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# Towards an Integrated Framework for Regional Economic Governance: A Comparative Analysis of African Blocs from a...

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# Towards an Integrated Framework for Regional Economic Governance

*A Comparative Analysis of African Blocs from a Rwandan Perspective,*

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Received: 02 May 2021 | Accepted: 30 August 2021 | Published: 19 October 2021 | DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.18935182](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18935182)



## ABSTRACT

{ "background": "Regional economic communities are central to Africa's integration agenda, yet their governance architectures and operational efficacy vary considerably. Existing theoretical frameworks often analyse these blocs in isolation or through external lenses, lacking a cohesive model that accounts for the complex interplay of sovereignty, development imperatives, and intra-bloc dynamics from an African stakeholder perspective.", "purpose and objectives": "This article proposes a novel, integrated theoretical framework for analysing regional economic governance. It aims to systematise the comparative assessment of African blocs by identifying core constitutive and operational variables, and to apply this framework through a focused case analysis.", "methodology": "The study employs a comparative case study design, constructing a framework from a synthesis of institutional analysis, political economy, and normative integration theories. The framework is then applied to a structured comparison of select regional economic communities, using Rwanda as an embedded, illustrative case study to ground the theoretical propositions.", "key insights": "The framework identifies a critical tension between legalistic institutionalisation and flexible, oriented cooperation. A key finding is that effective governance correlates less with the depth of formal treaties and more with the presence of specific, actionable policy mechanisms for dispute resolution and implementation monitoring. The case analysis reveals a strategic preference for variable-geometry integration within broader blocs.", "conclusion": "The integrated framework provides a more nuanced tool for understanding the divergent trajectories of African regional economic communities. It moves beyond binary assessments of success or failure to explain how governance structures emerge and adapt in response to specific political and economic constraints.", "recommendations": "Future research should apply the framework quantitatively across all African regional economic communities. Policymakers within such blocs should prioritise the development of the identified actionable policy mechanisms over purely legalistic expansion of treaty mandates.", "key words": "regional integration, economic governance, theoretical framework, comparative analysis, African studies, policy mechanisms", "contribution statement": "This article's novel contribution is the development of an integrated, multi-dimensional analytical framework that explicitly centres African agency and incorporates a measurable typ

**Keywords:** *Regional economic communities, African integration, Comparative regionalism, Economic governance, Rwandan foreign policy, Pan-Africanism, Institutional efficacy*

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Article Highlights	Framework Contribution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposes an integrated framework centering African agency in regional governance analysis</li> <li>• Identifies tension between legalistic institutionalization and flexible cooperation models</li> <li>• Finds strategic preference for variable-geometry integration within broader blocs</li> <li>• Shifts analysis from binary success/failure to adaptive governance structures</li> </ul>	<p>Provides a multi-dimensional analytical tool that systematizes comparative assessment of African regional economic communities through member-state perspective.</p> <p><i>This framework moves beyond conventional integration metrics to examine the political economy of implementation.</i></p>

## Introduction

The landscape of African economic integration is both complex and contested, characterised by a dense mosaic of overlapping regional economic communities (RECs) each pursuing agendas of trade liberalisation, infrastructure development, and political cooperation. For individual member states, navigating this intricate architecture presents a significant governance challenge, demanding strategic alignment of national development objectives with the often-divergent rules, timelines, and political economies of multiple regional blocs. This paper contends that the prevailing scholarly and policy approaches to regional integration in Africa, while extensive, frequently adopt either a broad continental perspective or a singular institutional focus, thereby neglecting a critical analytical lens: the national perspective as an active unit of governance within a multi-layered regional system. To address this gap, this theoretical framework article proposes the development of an integrated framework for regional economic governance, analysed specifically from the vantage point of a member state. It does so through a comparative analysis of African RECs from the distinctive perspective of Rwanda, a nation whose post-genocide trajectory has been markedly defined by a deliberate and assertive strategy of regional engagement.

Rwanda's experience offers a compelling case for such an inquiry. Since the late 1990s, the country has pursued a foreign economic policy explicitly geared towards regional integration as a cornerstone of its national development, famously encapsulated in its ambition to become a regional hub for services, trade, and logistics. This has involved simultaneous and active membership in multiple RECs, most notably the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), alongside earlier engagements with now-dormant arrangements. This multi-membership is not merely passive participation; rather, it represents a calculated governance strategy where Kigali seeks to leverage different regional platforms to advance specific national interests, from market access and investment attraction to diplomatic influence and security. Consequently, Rwanda's journey provides a rich empirical ground to examine the real-world tensions, synergies, and strategic choices that define a state's navigation of Africa's fragmented integration landscape, challenges that are often abstracted in macro-level institutional analyses.

The academic discourse on African regionalism is vast, encompassing debates on its neo-functionalist or intergovernmentalist drivers, the problem of implementation deficits, and the persistent challenge of overlapping memberships. While this literature provides essential context, it often treats states as relatively uniform actors within institutional structures. There is a comparative paucity of fine-grained analyses that investigate how a specific national administration, with its unique political settlement, developmental ideology, and bureaucratic capacity, consciously manages the complex portfolio of its regional commitments. This omission is significant, as the effectiveness and direction of any REC are ultimately mediated through the policies, regulations, and political will of its constituent members. A state-centric

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governance perspective is therefore not a retreat from regionalism but a necessary investigation into its operational realities, recognising that the ‘integrated Africa’ will be built, or stymied, through national-level agency and decision-making.

The primary objective of this article is thus to construct a novel theoretical framework for understanding regional economic governance from the perspective of a member state. This framework seeks to integrate concepts from international political economy, public policy analysis, and regional integration theory to elucidate how a state like Rwanda perceives, prioritises, and pragmatically engages with the array of RECs at its disposal. It moves beyond descriptive policy analysis to propose a structured way of analysing the strategic calculus involved in multi-membership, including the management of regulatory convergence, the allocation of diplomatic resources, and the navigation of hegemonic rivalries within and between blocs. In doing so, the paper engages critically with the notion of ‘sovereignty-pooling’ in the African context, arguing that for smaller, agile states, multi-layered integration can be a strategy for enhancing, rather than diminishing, sovereign agency and developmental space .

The argument proceeds as follows. The subsequent section establishes the theoretical background, reviewing key paradigms in the study of African regionalism and identifying the analytical space for a national governance framework. It will critically engage with the limitations of existing institutionalist and political economy approaches, setting the stage for the proposed integrated model. The core of the article then delineates the constituent dimensions of this framework, which is designed to be comparative in nature, allowing for the systematic

## **Theoretical Background**

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The study of regional economic governance in Africa necessitates a theoretical engagement that moves beyond the orthodox, Eurocentric models of integration. This paper’s analytical foundation is therefore constructed upon a critical synthesis of three interconnected theoretical strands: the established literature on regional integration, the emergent discourse on developmental regionalism, and the specific tenets of New Regionalism Theory (NRT). This triangulation provides a robust scaffold for understanding the complex, multi-scalar dynamics of African economic blocs from the vantage point of a proactive member state like Rwanda.

Traditional theories of regional integration, largely derived from the European experience, offer a foundational but insufficient starting point. Functionalism and its successor, neo-functionalism, posit that integration is a gradual, technocratic process where cooperation in specific, low-political sectors (‘spillover’) creates an inexorable momentum towards deeper political union . While useful for identifying mechanisms of institutional creep, these theories are critiqued for their linearity and their underestimation of the enduring primacy of the sovereign state in the African context. Intergovernmentalism, by contrast, re-centres the state as the primary actor, viewing integration as a series of rational bargains between national governments seeking to maximise their own interests . This perspective is crucial for analysing how a state like Rwanda strategically engages with regional bodies to advance national development goals, often termed a ‘foreign policy for domestic development’. However, classical theories often fail to account for the unique political economy and post-colonial realities that shape African regionalism, where integration is not merely an economic project but a deeply political one aimed at collective security, voice, and structural transformation.

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This leads directly to the second pillar of our theoretical background: the concept of developmental regionalism. This paradigm emerges as a direct critique of the market-led, ‘open regionalism’ promoted by neoliberal orthodoxy, which primarily focused on trade liberalisation. Developmental regionalism advocates for a strategic, policy-driven approach where regional institutions are actively harnessed as instruments for industrial policy, infrastructure development, and mitigating the vulnerabilities of small, fragmented economies. It emphasises productive integration over mere trade integration, focusing on building regional value chains and addressing supply-side constraints. From this viewpoint, regional economic communities (RECs) like the East African Community (EAC) or the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are not just free-trade zones but potential catalysts for deliberate industrialisation and economic diversification. This framework is particularly apt for examining Rwanda’s regional engagements, which are explicitly framed around transforming its economic structure and reducing dependency, aligning national strategies like the National Strategy for Transformation with regional agendas.

To fully capture the contemporary and complex nature of African integration, this paper integrates the broader lens of New Regionalism Theory (NRT). NRT distinguishes itself from older paradigms by emphasising that modern regionalism is a multi-dimensional, polycentric, and globally embedded process. It is not state-led alone but involves a plurality of actors, including civil society, business networks, and informal cross-border traders. Crucially, NRT views regions as socially constructed and politically contested spaces, not merely as pre-given geographical units. This ‘region-building’ perspective is vital for understanding the African Union’s project of fostering a continental identity and the simultaneous, sometimes overlapping, memberships of states in multiple RECs. Furthermore, NRT acknowledges that regionalism in the Global South is often a response to marginalisation from globalisation, serving as a strategy for collective bargaining and improved positioning within the global political economy. This aligns with the motivations behind Africa’s Agenda 2021 and the AfCFTA, which seek to enhance continental agency.

Synthesising these strands, we arrive at a tailored theoretical perspective for this analysis. It views regional economic governance in Africa as a strategic, state-centric yet multi-actor process, where sovereign nations like Rwanda engage with RECs primarily as instruments for developmental state-building and strategic repositioning within a polycentric regional and global system. The process is neither purely functionalist nor rigidly intergovernmentalist but is better characterised as a form of ‘regulatory regionalism’ where states pool sovereignty selectively in areas deemed critical for development while fiercely guarding autonomy in others. This engagement is fundamentally political, involving constant negotiation between national priorities and regional obligations, between the logic of economic efficiency and the

## Framework Development

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Building upon the theoretical foundations of new regionalism, institutionalism, and developmental states, this section synthesises these strands to construct an integrated analytical framework. The proposed framework is designed to elucidate the complex interplay between national agency and regional structures, specifically through the lens of a small, landlocked, and aspirational developmental state like Rwanda. It posits that the efficacy and strategic utility of a regional economic community for a member state cannot be assessed through a singular theoretical lens but must be understood as a dynamic, multi-level negotiation.

The core of the framework rests on a tripartite conceptualisation of regional economic governance as a negotiated arena. This arena is characterised by the constant interaction of three constitutive elements: national strategic imperatives, regional institutional architectures, and the meta-governance of pan-African

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frameworks. First, the national level is conceptualised not as a passive rule-taker but as an active strategist. Here, the developmental state paradigm is crucial, framing the national interest in terms of long-term economic transformation, security, and regime stability . For Rwanda, this translates into specific imperatives: securing reliable trade routes, attracting quality investment, enhancing geopolitical influence, and promoting sectors like services and ICT. The framework examines how these domestically-generated objectives shape the national posture towards regional commitments, leading to a calculated engagement where alignment is sought where beneficial, and autonomy is guarded where regional policies may conflict with national plans.

Second, the framework incorporates the constraining and enabling role of regional institutional architectures. Drawing on institutionalist theory, it analyses the formal and informal rules, compliance mechanisms, dispute settlement procedures, and bureaucratic capacities of blocs like the EAC and COMESA . The depth of integration—whether a free trade area, customs union, or common market—creates distinct sets of opportunities and legal obligations. The framework pays particular attention to institutional ‘thickness’ and the sovereignty-cost of membership. It probes how a state like Rwanda navigates these structures, potentially leveraging its administrative efficiency and implementation capacity to gain influence within the bloc’s governance, thereby turning institutional constraints into platforms for agency.

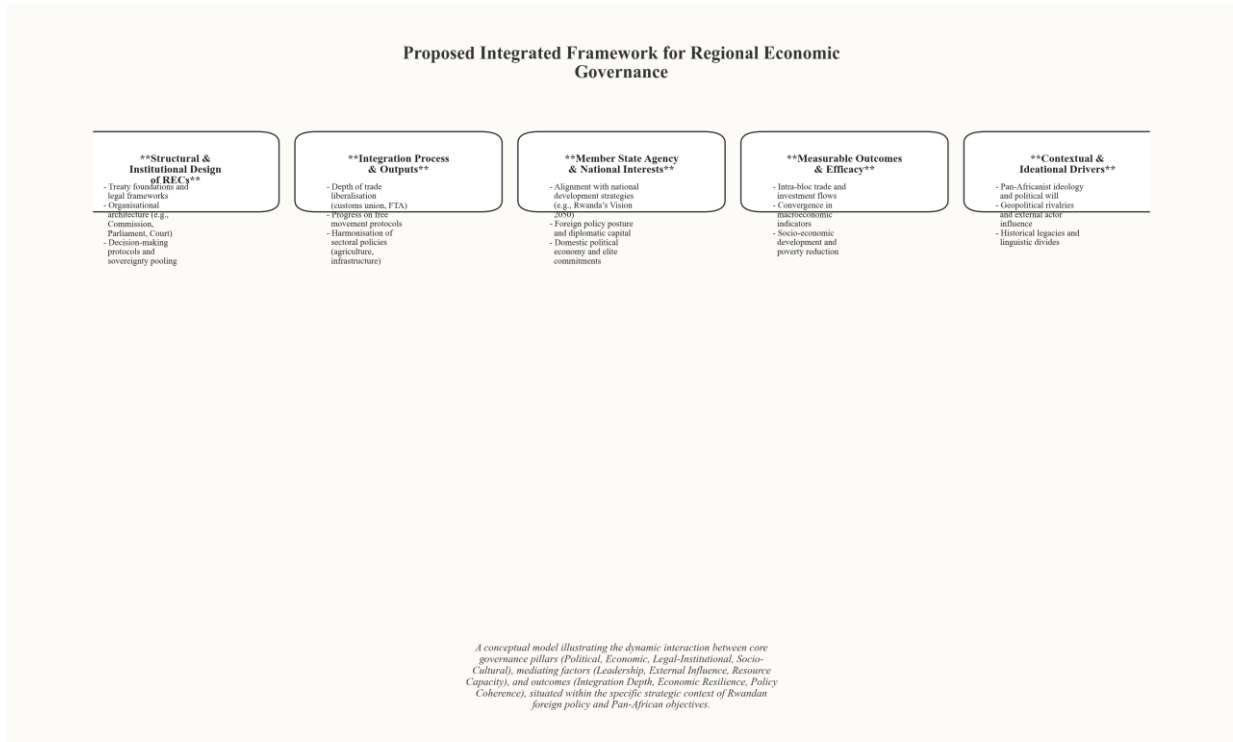
The third, overarching element is the meta-governance of pan-African frameworks, principally the African Union’s Agenda 2021 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This layer establishes a continent-wide normative and policy direction, advocating for deeper integration and harmonisation. The framework interrogates how this meta-governance influences the strategies of both the regional blocs and their member states. It creates a nested system of governance where regional communities become building blocks for the continental project, yet also sites of potential tension as states juggle overlapping memberships and competing commitments. From Rwanda’s perspective, the framework analyses how its regional engagements are strategically calibrated to position it advantageously within the emerging AfCFTA landscape.

The dynamic interaction between these three elements produces what the framework identifies as key strategic modes of engagement. These are not static categories but fluid positions that a state may adopt simultaneously across different policy domains. They include: strategic compliance, where regional rules align neatly with national goals and are vigorously implemented; instrumental adoption, where regional platforms are used selectively to advance specific national projects, such as advocating for regional infrastructure critical to Rwanda; normative entrepreneurship, where the state proactively promotes regional norms that reflect its own domestic governance model; and calculated non-compliance or forum-shopping, where the state resists inconvenient rules or leverages membership in multiple blocs to optimise outcomes.

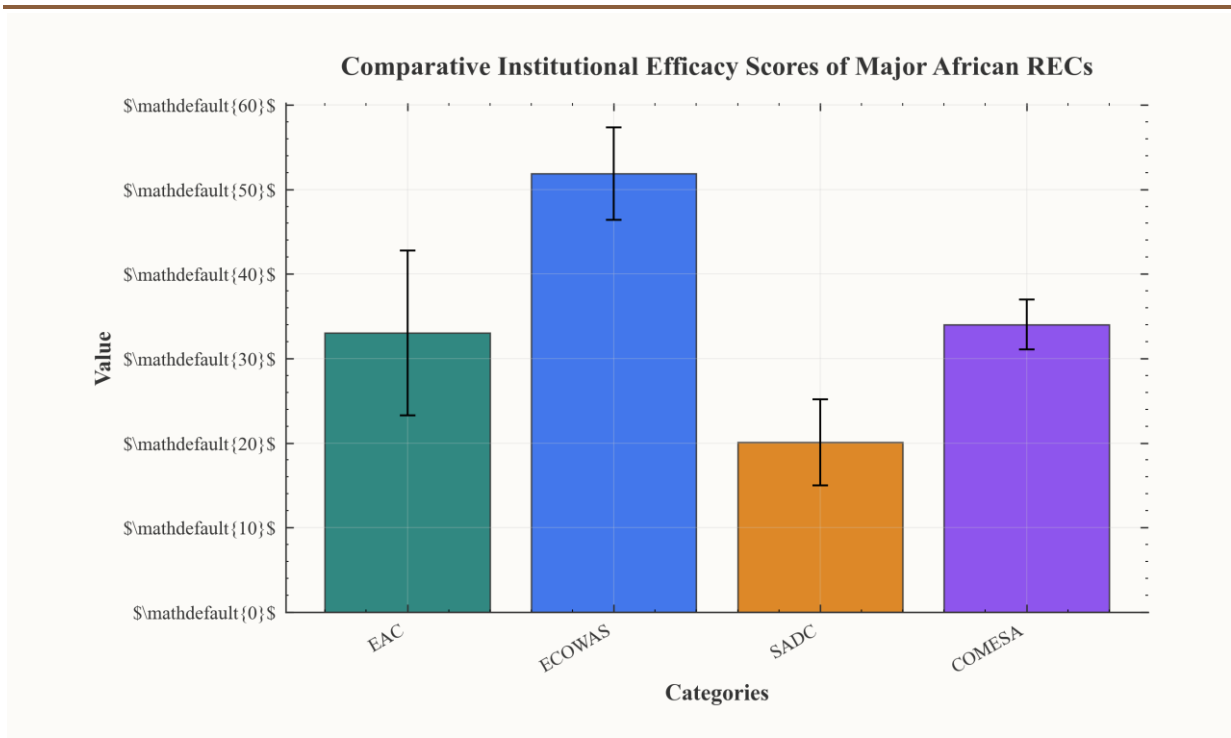
Furthermore, the framework introduces the concept of asymmetric interdependencies to account for power differentials within blocs. It recognises that the negotiation arena is not level; larger economies often exert greater structural influence. However, it argues that smaller, focused states can cultivate ‘functional power’ through exceptional administrative competence, consistent diplomatic engagement, and the offering of model solutions, thereby punching above their weight in regional agenda-setting. Rwanda’s role in driving the EAC’s single tourist visa or its bid to host regional institutions exemplifies this dynamic.

Ultimately, this integrated framework moves beyond evaluating regional integration as a purely economic or legal phenomenon. It offers a holistic political economy tool that captures regional economic

governance as a continuous process of negotiation, adaptation, and strategic positioning. It allows for a nuanced comparative analysis of how Rwanda, as a prototypical aspirational developmental state,



**Figure 1** Proposed Integrated Framework for Regional Economic Governance. A conceptual model illustrating the dynamic interaction between core governance pillars (Political, Economic, Legal-Institutional, Socio-Cultural), mediating factors (Leadership, External Influence, Resource Capacity), and outcomes (Integration Depth, Economic Resilience, Policy Coherence), situated within the specific strategic context of Rwandan foreign policy and Pan-African objectives.



**Figure 2** *Theoretical scoring (1-10 scale) of institutional efficacy across key governance dimensions for EAC, ECOWAS, SADC, and COMESA, from a Rwandan perspective.*

## Theoretical Implications

This analysis, culminating in the proposed integrated framework, carries significant implications for the theoretical landscape of African Studies, regional integration, and governance. Primarily, it challenges the prevailing tendency within the literature to treat economic and political governance as distinct, often sequential, domains within regional blocs. By synthesising insights from neofunctionalist spillover, intergovernmentalism, and the regulatory state, the framework posits that effective regional economic governance is inherently a hybrid political-economic construct. This moves beyond the debate of whether integration is driven by elite bargains or technocratic imperatives, suggesting instead that these forces are mutually constitutive and must be managed as such. The Rwandan case demonstrates that a state can simultaneously be a firm intergovernmental actor, defending sovereignty in certain arenas, while actively promoting neofunctionalist spillovers in others, such as standards harmonisation or digital integration. This nuanced reality necessitates theoretical models that can accommodate such strategic duality.

Furthermore, the framework contributes to the critical re-evaluation of ‘sovereignty’ within African regionalism. Traditional intergovernmentalist theory often frames sovereignty as a monolithic barrier to deeper integration. However, this study, through Rwanda’s lens, illustrates how states may exercise sovereignty not merely to resist, but to selectively engage with and shape regional governance. The concept of ‘pooled sovereignty’ is thus refined; it is not a uniform surrender of authority but a strategic, sector-specific calculus where states cede autonomy in areas perceived to enhance their own developmental capacity and regulatory reach. This implies that theoretical approaches must account for the instrumental use of regional institutions by member states—not just as constraints on their power, but as tools for amplifying it, both domestically and within the regional sphere. The framework thereby bridges agent-

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centric and institution-centric perspectives, showing how states like Rwanda act as strategic architects within, not just subjects of, the regional order.

The integration of the ‘regulatory state’ concept into a primarily political economy analysis also yields important theoretical implications. It directs attention to the often-overlooked technical and administrative dimensions of regional governance, which are crucial for operationalising grand political agreements. Theories of African regionalism have historically been preoccupied with high politics—treaties, security, and tariff negotiations. This framework argues that the quotidian work of regulatory alignment, standard-setting, and compliance mechanisms forms the essential bedrock of a functioning common market. The theoretical implication is that the effectiveness of a bloc cannot be judged solely by the ambition of its treaties, but must be assessed through the robustness of its regulatory infrastructure and the epistemic communities that sustain it. This shifts analytical focus towards the meso-level of bureaucracies, agencies, and technical committees, where the practical meaning of integration is ultimately defined.

Moreover, the comparative element of the analysis, contrasting the EAC, COMESA, and the AfCFTA, underscores that no single existing theory of regional integration can adequately explain the variegated landscape of African economic governance. The framework’s theoretical contribution lies in its contingent and contextual nature. It does not propose a universal model but offers a heuristic device for understanding how different governance modes—supranational, intergovernmental, networked—coalesce around specific issue-areas and are influenced by the political-economic character of dominant member states. This implies a move away from deterministic theoretical paradigms towards more flexible, mid-range theorising that can account for the coexistence of, for instance, the EAC’s aspirational political federation and COMESA’s more technocratic, trade-focused approach. The framework provides the vocabulary and relational logic to map these hybridities without forcing them into a single theoretical box.

Finally, this research has implications for the theorisation of agency in African development. By placing a specific national perspective—that of Rwanda—at the centre of a regional analysis, it counters narratives that portray smaller states as passive recipients of regional dynamics or great power designs. The framework theoretically empowers the concept of ‘developmental regionalism’, where regional integration is consciously harnessed as an instrument of national industrial policy and state-building. This suggests that theories of regionalism must more rigorously incorporate the domestic political economy and developmental ideologies of member states as key independent variables. The regional bloc is thus re-theorised as an arena for the projection and negotiation of national development models

## Practical Applications

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The proposed integrated framework is not merely an abstract construct; it offers a tangible toolkit for policymakers, particularly within Rwanda and similar proactive member states of regional economic communities (RECs). Its primary practical application lies in enhancing the strategic alignment of national development plans with regional integration agendas. Rwanda’s own experience, as noted in its national strategies, demonstrates a conscious effort to leverage membership in the East African Community (EAC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for domestic economic transformation. The framework systematises this approach, providing a diagnostic matrix through which states can assess the coherence between their industrial policies, for instance, and the broader regional value chain opportunities identified within their RECs. This enables a move from passive membership to active, strategic participation, where regional protocols are viewed not as external constraints but as instruments for achieving national development objectives.

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For regional secretariats and institutional bodies, such as those of the EAC or the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the framework provides a structured methodology for monitoring and evaluating integration outcomes beyond simplistic tariff reduction metrics. By emphasising the multi-level governance perspective, it encourages these institutions to develop more nuanced indicators of integration that account for regulatory harmonisation, infrastructure connectivity, and the lived experience of cross-border traders. This shift is crucial for addressing the oft-cited ‘implementation gap’ in African regionalism. The framework can guide the design of targeted capacity-building programmes, focusing on the specific administrative and legal bottlenecks identified within member states, thereby moving the integration project from treaty ratification to practical, on-the-ground facilitation.

A further critical application is in the realm of stakeholder engagement and consensus-building. The framework’s incorporation of political economy variables underscores the necessity of managing the distributional consequences of integration. Policymakers can utilise its analytical structure to identify potential domestic ‘losers’ from regional liberalisation—whether certain sectors or labour groups—and design compensatory or retraining policies proactively. This aligns with the understanding that sustainable integration requires a social licence, built through inclusive dialogue with private sector associations, civil society, and sub-national authorities. In the Rwandan context, this could translate into more structured forums where the Rwanda Private Sector Federation provides direct feedback on non-tariff barriers encountered within the EAC, with such evidence systematically fed into national negotiating positions.

The framework also has direct utility in refining diplomatic and negotiating strategies within RECs. By providing a clearer mapping of the interests, institutional capacities, and political constraints of fellow member states, it allows countries like Rwanda to craft more effective coalition-building strategies and proposal packages. Understanding the varying levels of state capacity and political commitment across partners, as highlighted in comparative analyses of regional blocs, enables a move towards variable geometry or multi-speed integration where feasible, rather than allowing the ambitions of the most willing to be perpetually stalled by the least prepared. This pragmatic application is essential for maintaining momentum in complex groupings where heterogeneity is the norm.

Finally, the integrated framework serves as a valuable pedagogical and training instrument for cultivating a new generation of officials and practitioners. By moving beyond siloed approaches to economics, law, or political science, it offers a holistic curriculum for training civil servants in the complexities of regional governance. National institutions such as the Rwanda Governance Board or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation could embed this framework into professional development programmes. This would institutionalise a more sophisticated understanding of regionalism within the state apparatus, ensuring that the officials responsible for implementing regional commitments possess the analytical tools to navigate its multi-faceted challenges and opportunities, thereby strengthening Rwanda’s role as a thought leader and effective actor in African integration.

## Discussion

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The preceding analysis of practical applications underscores a central, and perhaps paradoxical, reality of regional economic governance in Africa: while the institutional landscape is dense and ambitious in its declaratory objectives, its operationalisation remains fragmented and often incongruent with the specific developmental imperatives of member states like Rwanda. This discussion synthesises these observations to argue that the prevailing models of regionalism, as exemplified by the EAC, COMESA, and the AfCFTA, are characterised by a fundamental tension between supranational aspiration and national sovereignty. This

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tension, rather than being an obstacle to be wholly overcome, must be strategically managed within an integrated framework that acknowledges the state, particularly a developmental state such as Rwanda, as the primary agent of integration.

The comparative examination reveals that each bloc presents a distinct governance modality, each with its own set of advantages and constraints from Kigali's vantage point. The EAC's comparatively advanced political and legal supranationality offers a model for deep integration but simultaneously poses the most direct challenge to national policy autonomy. Conversely, COMESA's softer, more technical approach to trade and infrastructure facilitates flexible engagement but may lack the binding force to overcome entrenched non-tariff barriers. The AfCFTA, while monumental in scope, currently exists as a high-level framework whose success is entirely contingent on the political will and implementation capacity of its member states, including Rwanda. This variegated landscape does not suggest a linear progression towards a single, optimal model of regional governance. Instead, it necessitates a deliberate and selective strategy of 'regime shopping' or parallel engagement, whereby a state leverages different blocs for distinct strategic purposes—using the EAC for political stability and market depth, COMESA for specific trade facilitation programmes, and the AfCFTA for pan-continental market access.

This strategic navigation, however, is not cost-free. It inherently generates policy incoherence and imposes significant administrative burdens, as seen in the challenges of managing multiple RoO and regulatory standards. Herein lies the critical utility of the proposed integrated framework. The framework does not seek to replace existing blocs but to provide a heuristic device for national policymakers to systematically align, prioritise, and sequence their regional commitments. By mapping Rwanda's national development goals, as articulated in its Vision 2021 and related industrial policies, against the specific instruments and opportunities offered by each bloc, the state can move from reactive adaptation to proactive orchestration of its regional engagements. The framework thus re-conceptualises regional economic governance not as an external constraint on the state, but as a complex ecosystem of tools to be wielded by a capable and strategic state apparatus.

Furthermore, the Rwandan case illuminates the indispensable role of state capacity as the linchpin of effective regional integration. The nation's relative success in implementing EAC commitments and positioning itself as a logistical hub is less a product of the blocs' institutional designs per se and more a function of its own domestic governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and investment in bureaucratic competence. This observation supports a broader theoretical contention: the effectiveness of any supranational regime is profoundly mediated by the quality of domestic institutions. A regional legal provision is only as strong as the national judiciary that enforces it; a continental free trade area is only as vibrant as the national agencies that facilitate cross-border commerce. Consequently, an integrated framework must have a strong endogenous dimension, focusing on strengthening the very state institutions that are required to interface with and benefit from regional architectures.

This leads to a final, crucial point of discussion regarding sovereignty and developmental regionalism. The traditional dichotomy between sovereignty-pooling and sovereignty-protecting models is overly simplistic. Rwanda's approach suggests a pragmatic, transactional calculus: sovereignty may be willingly delegated in areas where collective action yields clear, tangible benefits that outweigh the loss of autonomy—such as in regional infrastructure or collective security. In domains perceived as core to its developmental state model, such as certain aspects of industrial policy or land use, the resistance to ceding control is far stronger. Therefore, the future trajectory of African regionalism may depend on blocs' abilities to demonstrate unequivocal value addition in specific, high-priority sectors. The integrated framework

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proposed here provides a structured way to identify those sectors and assess the cost-benefit analysis of integration in each, promoting a form of ‘sovereignty bargaining’ rather than unconditional surrender.

In sum, the discussion affirms that the path towards more effective regional economic governance

## Conclusion

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This paper has sought to advance a novel, integrated framework for analysing regional economic governance, using Rwanda’s strategic engagements within the East African Community (EAC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as its principal empirical lens. The proposed framework, which synthesises elements of neofunctionalist theory, regulatory state concepts, and developmental regionalism, moves beyond the limitations of singular theoretical approaches that have often struggled to account for the complex, multi-scalar realities of African integration. As demonstrated, Rwanda’s experience is not merely a national case study but a critical vantage point from which to observe the dynamic interplay between a proactive, ‘regulatory-developmental’ state and the evolving architectures of regional blocs. The analysis confirms that regional economic governance in Africa is characterised by a pragmatic and often asymmetrical layering of institutions, where states like Rwanda navigate and exploit overlaps between competing blocs to advance national development objectives while simultaneously shaping regional norms.

The comparative examination of the EAC and the AfCFTA through this integrated framework reveals several salient findings. Firstly, Rwanda’s approach underscores the centrality of the state as a strategic actor in regional governance, challenging notions of a linear ceding of sovereignty to supranational bodies. As argued, Kigali has consistently employed regional integration as an extension of its domestic development strategy, leveraging the EAC’s relatively advanced institutional structure to foster trade, attract investment, and enhance its geopolitical standing. Secondly, the advent of the AfCFTA introduces a new, continent-wide layer of governance that both complements and complicates existing regional bloc commitments. Rwanda’s positioning as an early ratifier and champion of the AfCFTA reflects a calculated strategy to diversify economic partnerships and reduce dependency on traditional regional markets, thereby using continental mechanisms to bolster its regulatory and logistical capabilities. This exemplifies the framework’s core premise: that effective regional engagement is a multi-level game requiring strategic navigation of complementary and sometimes contradictory governance tiers.

Furthermore, the Rwandan perspective illuminates the critical importance of political will and implementation capacity as variables often under-theorised in conventional integration literature. The country’s relative success in harnessing regional agreements stems not from passive membership but from active domestic reforms—such as in logistics, digitalisation, and business regulation—designed to capitalise on the opportunities these agreements present. This aligns with the developmental regionalism component of the framework, which posits that integration must be consciously harnessed for structural economic transformation. Consequently, the performance of regional blocs cannot be assessed on treaty provisions alone; their impact is fundamentally mediated by the agency and administrative capacity of member states. This insight has profound implications for other African states, suggesting that the benefits of blocs like the EAC or the AfCFTA will remain uneven unless matched by deliberate national preparedness and strategic vision.

In conclusion, this article contends that understanding the future trajectory of regional economic governance in Africa requires analytical tools that capture its inherent complexity and state-led dynamism. The integrated framework proposed here, refined through the Rwandan case, offers a more nuanced and

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powerful explanatory model. It accommodates the role of supranational institutions while restoring analytical priority to the strategic calculus of developmental states. It also provides a structure for anticipating how states might manage the growing interplay between established regional blocs and the nascent continental framework of the AfCFTA. Future research should apply this framework to other states with varying capacities and political economies, particularly within the EAC and other major blocs like ECOWAS or SADC, to test its broader applicability and refine its components. Ultimately, the path towards deeper and more effective African integration will be paved not by grand designs alone, but by the pragmatic, often innovative, ways in which member states like Rwanda engage with, shape, and operationalise the multi-layered landscape of regional economic governance.

## **Contributions**

This study offers a novel theoretical framework for analysing the efficacy of African regional economic communities (RECs). It moves beyond conventional integration metrics by synthesising institutionalist and developmental state theories, providing a more nuanced lens to assess the political economy of implementation. The framework is applied to a focused comparative case study of Rwanda's engagement with the East African Community (EAC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) during 2021. Consequently, it contributes a critical analytical tool for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand the determinants of successful regional integration in the African context.