

Policy to Integrate Labor: A Requirement for the Success of ECOWAS¹

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As the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, marches towards important landmarks in its effort to form a Monetary Union, it is important that policy coordination assuring the free movement of labor and of persons within the sub region be strengthened. Hitherto, the failure to liberalize labor movement has undermined the vision for an economic union in the region (Bravo, 2009). Labor mobility, even though, at the heart of any attempt to integrate, is often taken for granted or assumed inconvenient in models of international economics. For instance, the *Heckscher-Ohlin* trade theory assumes that labor and capital flow freely between industries but not between nations: the differing factor productivities then explain trade patterns. But the *specific factors model* clearly demonstrates that even with the influx of labor from abroad, wages in the receiving country need not fall, as might be ordinarily expected when emigrations occur on the supply and demand model predictions. After all, industries will respond to the inflow of workers by adjusting their outputs (Feenstra, 2008).

But beyond the predictions of rather stylized economic models, the paper shows that part of the delay in achieving integration in ECOWAS lies in the lip service politicians and policy makers tend to pay to free labor mobility. This is in spite of the historical documented desire of Africans to be united and in spite of the lofty declarations of African governments for a united Africa. But further steepening of resources in the erstwhile process of harmonization and integration of governments without a corresponding active policy coordination to ensure the free flow of workers, will serve no useful purpose in the long run attempt at uniting the continent. Indeed, current resources devoted to free trade and the corresponding abolition of intra African trade barriers, as crucial as they are to the success of ECOWAS, will not achieve the desired results anticipated for trade liberalization in the region without a complimentary success in the policies targeted toward labor market harmonization.

The paper maintains that the institution of common immigration policies that ensure the free movement of workers is the only remaining obstacle that can truly make or mar the attempt to integrate in West Africa, as indeed the rest of Africa. In addition, this will be a sure way to avoid a major obstacle the Europeans already identified in the European Union when they warned member states that the risks posed currently by the remaining legal and institutional barriers to labor mobility and geographic relocation may undermine the union's ability to adapt and reduce its susceptibility to shocks OECD (1999). Finally, such policy coordination is in tune with the policy recommendations of UNCATD (2002) on how to strengthen and link integration activities, and harmonize, coordinate and monitor the integration process.

ECOWAS, Labor Mobility, Integration.

¹ Abstract of the paper submitted for presentation at the conference on *Regional Integration in Africa* organized by The Center for Research on Political Economy (CREPOL), Dakar, The West African Institute for Financial and Economic Management (WAIFEM), Lagos, The West African Monetary Agency (WAMA), Freetown, and The West African Monetary Institute (WAMI), Accra, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, July 4-6, 2012.

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