrate that the DRC's economy is more integrated with the eastern and southern parts of the continent than with central Africa.

The DRC's weak integration in regional communities: analysis of factors

Several studies have shown that in Africa, regional integration should have been an effective driver of development and one of the solutions to the problems of small market size, weak institutions, low human development, worsening terms of trade, conflicts between countries, and the poor investment climate[11]. Regional agreements were therefore expected to:

- increase trade and attract more investments;
- generate greater economies of scale based on profitable competition;
- facilitate free movement of resources;
- promote peace and security; and
- improve the bargaining power of small countries in multilateral or bilateral negotiations;

with the long-term objective of generating sustainable economic growth and development of countries.

However, regional integration in Africa has been characterised by overlapping memberships of countries in many economic communities, rendering them inefficient. Mareike[12] argues that multiple memberships of regional integration bodies constrain deeper economic integration. In Africa, about 95% of members of one REC belong to another. Geographic location is one reason among others that justifies membership of more than one REC. It also potentially allows a country to profit from the benefits offered by its economic integration in the different RECs. Yet there are many disadvantages of multiple memberships. Results of a survey conducted by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) shows that 25% of countries consider multiple memberships as the reason for their arrears in contributions to the different RECs. Multiple membership is also given by countries surveyed as a reason for low programme implementation (23%), low level of attendance at meetings (16%), and duplication and conflicting programme implementation (16%)[13].

The DRC is one of the African countries most affected by problems generated by the membership of more than one REC. The geographical position of the DRC makes it a link between eastern and western Africa on the one hand and between northern and southern Africa on the other. It is thus understandable that this country belongs to four RECs, namely COMESA, SADC, ECCAS, and the CEPGL.

According to a senior Congolese government official, the DRC's multiple memberships are due to the country's big size and the lack of integration among the different regions in the country[14]. In the DRC, three major national economic blocs can be identified:[15]

1 The provinces of Katanga and the eastern and southern Kasai provinces which are well integrated into the southern part of the continent and trade with SADC states.
2 The provinces of Bandudu, Bas Congo, Equateur and Kinshasa which are integrated into the central part of the continent, hence the country's association with ECCAS.
3 The provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Province Orientale and to some extent Maniema, which are linked to the eastern part of the continent and make COMESA

and the East African Community (EAC) natural trading partners, thus justifying the DRC's membership of COMESA.

As acknowledged by the DRC's National Coordinator of regional integration, it is difficult for the DRC to belong to only one REC, because parts of the country could be penalised as a result of poor transport infrastructure leading to an absence of connections between the different provinces. An ECA report[16] illustrates this by showing that in the absence of adequate transport infrastructure, the Congolese population living on the border with Tanzania have developed closer trade relationships with Tanzania and the eastern part of the continent than with Kinshasa and western and central Africa, thousands of kilometres away. Apart from some railways and roads built during the colonial period to facilitate the export of minerals, transport infrastructure linking different provinces of the country is inadequate.

The DRC has abundant natural resources. This provides the country with important economic potential which could be tapped into to strengthen its regional position and enable it to play a key role in its regional integration process. However, mismanagement and corruption, which have characterised the country since former President Mobutu's era, do not allow the country to play such a role. Even the relative peace and political stability that has prevailed in the majority of the country's regions since 2003, has not allowed the DRC to create new regional integration opportunities, because of the lack of financial and human resources and inadequate political leadership. The DRC's regional integration decisions are much more a result of opportunistic behaviour than that of well-defined policy[17]. This could explain the limited role the DRC plays in RECs compared to other countries with similar economic and demographic potential such as Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa or Kenya as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of the role played by the DRC and other countries in four RECs in the percentage of average exports for 2001–2007

	COMESA	ECOWAS	SADC	EAC
South Africa	–	–	63.8	–
Nigeria	–	43.6	–	–
Egypt	12.6	–	–	–
Kenya	28.6	–	–	79.2
DRC	2	–	0.8	–

Source: Adapted from ECA (2010)[18]

In COMESA, the DRC represents 2% of intra-regional exports whereas in the same REC, Egypt and Kenya represent 12.6% and 28.6% respectively. In SADC, South Africa is responsible for more than 60% of intra-SADC exports while the DRC accounts for 0.8%. In ECOWAS and EAC, Nigeria and Kenya represent 43.6% and 79% of intra-regional exports respectively. These statistics illustrate the insignificant role the DRC plays in these RECs compared to other African countries.

Several reasons can be put forward to explain the DRC's weak regional integration:

- the structure of its exports is dominated by mineral products that many African countries do not need for their industries or do not have the capacity to transform into end products;
- the low diversification of the DRC's economy; and
- political instability which has destroyed the industrial sector and undermined the production of the agricultural sector (for example, vegetables).

The case of the eastern part of the country and particularly the province of North Kivu illustrates this point. During the 1980s and 1990s, this province supplied all types of agricultural products (cabbages, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, peas and beans) to Rwanda via the city of Gisenyi. Current studies[19,20] on the cross-border trade between the DRC and Rwanda, especially between Goma (the capital of North Kivu) and Gisenyi (western Rwanda), show that these products are now imported by the Congolese from Rwanda. The political instability that the province of North Kivu is experiencing, with the presence of several rebel factions in its rural areas, has displaced thousand of peasants who have fled from the militias. In 2006 the number of internally displaced persons was estimated at 2.4 million[21], 1.2 million of whom were former residents of North Kivu villages.

Accordingly, villages face a shortage of manpower for cultivating land with a consequent decrease in agricultural production to feed the city of Goma and to some extent the city of Bukavu in South Kivu. This situation has resulted in food insecurity in the region. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that in 2004, about 73% of the population was affected. In 1979–1981 the average Congolese consumed about 2 110 calories daily; during the war in 2001–2003, daily consumption decreased to 1 619 calories[22].

A farmer, quoted in the Congolese strategic document for poverty alleviation[23], confirms how the two wars in the DRC between 1997 and 2002 have had a negative impact on its agricultural sector: 'Before the war in 1996, I was producing 45 tonnes of potatoes, but today I can produce only four tonnes and I am obliged to buy products from others peasants in order to have an important lot to sell in Goma.'[24]

This is only one example of the negative impact of the wars, which have affected almost all farmers and agricultural products that the province used to produce. Table 3 provides statistics on the level of production of some products before and at the end of the war in Masisi (North Kivu), one of the biggest agricultural districts in the DRC.

Table 3: Agricultural production in Masisi (in tonnes)

Years	Beans	Cassava	Maize	Nuts	Sorghum
1992	32 274	27 074	11 870	1 408	15 522
2002	15 825	25 150	1 763	140	6 935

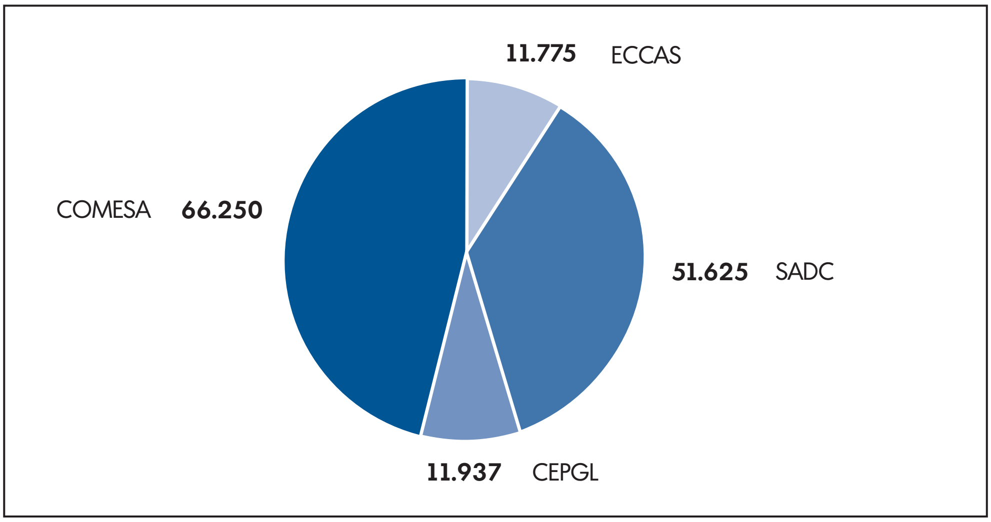
Source: Adapted from United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Congo (2004)[25]

Table 3 shows that, apart from the production of cassava, the production of all other products declined. Production of beans and sorghum halved, and that of maize and nuts fell nearly tenfold. The role of the DRC in the RECs has been undermined by its internal conflicts, which reduced agricultural production and therefore its capacity to trade with neighbouring countries. Given that a peaceful and stable environment is a precondition for successful regional co-operation, it is not surprising that the DRC's role in the RECs is insignificant. The link between security, stability, development and regional co-operation was acknowledged in 1991 by the African Leadership Forum, the African Union and the UN[26].

Greater economic integration in Southern and Eastern Africa

Despite the limited role played by the DRC in the regional communities, statistics show that the country is more integrated in COMESA and SADC than in the other two RECs. Figures 3 and 4 provide a broad idea of the level of trade (exports and imports) among the DRC and its partners in CEPGL, COMESA, ECCAS and SADC.

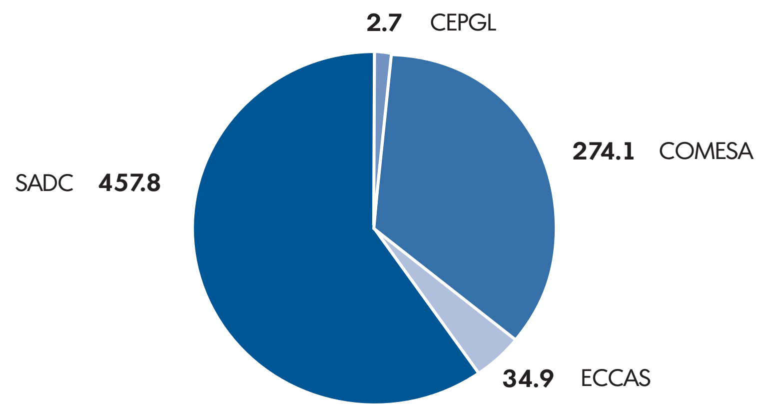
Figure 3: Average exports of the DRC (in $ millions) to African RECs (2000–2007)



Source: Adapted from Economic Commission for Africa (2010), Assessing Regional Integration in Africa IV. *Enhancing Intra-African Trade, Addis Ababa*[27]

Figure 3 confirms that the DRC's exports are more oriented to COMESA and SADC, two regional communities grouping southern and eastern African countries. The DRC's exports to ECCAS were estimated at only $11.775 million during the period under review. This amount is even lower than the DRC exports to its two partners in CEPGL – Rwanda and Burundi. An analysis of the DRC's imports from the four RECs provides a similar picture.

Figure 4: Average imports by the DRC (in $ millions) from African RECs (2000–2007)



Source: Adapted from Economic Commission for Africa (2010), Assessing Regional Integration in Africa IV. *Enhancing Intra-African Trade, Addis Ababa*

As shown in Figure 4, the DRC's imports derive mainly from its SADC and COMESA partners. The regional integration index presented in Table 4 provides a clear picture of the RECs in which the DRC is better integrated.

Table 4: The DRC's regional integration index

	CEPGL	COMESA	ECCAS	SADC
Years	Integration index[28]	Integration index	Integration index	Integration index
2000	100.0000	100.0000	100.0000	100.0000
2001	98.5504	191.6872	102.4676	134.1238
2002	85.5492	52.1119	57.9951	73.4066
2003	97.2548	92.7677	53.8503	82.3194
2004	100.5839	130.0869	89.0052	118.8319
2005	98.6898	92.9316	98.0345	100.1230
2006	102.4223	171.3673	143.3781	151.9808
2007	98.8401	121.2656	98.8878	133.5407
Average Index	**97.2720**	**112.8306**	**87.6016**	**110.0675**

Source: Author's calculation based on World Trade Organization database and Commission. Economique pour l'Afrique (2009)[29]

An index lower than 100% means that the country has traded less with that particular REC. An index higher than 100%, means the level of trade between the country and its partners has increased compared to the base year. The year 2000 is considered as the base year, with an index of regional integration of 100%. The average index from 2000 to 2007 demonstrates an increase of the DRC's volume of trade with COMESA and SADC (the southern and eastern RECs) indicating a much higher integration in these regions. For the same period, the volume of trade with CEPGL and ECCAS decreased. The level of the DRC's integration with ECCAS (the central REC) is the lowest.

COMESA and SADC also provide better potential for trade growth than ECCAS. During the first decade of the 21st century, intra-regional trade increased at an annual average rate of 17.5% in SADC, 14% in COMESA and only in 12.5% in ECCAS[30]. SADC is presented as the most credible REC in Africa. This is due, to a large extent, to the institutional economic reforms carried out by its members, and the realisation of major projects that accelerate the regional integration process. Specialists consider that contrary to other economic communities in Africa, SADC is characterised by complementary economies, and its potential in terms of human and natural resources[31].

In view of all these elements, it is clear that rationally, the DRC should work more on its integration in southern and eastern Africa than in central Africa. In theory economic integration of the DRC in the eastern and southern parts of the continent appears to be more profitable than its integration in central Africa.

One of the factors that make economic integration profitable for a country is the existence of more potential foreign trade among members[32]. It is therefore obvious that the DRC has an interest in focusing its regional integration process in SADC and COMESA's zones, where its level of trade with other members is high. Looking at the DRC's export structure it is clear that mineral products make up the bulk of its exports, and given that the few African countries that have an industrial sector capable of transforming the DRC's raw materials are members of SADC and COMESA (South Africa and Egypt for example), there is much higher foreign trade potential with members of these two RECs than with those of ECCAS and CEPGL. In addition, seven of the eleven provinces of the DRC have commercial relationships with SADC and COMESA countries. Such a position should allow the country to orient its integration toward the southern and eastern part of the continent.

However, what is seen on the ground is that the DRC prefers to be close to the central African region rather than to the eastern and southern parts of the continent. Our fieldwork in July 2011, revealed that with the new dynamic of the African Economic Community, which proposes that a country should be a member of only one customs union or Free Trade Area (FTA), the DRC may join the ECCAS–CEMAC zone rather than the SADC–COMESA–EAC zone[33]. However, theoretical and empirical evidence contradicts the DRC's choice. An in-depth analysis of the political and economic drivers of the DRC's participation in the different RECs could provide the answer to those contradictions.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF THE DRC'S REGIONAL INTEGRATION

As concluded in the previous section, all indicators show that the DRC now favours integration in the central region of Africa. This means that its future economic integration efforts could be concentrated on the ECCAS region rather than on COMESA and SADC. Two major elements illustrate this tendency.

First of all, in the process of rationalisation of regional integration in Africa and to solve the problem of overlapping memberships, the Treaty of Abuja, which created the African Economic Community, has suggested positioning the DRC in the group of the Central African Economic Community merging ECCAS and CEMAC. The DRC's authorities have not contested this suggestion.

One of the strategies suggested by the Lagos Treaty is rationalisation by absorption, with the reduction of the 14 recognised African RECs to only five. The five RECs that have been proposed are as follows:[34]

1 The North Africa Economic Community would include Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The secretariats of the Arab Maghreb Union and the Regional Group of Sahel and Saharan States would unite to form a new secretariat to serve this community.
2 The West Africa Economic Community (WAEC) would include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The secretariats of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africain (UEMOA), and the Mano River Union would unite to form a new secretariat to serve this community.
3 The East Africa Economic Community would include Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Malawi, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The secretariats of COMESA, EAC, and the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development would unite to form a new secretariat to serve this community.
4 CAEC would include Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé and Principe. The secretariats of the Economic Community of Central African States, CEMAC and CEPGL would unite to form a new secretariat to serve this community.
5 The Southern Africa Economic Community would include Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The secretariats of SADC, the Southern African Customs Union, and the Indian Ocean Commission would unite to form a new secretariat to serve this community.

According to the Lagos Treaty, 'Geographical proximity, economic interdependence, commonality of language and culture, history of co-operation, and shared resources should define REC membership'. Given this perspective, it is clear that the DRC has been included in the central African group mainly because of a common language with many members of ECCAS and CEMAC. However, geographic, economic, cultural and historical criteria cannot justify the presence of the DRC in this group because it shares some of those characteristics with countries of SADC and COMESA (for example Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zambia and Sudan). Using the above criteria, it would also be reasonable to position the DRC in the eastern or southern African groups.

As acknowledged by the 2006 report of the ECA on regional integration in Africa, despite the advantages offered by the merging solution (notably the reduction of the number of RECs, and the solution to the problems of multiple memberships and their consequences), many countries are not keen to adopt this scenario; leaving other RECs could prove difficult for political, economic and historical reasons. However, the creation of custom unions, do not allow a country to be a member of more than one customs union. Each country will have to choose between a customs union and an FTA in which to integrate. Recent developments have shown that the DRC is more likely to choose the central African zone.

Secondly, while initially negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU[35] as a member of COMESA, the DRC decided to rather join CEMAC and negotiate the EPA from within the CEMAC group. Although the EU seems to have played a key role in the integration of the DRC in the Central African group[36], this indicates a clear intention to focus its integration in the central African region. Furthermore, interviews with DRC officials in charge of regional integration indicate that integration in the central region is favoured above integration in southern and eastern Africa.

However, the analysis of the DRC's role in regional economic communities indicates that SADC and COMESA seem to be the better choices for integration for the DRC. They are the best integrated RECs in Africa and indicators show that the level of integration of the DRC in the eastern and southern regions (COMESA and SADC) is higher than its level of integration in the central region. Economic reasoning thus leads to the conclusion that it could be more profitable for the DRC to orient its efforts of integration towards the southern and eastern parts of the continent. The current tendency of the DRC to orient its integration in ECCAS and CEMAC is not economically rational. In order to understand the choice made by the DRC, an analysis of past and current political and economic drivers of integration in regional communities could be helpful.

Political and economic drivers of the DRC's integration in the CEPGL region

The CEPGL was created on 20 September 1976 in Gisenyi under the initiative of the former President Mobutu of Congo (Zaire). Many scholars[37,38] estimate that the creation of CEPGL was driven by political reasons rather than economic ones. The creation of this institution, and its future functioning, has revealed that it was a tool at the disposal of Mobutu to keep and expand power and domination over the central and eastern parts of the continent. The initial objective of the organisation was to enhance cross-border trade and co-operation, and ensure peace and stability in the region[39]. However, evidence shows that CEPGL was used by the presidents of the three country members of the REC (Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi) to prevent their opponents from using either of the countries as a rear base to destabilise their respective regimes.

Despite the development of widespread informal cross-border trade, which the organisation allowed, the recent political and economic development in the region has shown that the results of CEPGL have, to a large extent, been negative. The war in the DRC, which involved both Burundi and Rwanda, has undermined the relationships between the three countries and therefore the effectiveness of this REC.

Political instability and rivalries among members that can lead to wars are significant obstacles to the regional integration process in Africa. A war between members can threaten the existence of the REC. Even after a peace agreement is brokered between former belligerent members of a common REC, the distrust and suspicion among them never disappears thereby undermining the economic integration process. In addition, it is important to underline the fact that internal conflict in neighbouring countries can also have negative effects on the efforts of regional economic integration. The ECA report has identified three ways in which internal civil strife in a country can affect the regional integration process:[40]

- A war in a member country of an REC undermines economic growth of the country and consequently of the entire REC.
- In a situation of conflict, resources which could be used for reinforcing regional integration may be diverted to finance the conflict.
- A consequence of conflicts is a contraction of markets due to loss or decrease of revenues and the erection of non-tariff barriers.

It thus becomes easier to understand why the CEPGL has been one the most ineffective RECs during the past two decades. Although the peace agreement was signed by the former antagonists[41] in the Great Lake conflict and CEPGL activities resumed, the distrust among members has not allowed the organisation to function effectively. Consequently, the regional integration expected at the inception of the organisation was not achieved. CEPGL is considered one of the least integrated RECs on the continent, whereas SADC, UEMOA and ECOWAS are considered the most integrated.

The resumption of CEPGL activities in 2007[42;43], is seen by many specialists in the region as a result of external pressure to revive the REC in order to assure the stabilisation of the region rather than the clear will of its members to re-launch the institution. The minutes of meetings held since 2008 show that security issues have been a priority on the agenda while economic ones are, if not completely ignored, mentioned as afterthoughts[44]. This is illustrated by the high number of meetings of ministers of defence of member countries of the CEPGL – at least two per year[45]. Furthermore, with Rwanda and Burundi, which are now focusing their integration in the EAC, and the DRC which is still reluctant to play an active role in the CEPGL as a result of its mistrust of the two countries involved in the wars in its territory, chances of CEPGL success in the future is minimal.

An additional factor illustrating the low importance that the DRC currently attaches to CEPGL is its arrears on contributions to the budget of the organisation. However, this situation also applies to almost all regional organisations of which the country is a member. These arrears do not allow the country to benefit from advantages that come with the regional integration process: for example, the DRC was not allowed to occupy two permanent positions at the COMESA secretariat until it started to repay its outstanding contributions in 2009[46].

As shown in Table 5, since the resumption of CEPGL's activities, the DRC has not made any contributions. Whereas Rwanda and Burundi, which have limited resources compared to the DRC, are making efforts to respect their financial obligations, the DRC is still reluctant and is adopting a strategy of 'wait and see'.

Table 5: CEPGL's membership contributions in 2007 and 2008

	Countries	Contributions due ($ and euros)	Contributions made ($ and euros)	Arrears ($ and euros)
2007	Burundi	$100,000	$100,000	–
	Rwanda	$100,000	$100,000	–
	DRC	$100,000	–	$100,000
2008	Burundi	€250,000	€46,734	€203,266
	Rwanda	€250,000	€249,060	€940
	DRC	€250,000	–	€250,000

Source: 2008 Annual Report of CEPGL[47]

The lack of financial means and the incapacity of countries to respect their financial obligations in regional organisations in Africa undermine the effectiveness of the latter. For example, more than 60% of CEPGL's budget is financed by the EU. This shows the extent to which the REC, as do many others in Africa, depends strongly on external funding and thus strategies for integration could be influenced by the donors. The EU played an important role in the resumption of CEPGL's activities. The organisation was seen by the EU and many other countries such as South Africa and Belgium as the best way to bring peace and stability in the Great Lakes region (the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi). It is thus clear that the three countries did not voluntarily decide to revitalise the CEPGL. The Congolese attitude towards the resumption of CEPGL's activities is quite clear from the following statement:

> You know, if it were not the pressure of the international community, in particular the EU and Belgium, I am sure that the DRC could never rejoin the CEPGL. What does the DRC benefit from this organisation? Nothing. However, CEPGL is more beneficial to Rwanda and Burundi whose objective is to have access to the large market of the Eastern part of the country. CEPGL can also be used by those two countries in order to extend their influence in that part of the DRC. Don't forget that those countries have been actively involved in the war in Congo and the reason of their presence there was the pillage of our natural resources[48].

This statement from a Congolese official who has participated in several CEPGL meetings illustrates the important role that the international community can play in the regional integration process in Africa. How can we expect good results from an organisation like CEPGL when even the members do not trust each other? They are grouped in an organisation, not because they find it necessary to be there, but because they have been pushed and to some extent are obliged to be together. However, CEPGL is not the only REC on the continent that is subject to external influences.

Many other African RECs have the same experiences, either because of major budgetary funding or because external forces have played a key role in the RECs inception. Some RECs on the continent have been created through the influence of their former colonial masters and this influence is still present in their current functioning. This is the case of CEMAC, which consists of former colonies of France, the Eastern African

Community and SADC that join together the majority of former colonies of England, and CEPGL that groups former colonies of Belgium. The reasons for the DRC's participation in the CEPGL can be found in the history of the country. One of our interviewees at CEPGL stated: 'Belgium has played an important role in the inception of the CEPGL and is still playing a key role and supporting the institution in different manners, notably the financial support'[49].

It is clear that external elements play a significant role in the regional integration process of African countries. As developed countries contribute in a significant way to the budget of the African regional integration projects, their influence is substantial. Therefore, their financial power provides them with the opportunity to influence the participation of a country in a given REC.

Political and economic drivers of the DRC's integration in the SADC region

The population and size of the DRC, which account for 25% of the SADC total population and size, make it the largest country in SADC. However, because of political and economic factors, the DRC does not play a key role in the SADC's regional integration process. The DRC's contribution to the GDP of SADC is indeed one of the lowest[50].

The DRC's entry into SADC is the clearest illustration of how much more the regionalisation of this country has been driven by political interests and opportunistic behaviour than potential economic opportunities offered by an REC. Launched in 1992, the DRC joined the SADC region in 1998, a few months before the beginning of the second war in the country. Many scholars and political analysts agree that this decision was justified by the loss of trust between then President Kabila and his former supporters, Rwanda and Uganda. By mid-August 1998, when the war started in the DRC, he immediately requested support from SADC to intervene and halt the progression of the rebels to Kinshasa. Members of SADC namely Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia sent their troops to the DRC and saved his regime from the Rwandese and Ugandan assault.

The following statement by a Congolese official shows how the decision to join an REC can sometimes be justified by other than economic reasons, and is quite insightful:

> …at that period (1998), we had no another solution against the threat of Uganda and Rwanda to overthrow former President Kabila from power. For us, the only solution was to find other allies who could help us in the case of a new aggression. As in central Africa it was not possible to find reliable partners, we then decided to join SADC from where we had a guarantee that in case of aggression we could receive help[51].

The opportunistic behaviour seems to have justified the integration of the DRC into SADC. This is expressed by the current attitude of the DRC's authorities who are reluctant to sign trade protocols and to integrate in the FTAs of SADC and COMESA.

The Congolese Central Bank in its 2007 and 2009 reports, argued that the hesitation of the DRC to join the COMESA FTA agreements and therefore maintain the tariff barriers, hinders regional trade[52,53]. Joining SADC's FTA is also not on the DRC's agenda at present[54]. The official discourse of the DRC officials in charge of regional integration demonstrates an attachment of the country to SADC and COMESA and recognises the economic opportunities they offer for the DRC[55]. However, this does not apply when it comes to fulfilling commitments in the two RECs. Numerous negotiations between the DRC government and the COMESA and SADC secretariats have not been fruitful.

The DRC's decision to join the SADC region demonstrates that one of the strategies of African leaders is to have as many regional agreements as possible allowing the membership of an REC to be used as a tool to ensure regime survival. A guarantee of external support when needed, in case of internal or external threat, can thus be a key element in deciding to join an REC. Political reasons appear to overtake the economic ones in African countries' decisions to join an REC[56].

Political and economic drivers of the DRC's integration in the ECCAS region

The history of the creation of ECCAS illustrates that it was largely driven by the political interests of regional leaders rather than by an economic will to improve the commercial relationships between members. Politics played and continues to play a key role in the inception of ECCAS and in its current functioning.[57]

The inception of ECCAS in 1968 (known at the time as l'Union Economique des Etats d'Afrique Centrale, UEAC) was initially a result of Mobutu's reaction to the creation in 1964 in Brazzaville of l'Union Douanière et Economique de l'Afrique Centrale which regrouped only former French colonies in Central Africa. The UEAC regrouped the DRC, Chad and the Central African Republic and was seen once more by many specialists as a tool created by Mobutu to keep and expand his power in the Central African region. However, the UEAC did not survive the withdrawal of Chad and the Central African Republic which, under pressure from France, had joined the UEAC at the end of 1968.

The ECCAS project resumed in October 1983 thanks to former president Omar Bongo of Gabon, in the dynamic of the Lagos Plan which had been adopted in 1980.[59;60]. Contrary to former President Mobutu's ambitions, the creation of ECCAS succeeded in attracting almost all central African countries. Similarly to CEPGL, with the predominant role played by Belgium in its inception and its current functioning, France played a critical role in the creation of ECCAS. The configuration of ECCAS was very similar to some former regional communities of the colonial period, notably French Equatorial Africa and the Equatorial Customs Union, created in 1910 and 1959 respectively, before the independence of many of the ECCAS members[61].

The effectiveness of ECCAS has been hampered by political rivalries in the region. One example of regional rivalry is between Gabon and Cameroon. These two countries have been engaged in a leadership battle in the region for a long time. An illustration of this rivalry is the presence of a regional financial market in Gabon and a national financial market in Cameroon. A single regional financial market would suffice for the whole region due to the limited extent of national and regional economic activities.[62]

CONCLUSION

The DRC's role in the RECs is still negligible. The slowness of the DRC's regional integration process can be explained by a number of factors: the type of products exported by the country; poor diversification of its industrial sector; political instability, which has slowed down its economy; and lack of a clear, well defined strategy for a regional integration process.

The DRC's regional integration history shows that very often the country's regional integration decisions were driven by short-term and political interests. The neglect of economic aspects when integrating a regional organisation may explain why the DRC is reluctant to engage fully with different RECs. To date, the country belongs to no FTA despite the political discourses acknowledging the benefits FTAs may generate for its economy. However, with regard to the frequent negotiations between the DRC's officials and the SADC and COMESA secretariats[63] on the possibility of the DRC joining their FTAs, it is possible that Congolese authorities are becoming aware of the importance of regional integration of the DRCs economy and want to increase the country's commitments. The question is whether these negotiations could lead to signing FTAs and whether this would lead to the DRC joining an optimal REC, given the fact that the country is planning to join CEMAC–ECCAS's forthcoming FTA.

Although there have been recent efforts by the Congolese government to become more dynamic in some regional organisations, its current economic, social and political situation is characterised by volatile security, especially in the eastern provinces. The lack of financial and human capacity suggests that in the short term, the country cannot expect substantial benefits from regional integration. Such benefits may be expected in the medium to long term when the country will have integrated within a more dynamic FTA and therefore undertaken the required commercial reforms. Similarly, it is clear that the DRC's economy needs to be more diversified to increase its level of intra-regional trade. The DRC cannot expect to play a key role and to benefit from regional integration while its industrial sector is still characterised by underproduction, poor diversification and low competitiveness. A deeper and more beneficial regional integration of the DRC presupposes that measures must be taken to address all these problems.

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