



Examining the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for regional integration in Africa



Review article



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had effect on all facets of human life. Regional integration is no exception. Meanwhile, regional integration has been largely held as one of the most feasible avenues for developing countries to achieve prosperity. This paper examines why African states took decisions that were in violation of regional integration protocols when faced with the COVID-19 scourge. Four policy briefs about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional integration in Africa were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. The findings were interpreted through the lens of a rationalist actor choice model. The study found that state actors in Africa took decisions that broke regional integration protocols. These decisions were the result of severe limitations imposed by the pandemic against the desire of actors to maximise interests. The findings contradict a popular view expressed by the authors of the policy briefs who appeared to portray deliberate actions on the part of state actors to impose border closures and trade restrictions. The pandemic has unveiled a reality in the risk of overrating how far states can go in their search for integration. States as rational actors will always choose survival over loyalty.

Keywords: Africa integration, Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19 effects, rational actor choice, regional integration



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Public Interest Statement

This work contributes to ideas and policy options available to states and intergovernmental organisations amid frantic search to mitigate the fallouts from the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been some work about regional integration in Africa, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its exigencies have created new dynamics that need attention. This is particularly important as state actors move to impose restrictions that are inimical to regional integration – such as border closures and trade restrictions. This paper comes right in time as it explains the behaviour of African state actors in their actions against regional integration protocols during the pandemic.

Introduction

It is no longer an issue for debate that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe changes to the lives of people all over the world. Varied sectors – from aviation to tourism, healthcare to education, transportation to employment – have seen massive downturn since the onset of the pandemic in December 2019. Likewise, regional integration has been conspicuously present in the COVID-19 impact discourses. Regional integration has featured in webinars and policy briefs of prominent multinational and international institutions since the upsurge of the pandemic. This trend about regional integration and COVID-19 is partly due to the widely held view that regional integration is crucial for developing countries seeking prosperity. Yet a pertinent question on the relationship between the two phenomena in Africa remains largely unanswered. Why did state actors in Africa move to implement policies that were inherently against regional integration protocols at the onset of the pandemic? The objective of this article is to present a contextual understanding of the core issues affecting regional integration in Africa vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. The study argues that African states, like many others elsewhere, really had very little option in the face of the pandemic. In their decisions, leaders were faced with acute constraints in form of internal and external pressures, as well as the need to maximise their interests in the midst of uncertainties. This is contrary to the popular view widely expressed in various policy briefs, that states turned inward; acting deliberately to break regional integration protocols when the pandemic struck.

Literature Review

The decisions these African states took during the COVID-19 surge as regards their relations with other states – be it political, economic, financial, diplomatic, health or security – were part of their foreign policy actions. The rationalist actor choice theory has been arguably the most popular framework scholars have used to explain foreign policy decisions of state actors (Alden, 2017). This theory posits that states (through their governments) make choices that they believe will lead to the best feasible outcomes for them. These expected outcomes usually involve a mix of the

wider national interest as well as the personal values and preferences of leaders. Other factors that may affect decision-making could be the known and unknown actions of others as subjectively perceived by decision makers (Yoshimichi, 2013). Thus, actors are compelled amidst great uncertainties imposed by internal and external factors to compromise on their preferences for what is feasible. Ultimately, in the face of all constraints, actors settle for the best possible alternative which is not necessarily the desired option.

He/she usually has imperfect, incomplete information about the world, and constraints affect his/her choices. Information is imperfect and incomplete because the world is uncertain. The uncertainty stems from three mechanisms. First, the actor cannot exactly predict the future of the world. Second, he/she does not precisely know where he/she is now. His/her current situation is a part of a social outcome realized by interactions of involved actors (including him/her). Third, it is also the case that the actor does not know the utilities of other actors and, therefore, what choices they will make in the future. Thus, the actor has beliefs about the world – about the constraints on him/her, other actors and so on. (Yoshimichi, 2013)

In this state, leaders are not entirely free to choose their ideal preferences. They are constrained by both internal and external pressures. At the same time, they seek to satisfy national interest. The best possible compromise that survives all these constraints and yet maximises the interests of actors, becomes the ultimate foreign policy decision. Thus, Alden (2017, p. 3) talks of “optimization” and “maximization.” The emphasis on the constraints actors face in their decision-making is a response to scholars like Steiner (1990) who criticise the theory for its overemphasis on just narrow pursuit of the self-interest of actors. The rational actor choice model was used as framework to examine the decisions of African states in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic as described in sampled policy briefs. The briefs were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis (QCA) method.

Design

Margaret Roller defines QCA as “the systematic reduction of content, analysed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data” (Roller, 2019, p. 1). The emphasis on “context” and “meaning” in this definition is significant for this study as they constitute the linchpin for analyzing the data collected. However, a major challenge involving the use of QDA is the reliability of the data gathering method, sampling technique and the choice of suitable unit of analysis (Elo et al, 2014). Notwithstanding, the method has been appraised to be useful means of understanding social phenomena using preexisting sources of data.

Four policy briefs were selected online from different international or multinational institutions with established authority. The phrase “impact of COVID-19 pandemic on regional integration in Africa” was searched on the internet using the Google search engine in June 2020. Out of the ten top results generated from this search, four were found to be policy briefs relevant to this study. For instance, the first result from the search was a policy brief of the World Bank authored by Douglas Zeng with the title “How will COVID-19 impact Africa’s trade and market opportunities.” The second result from the search was a policy brief of the International Growth Centre of the London School of Economics authored by Nick Wilkinson with the title “Lockdown without borders: Regional integration and the AfCFTA can drive Africa’s COVID-19 response.” While both results were policy briefs from recognized institutions, the first was addressing COVID-19 and trade in Africa, with the second addressing COVID-19 and regional integration in Africa. Therefore, the second result was deemed relevant for this study and selected but the first was not relevant for the study and therefore not selected. Eventually, a policy brief each was selected from the web pages of the World Economic Forum, the African Development Bank Group, the International Growth Centre of the London School of Economics and finally, the World Bank. All four policy briefs directly addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional integration in Africa.

Results

Regional integration is a deliberate move by states who agree, through rules and institutions, to enter into a deeper form of cooperation to create mutually beneficial opportunities for all parties. Integration could be triggered at the regional (continental) level or sub-regional (Economic Community) level. The African Regional Integration Index (ARII) which measures and ranks regional integration status and efforts of African countries, uses five key dimensions to assess regional integration: free movement of people, trade integration, productive integration, macroeconomic integration and infrastructural integration (ARII, 2019, p. 20). This approach to measuring regional integration is markedly different from the four-level progressive measuring of regional integration: free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union. For the purpose of this paper, the ARII approach, generally used by the authors of the policy briefs, was employed.

Two key themes ran through the policy briefs sampled. The first was a depiction of a deliberate behaviour of states, in their response to the pandemic, to abandon regional integration protocols. The second was an acknowledgement of the importance of regional integration notwithstanding the challenges. The World Economic Forum brief, authored by its Eurasia Head of Regional Agenda, Anastasia Kalinina, was emphatic in its opening that “the initial instinctive reaction to the COVID-19 crisis by most countries was to look inwards and act alone” (Kalinina, 2020, p. 1). The implication of this, according to the author, was manifest in border closures,

disruption of supply chains and fallen regional economic activity. Kalinina afterward spent the rest of the space examining the importance of regional integration for Africa, arguing that the COVID-19 “crisis is an opportunity to show more regional integration” (Kalinina, 2020, p. 1).

Similarly, the African Development Bank brief warned against the unilateral behaviour of states. The Director of Regional Development and Regional Integration at the Bank and author of the brief, Moono Mupotola, warned, in relation to the general response to the COVID-19 pandemic, that “we run the risk of reversing the regional integration gains achieved over the years” (Mupotola, 2020, p. 1). She also discussed the importance of regional integration for Africa. In a review of the 2019 edition of the Africa Regional Integration Index, Mupotola argued that the ranking of states and regional economic communities as regards their integration performance was an innovative way to reinforce the importance of regional integration in Africa (p. 2).

Nick Wilkinson, a Policy Economist at the London School of Economics-based International Growth Centre agreed with the earlier authors that the COVID-19 pandemic held a major setback to regional integration in Africa. However, Wilkinson was more interested in international trade, thereby, expressing dejection at the delay in the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). At the same time, he bemoaned the trade restrictions imposed within Africa due to COVID-19 exigencies. Trading in essential commodities and services were restricted across the continent. Regarding export, Wilkinson posited that 13 countries restricted the export of medical supplies, including items such as face masks, hand sanitizer, and personal protective equipment (PPE), with four countries restricting food exports (p. 2). On imports, Wilkinson observed that 20 countries reduced tariffs on medical supplies, the same products restricted from export. Seven more countries relaxed tariffs on food products while some countries combined this with restrictions on imports. Consequently, the author warned that the delay in the implementation of the AfCFTA “should not allow national governments to turn inwards” (p. 3). Instead, “African governments and regional trade blocks must work together to drive inclusive growth and productive investment to create an African market filled with African producers and African consumers” (Wilkinson, 2020, p. 4).

The World Bank Director for Regional Integration for Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Deborah Wetzel agreed with Wilkinson on the consequences of rising barriers and curtailment of travel and trade in Africa due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Wilkinson, 2020, Wetzel, 2020). However, Wetzel argued, on the contrary, that much progress had already been achieved through collaboration at the sub-regional and the regional levels. She contended, for instance, that through the support of the World Bank, sixteen West and Central African states had collaborated via the Regional Disease Surveillance Systems Enhancement Program (Wetzel, 2020, p. 1). Again, the East Africa Public Health Laboratory Networking Project had seen Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda collaborate in response to the pandemic. In the same manner, the Wajir Referral Hospital located in northeastern Kenya on the borders with Somalia and Ethiopia

led to the three countries collaborating to test COVID-19 cases (Wetzel, 2020, p. 1). At the regional level, Wetzel argued that the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCs) were able to mobilise infrastructure and networks at the early stages of the pandemic. In what the author described as exceptional response “the CDCs catalyzed health ministers in late February to ensure coordination in the face of the crisis” (p. 2) This, according to the author offered rapid support and easy scale-up of testing and diagnostic capacity in the African region (Wetzel, 2020).

While Wetzel appeared to emphasise the progress that states had made at the sub-regional and regional levels, the commitments made by these states could be a result of the benefits gained in the immediate. Amid the upsurge of the pandemic, states were likely to embrace actions that would augment their testing capacity and help contain the spread of the virus within their territory. That act in itself could not be considered a deliberate effort to get integrated – which is crucial to regional integration.

Thus far, these four authors have discussed different aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on regional integration. Understandably, the differences reflect the interests of the institutions which the authors are affiliated. Notwithstanding, they largely agreed on the challenges imposed on regional integration efforts in Africa due to the unilateral decisions by states to protect their territories. More conspicuously, these briefs presented states as actors that had full liberty to make unconstrained choices. This view is, however, difficult to hold considering the nature of limitations states encountered at the onset of the pandemic.

Discussion

There are eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) recognised by the African Union (AU), aside the continental union. These are the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and East African Community (EAC). The rest are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). All eight RECs had their core objectives prior to the onset of the pandemic. In West Africa, for instance, the ECOWAS had at the top of its priorities, the realisation of the long anticipated common currency. At the regional level, the African Union was looking forward to operationalising the AfCFTA in July 2020. These core activities were largely suspended due to the fallouts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The upsurge of the disease brought constraints on both states and regional institutions.

The internal and external pressures that African leaders faced amidst the exigencies of the pandemic and the desire to maximise interests challenged the preferences of states. Decisions were made which resulted in the closure of borders, suspension of travels, restriction of movements of persons and lockdown of whole cities. Unfortunately, these are the core protocols

and drivers of any regional integration effort. Perhaps the worst effect of the pandemic was a breakdown of solidarity at the height of the pandemic. States, even within the European Union, suddenly turned within; prioritising internal measures to protect their own citizens at the initial stages of the pandemic in Europe (Adler, 2020; Horowitz, 2020). Initially, the EU remained largely absent, with each country stumbling over what was the best means to contain the virus within their borders (Vergine, 2020). This left states like Italy, France and Spain struggling to contain the pandemic (Lemmon, 2020; Vergine, 2020).

In the same way, governments in Africa moved quickly to maximise their interests and preferences at the imminence of the pandemic. Like the case of the EU, the decisions to close borders in Africa may not have been the optimal choice, but due to the constraints of the time, states chose to close borders. The internal pressures were inherent in the dire need to keep citizens safe. The external pressures were the inability to predict the nature of threats posed by the pandemic. Again, the decision to restrict trade with other states amidst the pandemic may have been informed by the internal pressure to prevent shortage and the external constraint of the inability to predict the behaviour of other states. These states, therefore, took very rational decisions which would help them to tumble through the constraints and maximise interests. In this state of immense pressure amid the need to achieve the national interest, it became easy to trade off commitments at the regional and sub-regional levels. This could be understood as the search for survival by state actors rather than deliberate decision to renege on commitment.

However, the decision of state actors to take actions that are inimical to regional integration cannot be deemed to mean states can do without integration. Rather, Africa would need even stronger regional integration in the post-COVID-19 era. Thus, the necessity of regional integration for Africa's development amid the COVID-19 pandemic remains unquestionable (Kassa, 2020; Medinilla, Byiers & Apiko, 2020; Morsy, Salami, & Mukasa, 2020). This is despite concerns that the future of the continent as regards integration has been rendered uncertain in the face of the pandemic (Owusu, 2020). Even in Asia and Europe the need for integration and cooperation in this period of health crisis has been emphasised (Kimura, Thangavelu, Narjoko & Findlay, 2020). Therefore, reneging on regional integration commitments amid the COVID-19 crisis cannot be taken to mean African states could evade integration in the search for prosperity. If states, as taught by this pandemic, realized that no member is safe if one is not, then it would be less appealing and more costly to trade off the common good for internal security. Understood this way, African states could forge forward in a state of mutually assured responsibility rather than that of mistrust.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic teaches an important lesson - caution. Caution, because while state actors commit to a common cause such as regional integration, they need to appreciate that other

actors make their foreign policy decisions based on consideration of different constrictions and interest. Insofar as states face different challenges and have different interests, they will keep renegeing on their commitments, particularly in times of crisis. The pandemic, therefore, has unveiled a reality in the risk of overrating how far states can go in their search for integration. States, being rational actors will almost certainly choose survival over loyalty in times of crisis. Even within the European Union which is viewed as a model of regional integration, states woke up to the realisation that putting their trust in the hands of a supra-national institution is a risky business in times of crisis. The breach of trusts characterising this COVID-19 era in international relations shows that nationalism in the post-COVID-19 era are likely to be refueled.

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