



Informal Cross-Border Trade Networks within ECOWAS: A Study of Benin's Integration Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Informal cross-border trade networks are a significant aspect of regional integration in Africa, particularly within Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Benin's efforts to integrate into ECOWAS face challenges and opportunities related to these networks. The research employs qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews with traders, focus groups with local communities, and document analysis of trade regulations and policies across borders. Data was collected from both within Benin and neighboring countries. Informal cross-border trade networks in Benin are predominantly centred around agricultural products such as rice and fish, accounting for at least 40% of total exports to ECOWAS member states. These networks often involve small-scale traders who operate outside formal regulatory frameworks. The study highlights the importance of engaging with informal cross-border trade actors in Benin's integration strategy within ECOWAS. It also underscores the need for harmonized policies that can facilitate smoother cross-border transactions while ensuring compliance with regional regulations. To optimise Benin's participation in ECOWAS, it is recommended to establish a regulatory framework that supports informal traders and encourages their formalization while maintaining market access rights. Strengthening intergovernmental cooperation on trade facilitation measures is also crucial.

Keywords: *West African, Geopolitics, Mercantilism, Regionalism, Informality*

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