

**COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ECOWAS
PROTOCOLS (MOVEMENT OF GOODS AND PERSONS) AND AfCFTA: POSSIBLE
AMENDMENTS TO THE ECOWAS AND AfCFTA TRADE AGREEMENTS – A
CUSTOMS PERSPECTIVE.**

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POLICY BRIEF

KEYWORDS: Essential Goods, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, Trade Facilitation, Covid-19 Pandemic, Sustainable Development Goals

A contribution to the Policy Hackathon on Model Provisions for Trade in Times of Crisis and Pandemic in Regional and other Trade Agreements

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HIGHLIGHTS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), through the 28th of May 1975 Treaty of Lagos arguably Africa's most successful Regional Economic Community (REC) should be proud of its modest achievements but still short of achieving the full goals and aspirations envisioned by the founding fathers. Achieving these goals has been stalled by different challenges and the Coronavirus breakout – COVID-19 has amplified these challenges. Which has resulted in member states adopting different measures to contained the spread and keep the supply chain open.

Before the breakout of the pandemic, Nigeria closed its borders to neighbouring countries to curb illicit movement of goods through its porous land borders and boost production of locally manufactured goods. The outbreak of the virus ensured that borders remained closed while other countries also shut their borders, which is not in line with the ECOWAS Protocol of Free Movement of Goods and Persons across the region.

And in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the slowdown in global economy as necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic has definitely derailed the progress made towards its achievement. As a result of this, there is need to consider how reviews and amendments in Trade Agreements can be used to turn around these impacts and help fast track the implementation of the necessary steps in meeting up with achieving the goals.

This paper would consider the effects of these restrictions and lockdown on the implementation of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty and how this could further affect the newly signed Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement which is yet to commence implementation as well as proffer solutions that can be adopted.

INTRODUCTION

The world continues to battle with the COVID-19 pandemic which originated from China and has spread to several countries and territories at an unprecedented speed. Many economies around the globe have witnessed reduced economic activities in the first quarter of the year, industrial facilities have been shut down in some affected countries, and the global supply chain has been disrupted. The pandemic is expected to hit African economies extremely hard according to the World Bank biannual report. It is projected that economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa will decline from 2.4% in 2019 to between -2.1% and -5.1% in 2020, depending on the success of measures taken to mitigate the pandemic's effects. This means that the region will experience its first recession in 25 years.¹ (World_Bank, 2020)

Unfortunately, the world has not experienced this scale of crisis for a century and all treaties and agreements were negotiated and drafted without recourse to a pandemic of this nature. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a reminder to the world to think and produce solutions that could be adopted for the movement of goods and persons to militate against the massive negative impact that a halt in trade could necessitate as the world is currently experiencing.

For the purpose of this document, we would be looking at the need for Treaties and Agreements developed by International Bodies, Economic Communities and World Leaders to deliberately address situations such as pandemic which can hinder the flow of essential goods, services and persons meant for the survival of citizens of Member States.

SCOPE AND BACKGROUND OF THE PAPER

This paper considers how the pandemic has affected the implementation of the revised ECOWAS Treaty with specific focus on the Protocol on Free movement of Persons and the Protocol on Trade and Market Integration ECOWAS Treaty and how lessons can be learnt to avoid the same effects in the AfCFTA.

The focus will be further narrowed down on the implementation of the ECOWAS Inter State Road Transit (ISRT), the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) which are conventions that are designed to help in the actualisation of the protocols.

The AfCFTA does not have provision for emergency and natural disasters which is unforeseen. However, the delay in implementation could be a path way for State Parties to engage and become creative in thinking on how AfCFTA can be reconfigured to reflect the new realities and risks of the 21st century.

However, AfCFTA Annexes have clauses for Review and Amendment. These standalone provisions are:

- I. Annex 2 Article 41 - Review and Amendment: Rules of Origin
- II. Annex 3 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Customs Cooperation
- III. Annex 4 Article 31 - Review and Amendment: Trade Facilitation
- IV. Annex 5 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Non-Tariff Barriers
- V. Annex 6 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Technical Barriers to Trade
- VI. Annex 7 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures

¹ January 2020 Global Economic Prospects: Slow growth, policy challenges

VII. Annex 8 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Transit

VIII. Annex 9 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Trade Remedies

The above listed Annexes contain key subjects that could be reviewed to provide for amendments which would cater for unhindered regional trade during a pandemic situation such as the Covid-19.

ECOWAS Inter-State Road Transit (ISRT)

"Inter-State Road Transit" (ISRT) means a regime that allows the transportation of goods by road from one Customs Office in a Member State to another Customs Office in another Member State through one or more Member States free of duties, taxes and restrictions while in transit. Such goods shall be accompanied with a set of customs documents and shall not be off-loaded or transferred while in transit;" (Ref. ECOWAS ISRT Convention).

The aim of this convention was to ensure the free movement of goods and person across the borders of member States without the accompanying encumbrances that are related to such movements. One major feature of this article is the need for the Customs to ensure the safe passage of transit cargo through the borders to other neighbouring countries. Where this becomes impossible due to reduced manpower as a result of the fear of spreading the virus, then trade suffers.

But unfortunately, several months before the breakout of the pandemic in the region, Nigeria had already closed its borders to neighbouring countries to curb illicit movement of goods through its porous land borders and boost production of locally manufactured goods. In her view, Nigeria felt the border closure was necessary as its neighbouring ECOWAS States failed to adhere to the provisions of the ECOWAS Protocols of Free Movements of Persons and Goods in pursuance of Article 25 of the revised Treaty which states that "Member States shall co-operate in the development of agriculture, forestry, livestock and fisheries in order to:

- a. Ensure food security;
- b. Increase production and productivity in agriculture and improve conditions of work and generate employment opportunities in rural areas;
- c. enhance agricultural production through processing locally, animal and plant products; and
- d. Protect the prices of export commodities on the international market." (Ref: Revised ECOWAS Treaty Article 25a)

The outbreak of the virus ensured that the Nigerian borders remained closed while other Member States also shut their borders, which is not in line with the ECOWAS Protocol of Free Movement of Goods and Persons across the region, thus rendering the convention and indeed the protocol non-effect. Most importantly, the movement of essential supplies such as PPEs, Medicament and essential personnel were also hindered as a result of these closures.

The ECOWAS ISRT requires that the corridors between Member states are kept open with the movement of goods flowing unhindered. Though the implementation of this before Covid-19 had its challenges, the Covid-19 added to its further breakdown. The fear to curb the spread of the virus made Member states take actions that were contrary to the articles as stated in the Convention.

The AfCFTA, which is a much larger agreement in terms of region and number of Member States (spanning the whole African continent), may experience worse challenges during similar crisis if solutions are not developed to cater for similar experiences in the future.

ECOWAS TRADE LIBERALISATION SCHEME (ETLS)

The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is the main ECOWAS operational tool for promoting the Free Trade Area within West Africa. This is in agreement with one of the integration objectives of the community which is the establishment of a common market through “the liberalization of trade by the abolition among member states of custom duties levied on imports and exports and the abolition among member states of non-tariff barriers” (Article 3 of the ECOWAS Treaty).²(CCC, 2016)²

The scheme seeks to remove all non-tariff barriers in pursuance of the ECOWAS goal of achieving and Customs Union in the region. The reference to the ETLS in this context is to refer to it as an example of the proposed solution that could be adopted to mitigate the challenges that could be encountered during a pandemic in the future.

PERSPECTIVE ON THE AfCFTA STATUS

The AfCFTA implementation by the 54-member nation was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. If implemented, it is expected to create a \$3.4tn economic bloc with 1.3 billion people across Africa and constitute the largest new trading bloc in the world. But the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic has put the brakes on the rolling out of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. Although the biggest obstacle in the implementation of the Agreement is the delay in concluding the negotiations especially on outstanding phases such as schedules of tariff concessions, rule of origin and liberalisation of services.

The negotiations are very important especially the rules of origin a cornerstone for effective implementation of the preferential trade liberalization which will enable the AfCFTA member countries to source more intermediate and final goods among themselves instead of importing from abroad. This will drive both industrialization and regional value chain especially post Covid-19.

In addition, the AfCFTA could significantly mitigate the economic consequences of Covid-19 through speeding up of the implementation instead of delaying it and there should also be “trade facilitation” reforms. This can be done through supporting immediate trade facilitation measures such as dematerialisation and continental customs clearance system and addressing facilitation problems along the entire length of corridors across the continent, within the AfCFTA framework. Trade facilitation reforms have a strong impact on intra-African trade in agriculture, food, and petroleum and chemicals sectors linked to the continent’s ambitious food security policy. Without implementation of such measures, the disruption of supply chains accompanied by observed trade restrictions could seriously affect African food security particularly during a pandemic.

Lastly, it is important for leaders to speed up the implementation of the AfCFTA instead of delaying as it could significantly mitigate the economic consequences of Covid-19. They should also involve all economic operators in the identification of priorities for trade facilitation reforms and enablers for a rapid and ambitious implementation of the agreement. If Africa had implemented agreements such as the AfCFTA in earlier years, the economies of the Member nations would have been more diversified, stronger and less affected by the current pandemic.

² The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS)

ADOPTED INNOVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Despite the restrictions that Member States were forced to impose in a bid to curb the spread of the virus, they understood the need to create and adopt solutions that will ensure the continuous movement of goods and persons across the borders, with particular reference to essential goods and services.

For instance, Benin Republic did not shut down its land border or airports like Nigeria did. They kept on allowing the inflow shipments while Nigeria restricted the movement of only essentials shipments such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), medicaments and food via the airports.

Rwanda and Uganda adopted a method of exchanging truck drivers at the borders with that aim of ensuring that the supply chain was kept open all through the period without risking further spread of the virus. This could be reflected in a review of Annex 8 which deals with Transit, as a method that could be adopted during a crisis such as Covid-19 in the future by the entire region to maintain the continuous flow of trade.

RECOMMENDED INCLUSION IN THE ECOWAS TREATY

As a result of the foregoing and to avoid the total shut down of airports and closure of borders during similar crisis as we have recently experienced, it is recommended that a special **Emergency/Crisis Convention** be developed and adopted by Member States. This could be designed to be triggered by and among Member States whenever there is a similar situation such as a pandemic in the future without necessary recourse to special meetings and negotiation.

This convention can be designed in semblance to the ECOWAS ETLS which has a list of items which are listed as preferential goods to be exempted from duty and taxes. In this case, a list of goods which are considered to constitute essential items will be created and agreed upon by Member States.

The Convention will also include the following details

1. Conditions under which the Convention can be triggered: This should state under which conditions such a convention can be triggered. For instance, in the current pandemic, when the Covid-19 began spreading from its origin, the WHO was responsible to declare it a pandemic after some certain occurrences, while back in 2015, during the Ebola Virus outbreak, despite other continents experiencing cases, it was never deemed a pandemic. So, in achieving this convention, it would need to be stated clearly, which scale of incidences have to be recorded, or what declarations would have to be made and by whom before the articles of the convention are triggered.

2. Documentation and Processes that will be required in fulfilment of the Convention: As in the ETLS, there are clearly defined documentations that are required. These would require putting into consideration already existing articles of ECOWAS Treaty relating to documentation and procedures. As we have learnt from the Covid-19 incident, it must be put into consideration that during similar crisis the resources in terms of manpower are seriously reduced. Hence, documentations must be minimal and the procedures must be designed to minimize human contact to the barest minimum while ensuring continuous and unhindered cross border movement of cargo. Special note would have to be taken in consideration to movement of small packages across borders (cross border e-commerce), as the rise in this type of cargo was experienced during the on-going Covid-19 case.

3. The method through which movement of goods and persons can continue unhindered:

During the current crisis, we experienced a case where even those who are responsible for the movement of goods could not move themselves. The need to develop a safe and convenient solution as part of the **Emergency/Crisis Convention** must be given a huge priority. At the moment, goods and cargo cannot move themselves; humans are still required and are responsible for the movement of cargo to large extent. To ensure that this is not hindered during a similar crisis, the need to make recommendation on what type of technologies can be adopted, and how they can be used to mitigate a total shutdown would be important. The type of personnel that are essential for trade must be identified and listed for governments to be able to plan for their safety. For instance, during the on-going crisis, governments were not able to plan adequately for the protection essential trade workers such as Customs and other border agencies officials, by providing PPEs and other protective working gears, because there was a lack of any sort of arrangement put in place prior to the pandemic. For instance, the United Kingdom has compiled a list specifying different categories of workers who are allowed to move through its borders without being subject to some entry and exit rules. (UK COVID-19 Exemptions, 2020)³. Ideas like this could be incorporated into the emergency/crisis convention

4. Operation and Monitoring: For any strategy to actually work there needs to be a design of its actualisation and how it is to be monitored when implemented. As noted earlier, many of the ECOWAS articles of the protocols have not been implemented successfully and there are no guarantees that any new convention will be implemented if introduced. Nevertheless, designing an operational and monitoring plan that can be adopted during similar crisis in an agreement such as the ECOWAS Treaty will still prove to be useful in a situation where it becomes necessary.

The coming into existence of a Customs Union at some future date, and preparing for operational eventualities in times of crisis would make things easier when this eventually happens. The operational and monitoring plan would focus on the need for data collection, trade facilitation and adherence to procedures in the most effective and flexible manner.

³ Coronavirus (COVID-19): travellers exempt from border rules in the UK

PROPOSED REVIEW AND AMENDMENTS FOR THE AfCFTA ANNEXES

I. Annex 2 Article 41 - Review and Amendment: Rules of Origin

Rules of Origin (RoO) is a vital tool for the AfCFTA and its understanding and implementation by a designated competent authority/enforcer such as Customs Administration will be key in determining the success of the Agreement. As a common knowledge, regional agreements are signed mainly with the aim of promoting economic prosperity among its Member States and the AfCFTA is not different. Nevertheless the pandemic presents new challenges that may make implementation difficult.

The need for essential items such as PPEs and Medicaments required for survival during a pandemic may not necessarily be readily manufactured within the region where the Rules of Origin is enforceable, hence, are neither wholly obtained nor substantially transformed within the territory of any Member State. In such a situation, how do designated competent authority/enforcers handle such items where the goods are required to cross borders, especially in the case of landlocked States within the region?

The need to provide an amendment to address this challenge will ensure that the AfCFTA adequately caters for the eventualities such as a pandemic of the nature of Covid-19 or a crisis as the case may be.

Annex 2 Article 17 which deals with the subject matter of Proof of Origin in paragraph mentions the need for Party State legislation for the acceptance of an electronic copy of the Certificate of Origin. Given the nature of transmission of the Covid-19 pandemic which can be transmitted as a result of handling of hardcopy items such as the Certificates, the AfCFTA may wish to include a section that will make it mandatory for Certificates to be made electronic to curb the further spread of the virus or any other such virus in the future.

II. Annex 3 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Customs Cooperation

As mentioned earlier, Customs is a designated competent authority/enforcer for a tool such as RoO and plays a vital role in ensuring that goods are facilitated at the borders. This above Annex emphasizes Customs Cooperation which seeks to promote automation, removal of barriers through simplification and harmonization of procedures and exchange of advanced information. These are all well-articulated in the agreement, nevertheless, there may be need to include a provision for simplified procedures that are peculiar to crisis like the current Covid-19 pandemic. The WCO/UNOCHA through the C-RED Project has released a guideline for emergency clearance that can serve as a baseline for the development of such a provision. This should also consider the reality of a limited workforce that will be available during such situation.

III. Annex 4 Article 31 - Review and Amendment: Trade Facilitation

Under the Article 25 of this Annex, an amendment could be made to describe the steps which are to be taken in a situation of crisis or a pandemic such as the Covid-19. This should explicitly detail the mode of interaction for cooperation between border agencies during a crisis, which may include but not limited to the Rwanda/Uganda example cited in an earlier paragraph.

During the lockdown in Nigeria, though Customs Officers continued to go to work, as a result of their role as essential to the continuous flow of goods across border, congestion was experienced at the ports and goods were stuck on ships without been offloaded for days. This was as a result of

other port workers such as handlers, customs broker, banks etc., not been able to access the port areas or their offices to carry out their duties. Hence, the experience revealed that though Customs Officers were present, goods could not be cleared because other key players in the trade supply chain were not able to leave their homes.

This Annex could be reviewed and amended to include trade facilitation during crisis (pandemic of similar nature to the current Covid-19) which would consider the roles of private sector players are essential in facilitating the movement of goods and payments during such times. Article 14 of the Annex seeks to address Expedited shipment, but this was limited to e-Commerce at the airport only and not specific to crisis situation.

IV. Annex 5 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Non-Tariff Barriers

Crisis in the African regions especially at many national borders has hindered trade more often than not. While this paper focuses on the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is important to note the impact of crisis such as the unrests in many regions as a Non-Tariff Barrier. For instance, the Boko Haram Crisis in the North-Eastern region of Nigeria has effectively stifled across the Nigerian borders with Cameroun, Chad and Niger Republic. These kinds of crisis are replicated in many regions in different countries across Africa. The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is a form of crisis, has heightened this concerns which led to the total shutdown of national borders.

One could argue that there may be need to include Crisis Management in the General Categorization of NTBs listed in Article 3 of this Annex. This will help the NTB Committee give attention to the effects that crisis could have in trade among member nations.

V. Annex 6 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Technical Barriers to Trade

During the early stages of the pandemic when the drug trials were been carried out around the World, after some media reports claimed the effectiveness of Hydroxychloroquine in treating the Covid-19, some countries which had the manufacturing capacity of the drug stopped or limited the exportation of the drug with the aim of protecting its own citizens in terms of sufficiency, hence, creating some form of tension at the time.

The above is sited as a likely scenario that could play out during crisis, where countries may seek to limit supply of essential goods where they enjoy a comparative advantage in the production of such items could put up Technical Barriers to limit or discourage export of such items which are essential and needed by other nations for the survival of its people.

The current Annex could be reviewed to consider such a scenario and provide steps that can be taken to address such situations. These are issues that can be negotiated and discussed to come up with solutions in times of crises.

VI. Annex 7 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures

Initial findings and reports suggested that the Coronavirus originated from live animals and was transmitted to humans through them. One of the major non-tariff barriers that can become prominent especially during a pandemic is Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. Given the mode of transmission of the Covid-19, it will be highly necessary for Member States take stricter measures to curb the movement of food items such as poultry and dairy products into their territory. While this may be justifiable, the need to include an Article in this Annex which will guide the import,

export and transit of live animals and edible products across borders during a pandemic has become imperative to ensure Member States do not use this as a guise for protectionism.

Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures is captured under potential Non-Tariff Barriers in Article 3 of the Annex and further elaborated in Annex 7. Under Article 4 which focuses on the objectives of the Annex, the first paragraph states the need to facilitate trade while safeguarding human, animal or plant life or health in the territory of State Parties;

While this comes closest to any reference to diseases and steps to be taken to address the need for safe trade which may not constitute health hazards to the people, it still does not take care of a situation in the scale of a pandemic because it focuses on boosting intra-Africa trade in animals, animal products, animal by-products, plants, plant products and plant by-products. This SPS measures may be reviewed to include emergency responses in time of crisis similar to the Covid-19 in the future.

VII. Annex 8 Article 17 - Review and Amendment: Transit

This Annex covers requirements for Transit in terms of documentation and procedures. Given the importance of Transit across borders in trade, it is important to review this Annex to include documentation and procedures during crisis such as the Covid-19.

Articles 7 of this Annex focuses on Transit documentation and are mostly related to Customs. While this suffices for normal times, there is need to include licenses for health clearance and disinfection of means of carriage certificates/measures for the safety of all border agency staff. The Rwanda/Uganda border arrangement can again be useful as reference in the amendment of this Article.

The movement of goods and persons during the Covid-19 period posed a very huge challenge for many member states as there was fear of spread of the disease. Also, the level of readiness in handling such cases differed among member states; hence the need for this Annex to specifically put in place measures that will consider all the factors that could inhibit the movement of essential items such as food and medicaments.

VIII. Annex 9 Article 15 - Review and Amendment: Trade Remedies

The WTO permits members to impose trade remedies or trade defence measures against imports to protect their domestic industries from unfair practices such as dumping and subsidies, or to cope with a sudden surge of foreign goods. (WTO, 2013)⁴.

The AfCFTA in line with this has created an Annex for the implementation of same in the Agreement.

While the idea of trade remedies according to the WTO Bali Convention may be to effect controls or protect a Member State from unfair trade that can hurt its economy, the experience during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that economies were hurt as a result of the strict restrictions that were imposed on movement to hamper the spread of the virus.

Hence, in this case, the AfCFTA may need to take a slightly different and positive approach towards its definition of Trade Remedies by either reviewing this Annex to include measures that

⁴ 9TH WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE, BALI, 2013

can be adopted to stimulate the economies of its Member state or create a completely new Annex to address the issue of how the economies of Member States can be stimulated to speed up recovery.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

This policy brief is written and developed in line with the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In line with the Sustainable Development Goal 9 – Industries, Innovation and Infrastructure states that the inclusive and sustainable industrialisation together with innovation and infrastructure can unleash dynamic and competitive economic forces that generate employment and income. They play a key role in introducing and promoting new technologies, facilitating international trade and enabling the efficient use of resources.

(SDG GOALS, n.d.)⁵

Before the pandemic, there were already challenges about Sub-Saharan Africa achieving the SDGs 2030 targets. The Covid-19 pandemic has badly hit the international trade supply chain and affected the movement of goods and services across borders and Sub Saharan Africa was not left out.

The Trade Agreements and the proposed amendments could be useful in helping Sub-Saharan African Member State navigate the difficulties that were occasioned by the advent of Covid-19 without risk to further spread of the virus.

CONCLUSION

Given the poor implementation of the ECOWAS ISRT Convention before the pandemic, it is difficult to entirely determine the impact of the pandemic on the ECOWAS Treaty. Several countries in the region had not carried out several of the recommendations and conventions of the treaty e.g. the treaty states that member nations constitute a monitoring committee for the implementation of the ISRT and the ETLS, but just a few countries have done so.

(Aderanti Adepoju, n.d.)⁶

Nevertheless, with the introduction of the AfCFTA, it is imperative to create and adopt a strategy or convention that can be activated only during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This convention will consider issues such as the movement of essential personnel and shipment or essential goods that are needed for the health of the citizens of Member States and also the continuous flow of trade to ensure that the economies of Member States are not impacted the way it has been with Covid-19.

⁵ Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

⁶ Promoting integration through mobility: Free movement under ECOWAS

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