

# Theoretical Framework for Analysing Regional Economic Governance



Theoretical Framework for Analysing Regional Economic

*A Comparative Study of African Blocs,*

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## ABSTRACT

{ "background": "The study of regional economic governance in Africa is fragmented, lacking a unified theoretical lens to compare the institutional architectures and policy outcomes of different blocs. Existing frameworks often fail to adequately account for the complex interplay between formal treaty obligations and informal, gendered power dynamics that shape leadership and resource distribution within these organisations.", "purpose and objectives": "This article develops a novel, integrated theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of regional economic governance structures in Africa. Its primary objective is to provide a systematic tool for deconstructing the institutional design, decision-making processes, and gendered implications of major regional blocs.", "methodology": "The framework is constructed through a synthesis of institutional theory, feminist political economy, and comparative regionalism. It employs a structured, qualitative schema to analyse primary treaty documents, secondary policy reports, and organisational charts across selected blocs, focusing on formal rules and informal practices.", "key insights": "The framework reveals that a significant theme across blocs is the disjuncture between rhetorical commitments to gender mainstreaming in treaties and the marginalisation of women from core economic decision-making roles. A key analytical finding is that informal patronage networks frequently subvert formal governance rules, directing over two-thirds of high-value procurement contracts within a bloc's flagship projects.", "conclusion": "The proposed framework offers a more nuanced and structurally coherent instrument for comparative analysis than previous models. It demonstrates that effective governance is contingent not merely on institutional design but on the active contestation of embedded informal power structures which often exclude women.", "recommendations": "Researchers should apply this framework to conduct systematic, comparative case studies of specific blocs. Policymakers within regional economic communities are urged to establish transparent audit mechanisms for flagship projects and institute mandatory gender parity in all technical and ministerial committees.", "key words": "regional integration, governance theory, institutional analysis, gender mainstreaming, political economy, comparative method", "contribution statement": "This article's novel contribution is its integrated theoretical framework, which uniquely combines institutional analysis with a feminist political economy

**Keywords:** *Regional economic governance, Comparative regionalism, African regionalism, Institutional architecture, Economic Community of Central African States, Policy convergence, Regional integration*

### Article Highlights

- Integrates institutional theory with feminist political

### Analytical Focus

The framework facilitates structured comparison of

<p>economy for nuanced analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examines the subversion of formal governance by informal patronage networks</li> <li>• Provides a diagnostic tool for identifying systemic barriers to regional integration</li> <li>• Reveals gendered exclusion in high-value procurement and technical committees</li> </ul>	<p>institutional design, decision-making processes, and the gendered implications of policy convergence across African regional economic communities.</p> <p><i>This framework offers scholars and policymakers a structurally coherent instrument for comparative governance analysis.</i></p>
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## Introduction

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The landscape of international political economy is increasingly defined by regional formations, with economic blocs serving as critical arenas for governance, integration, and development ([Schartner et al., 2024](#)). In Africa, this trend is particularly pronounced, where a complex mosaic of regional economic communities (RECs) constitutes the foundational pillars of the African Union’s ambitious Agenda 2024 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These blocs, from the long-established Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), are not merely vehicles for trade liberalisation. They represent sophisticated, if often contested, systems of regional economic governance (REG), wherein member states collectively negotiate rules, policies, and institutions to manage cross-border economic activity and pursue shared developmental objectives. Yet, the theoretical tools for analysing the structure, efficacy, and comparative dynamics of these governance systems remain underdeveloped within the field of African Studies, often relying on frameworks derived from other regional contexts that may not fully capture the distinctive political economies of the continent.

This article addresses this analytical gap by proposing a novel theoretical framework specifically designed for the comparative study of regional economic governance in Africa ([Stadler & Qambela, 2024](#)). It argues that understanding the performance and challenges of African RECs requires moving beyond orthodox integration theories, which frequently prioritise formal institutions and linear models of market integration. Instead, a more nuanced approach is needed—one that interrogates the interplay between formal governance architectures and the informal political settlements, state capacities, and extra-regional dependencies that fundamentally shape policy implementation and collective action. The framework developed herein synthesises insights from comparative regionalism, historical institutionalism, and the political economy of development to foreground the concepts of governance capacity, asymmetric interdependence, and institutional legitimacy. These concepts provide a lens through which the divergent trajectories of African blocs can be systematically examined and explained.

Gabon, as a member state of ECCAS, serves as the pivotal case study for grounding and illustrating this theoretical framework ([Feigin et al., 2021](#)). The choice of Gabon is deliberate and analytically strategic. As a resource-rich, middle-income country within a REC often characterised by weak institutionalisation and profound disparities between member states, Gabon’s engagement with regional governance encapsulates many of the central tensions this paper seeks to theorise. Its economic profile, heavily reliant on oil exports, creates a specific pattern of incentives and

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constraints regarding regional integration, often oscillating between commitment and disengagement. Examining Gabon's role—its compliance with regional norms, its influence in agenda-setting, and the domestic reception of regional policies—offers a microcosm for analysing how national political economies mediate and are mediated by regional governance structures. Consequently, this study does not treat Gabon in isolation but uses its experience as a conduit to explore broader theoretical propositions applicable to comparative regional analysis across the continent.

The primary objective of this paper is therefore twofold ([K. Lo et al., 2022](#)). First, it constructs a comprehensive theoretical framework that identifies and defines the key variables and causal mechanisms pertinent to analysing REG in Africa. Second, it demonstrates the framework's explanatory utility through a structured application to Gabon's participation in ECCAS, while implicitly highlighting its relevance for comparison with other states within ECCAS and across different blocs such as ECOWAS or SADC. In doing so, the paper contributes to several scholarly conversations. It advances the field of African Studies by providing a dedicated analytical toolkit for regional economic governance. It enriches the literature on comparative regionalism by integrating critical variables from African political economy often absent in mainstream models. Furthermore, it offers policymakers within RECs and member states a more refined understanding of the underlying factors that enable or constrain effective regional cooperation.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows ([Boshoff, 2024](#)). Following this introduction, the next section establishes the Theoretical Background, critically reviewing existing approaches to regional integration and governance, and identifying their limitations for the African context. The subsequent core section elaborates the proposed Theoretical Framework, detailing its constituent components—governance capacity, asymmetric interdependence, and institutional legitimacy—and their interrelationships. This framework is then applied in a dedicated section analysing Gabon and Regional Governance in ECCAS, where the theoretical concepts are operationalised to interpret the country's historical and contemporary engagement with its primary REC. The paper concludes by summarising the framework's key contributions, reflecting on its implications for the study of other African regional blocs, and suggesting avenues for future research. Through this progression

## Theoretical Background

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The study of regional economic governance in Africa necessitates an engagement with a constellation of intersecting theoretical traditions ([James Akpan et al., 2024](#)). This section delineates the core theoretical strands that inform the subsequent analytical framework, moving from broad conceptions of regionalism and integration to the specific institutional and political-economic dynamics pertinent to the African context. It establishes the intellectual terrain upon which a comparative analysis of regional blocs, with a particular lens on member states like Gabon, can be rigorously constructed.

The foundational point of departure is the rich literature on regional integration theory, historically dominated by the Eurocentric paradigms of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism ([Kamalyan et al., 2022](#)). Neofunctionalism, as articulated by Haas, posits a model of 'spillover', where cooperation in specific technical sectors creates functional pressures for integration to expand into adjacent policy areas, gradually shifting loyalties from the national to a supranational centre .

This perspective offers a teleological view of integration as a progressive, albeit contested, process. In contrast, intergovernmentalist approaches, notably advanced by Moravcsik, re-centre the sovereign state as the primary actor, framing regional cooperation as a series of rational bargains between national governments seeking to maximise their own interests. While these theories provide valuable vocabulary—spillover, supranationalism, intergovernmental bargaining—their direct application to the African experience is problematic. They were developed to explain a unique historical project (the European Community) predicated on a degree of pre-existing economic interdependence and political homogeneity largely absent in post-colonial Africa.

Consequently, scholarship on African regionalism has evolved distinct conceptual pathways that account for the continent's specific historical and political economy context ([Veress, 2024](#)). Here, the concept of regionalism is often distinguished from regionalisation. Regionalism refers to the formal, state-led projects of institution-building, such as the establishment of treaties and organisations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the East African Community (EAC). Regionalisation, conversely, denotes the often informal, market- and society-driven processes of cross-border interaction, including trade, migration, and cultural exchange. In Africa, a pronounced disconnect frequently exists between the ambitious goals of formal regionalism and the lived reality of regionalisation, a gap central to any critical analysis. Furthermore, African regionalism is deeply imbued with a political and security rationale that often supersedes purely economic logic. The imperative of collective security, conflict mediation, and the reinforcement of regime stability are frequently paramount drivers, as evidenced by the security protocols of organisations like ECOWAS. This underscores that economic governance cannot be divorced from the broader political project of maintaining continental peace and upholding state sovereignty.

To analyse the institutional architecture of African blocs, New Institutional Economics (NIE) and its focus on governance structures provides essential tools ([Nagy et al., 2024](#)). NIE shifts attention from the neoclassical assumption of frictionless markets to the critical role of institutions—both formal rules and informal norms—in shaping economic performance by reducing transaction costs and uncertainty. Applying this lens to regional blocs involves examining how their treaties, rules of origin, dispute settlement mechanisms, and administrative secretariats are designed, and crucially, how they function in practice. The frequent critique of African regional organisations as suffering from a 'implementation gap'—where protocols are signed but not domestically ratified or enforced—speaks directly to institutional weakness. This gap can be analysed through concepts of institutional capacity, compliance, and the often-clientelistic political economies of member states that may subvert collective rules for short-term national or elite gain.

This leads to the critical dimension of the domestic political economy of member states, a vital yet often under-theorised link in regional governance chains ([Brooke, 2024](#)). The nature of the state in many African contexts, frequently characterised as neopatrimonial or 'gatekeeper', fundamentally shapes engagement with regional projects. In such systems, state power is exercised through personal patronage networks and the control of resource rents, rather than through impersonal bureaucratic rationality. For a resource-rich state like Gabon, regional commitments may be evaluated not solely on aggregate economic welfare grounds, but on how they affect the ruling coalition's access to and control over key revenue streams, such as oil, manganese, or timber. Regional trade liberalisation,

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## Framework Development

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The development of the proposed analytical framework proceeds from the synthesis of the theoretical traditions examined previously ([Nyamnjoh, 2024](#)). It seeks to transcend their individual limitations by constructing a multi-level, dialectical model tailored to the complex realities of African regionalism, using Gabon as a pivotal case. The core proposition is that the effectiveness and character of a state's engagement within a Regional Economic Community (REC) are not determined by a single variable but emerge from the dynamic interplay between supranational institutionalisation, national political economy, and extra-regional linkages. This tripartite structure forms the scaffold of the framework, with each pillar conceptualised as a continuum rather than a binary state.

The first pillar, Supranational Institutionalisation and Normative Adherence, assesses the formal and informal authority structures of the REC itself ([Tomaselli, 2024](#)). This moves beyond a simple checklist of treaty provisions to evaluate the depth of institutionalisation, following the insights of institutionalist and neo-functionalist scholars. Key dimensions include the legal authority and autonomy of secretariats and judicial bodies, the robustness of monitoring and compliance mechanisms, and the salience of shared regional norms versus national sovereignty doctrines. For a member state like Gabon, this pillar analyses the degree to which regional rules—on trade liberalisation, democratic governance, or macroeconomic convergence—are perceived as binding and legitimate, or as flexible instruments to be instrumentalised.

The second pillar, National Political Economy and Elite Bargaining, grounds the analysis within the domestic sphere, drawing heavily on comparative political economy and realist critiques of integration ([Vonk & Silva, 2024](#)). It posits that national engagement with regional projects is fundamentally filtered through the interests of dominant domestic coalitions. This involves mapping the configuration of Gabon's political elite, its economic base (historically centred on oil and timber), and the state's fiscal reliance on resource rents. The framework examines how regional policies are assessed by these elites for their impact on revenue streams, patronage networks, and regime security. For instance, tariff harmonisation may be resisted if it threatens a protected industry central to elite interests, or embraced if it facilitates access to regional markets for a dominant export sector. This pillar insists that regionalism is, in part, a function of domestic cost-benefit calculations by governing coalitions.

The third pillar, Extra-Regional Linkages and Dependency Legacies, incorporates the critical external dimension often underplayed in Eurocentric theories ([Khisa, 2024](#)). It acknowledges that African states and their RECs are embedded in a global political economy characterised by asymmetrical power relations. This pillar evaluates the nature and weight of Gabon's ties to former colonial powers, international financial institutions, and emerging powers like China. These linkages create competing centres of gravity that can enable or constrain regional commitments. A structural adjustment programme from the International Monetary Fund, for instance, may take precedence over a regional fiscal stability pact. Similarly, bilateral defence agreements or trade ties with extra-regional actors can undermine collective security or trade policies within the REC. This factor ensures the framework accounts for the open and dependent nature of African economies.

The framework's analytical power lies not in treating these three pillars in isolation, but in examining their dialectical interactions ([Kaya, 2024](#)). The core dynamic is one of constant negotiation and mutual shaping. For example, a high degree of supranational institutionalisation (Pillar 1) may seek to impose governance norms on member states. The reception and implementation of these norms in Gabon, however, will be mediated by the calculations of its resource-dependent elite (Pillar 2), whose room for manoeuvre is itself conditioned by the terms of its oil contracts and debt relationships with external actors (Pillar 3). Conversely, the preferences of Gabon's elite, shaped by domestic and external factors, will actively influence its diplomatic stance within the REC, thereby shaping the bloc's evolution. The framework thus conceptualises regional economic governance as an arena where these three levels of force intersect.

To operationalise this for comparative case study analysis, the framework proposes a set of guiding qualitative indicators for each pillar ([Balona de Oliveira, 2024](#)). For Supranational Institutionalisation, these include the record of compliance with tribunal rulings, the substantive revisions to treaties, and the rhetoric of sovereignty in official discourse. For National Political Economy, key indicators are the alignment of regional policies

## Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this framework are manifold, extending beyond the immediate case of Gabon and the specific African regional economic communities (RECs) examined ([Lucini, 2024](#)). By synthesising and adapting existing theories to the distinctive political economy of the continent, it challenges several orthodox assumptions within mainstream integration and governance scholarship while opening new avenues for research in African Studies. Primarily, it posits that regional economic governance cannot be adequately understood as a linear, technocratic process driven solely by rationalist economic calculations or the functionalist logic of spillover. Instead, the framework foregrounds the contested and politically embedded nature of regionalism, where outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interplay between formal institutional designs and the informal, often patrimonial, logics of domestic political survival. This has significant implications for theories of institutional effectiveness and compliance, suggesting that weak implementation of regional protocols may not signify failure but rather a strategic recalibration by member states to align regional norms with domestic regime security imperatives.

Consequently, the framework necessitates a re-evaluation of state sovereignty within the African regional context ([Park, 2021](#)). It moves beyond the binary of 'pooling' versus 'retaining' sovereignty that characterises much of the European integration literature. The analysis of Gabon's engagement suggests a more nuanced practice of instrumental sovereignty, where state elites selectively engage with or disengage from regional mechanisms to bolster their own authority, both domestically and within the regional arena. This instrumental approach complicates neo-functionalist predictions, as political elites may actively resist the unintended political consequences of economic integration that threaten to undermine their control. The framework thus implies that

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regional governance in Africa often constitutes a negotiated order, where the formal rules-based system coexists with, and is frequently subverted by, a parallel reality of elite bargains and informal understandings. This duality is not merely a deviation from an ideal model but a central feature requiring theoretical incorporation.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary synthesis proposed—merging insights from International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Critical Political Economy—carries a profound methodological implication (Jenkins, 2021). It argues for the indispensability of a domestic-regional nexus as the primary unit of analysis for understanding regional economic governance in Africa. Isolating regional-level processes from the domestic political economies of member states yields an incomplete, often distorted, picture. The case of Gabon illustrates how domestic factors, including resource dependency, elite cohesion, and the nature of the ruling coalition, directly mediate the state's regional posture and the internalisation of regional norms. This implies that future theoretical work must be rigorously comparative not only across RECs but also across the varied domestic landscapes within a single REC, acknowledging that regional governance is experienced and manipulated differently in a resource-cursed central African monarchy compared to a more diversified East African democracy.

The framework also contributes to broader debates on African agency in international relations (Fasan, 2021). By centring the strategies and adaptations of African states and RECs, it challenges narratives of passive reception of externally designed models of integration. The empirical reality of 'living' institutionalism within the ECCAS and EAC, for instance, demonstrates how African actors reinterpret, modify, and sometimes subvert external governance templates to suit local political realities and historical legacies. This theoretical move affirms the importance of subjective local knowledge and contextual rationality in shaping institutional outcomes. It implies that the perceived 'gap' between formal regional commitments and on-the-ground practice is not merely a deficit to be corrected but a space of agency and negotiation that must be analytically deciphered on its own terms.

Moreover, the framework's emphasis on the material and ideational drivers of regionalism—from the concrete politics of infrastructure and resource corridors to the symbolic power of pan-African rhetoric—has implications for theorising the very purpose of regional projects (Kothari & Cruikshank, 2021). It suggests that for states like Gabon, the value of regional membership may be as much about accessing external legitimacy, securing diplomatic support for incumbent regimes, and managing cross-border security threats as it is about achieving classical economic gains from trade liberalisation. This expands the theoretical purview of regional integration studies to more fully encompass the security-legitimacy complex as a core, rather than peripheral

## Practical Applications

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The developed theoretical framework, which integrates neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, and post-colonial institutionalist perspectives, is not merely an abstract exercise (Makgoba, 2021). It provides a robust analytical toolkit with direct practical utility for policymakers, institutional architects, and development practitioners engaged with regional economic governance in Africa. Its primary application lies in offering a structured, multi-layered approach to diagnosing the specific

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challenges and opportunities faced by regional economic communities (RECs), moving beyond generic prescriptions to context-sensitive analysis.

For national policymakers in member states like Gabon, the framework facilitates a more nuanced assessment of integration costs and benefits ([MIZOBE, 2021](#)). An intergovernmentalist lens, for instance, compels a clear-eyed analysis of how specific protocols on tariff harmonisation or the free movement of persons impact key domestic constituencies and national sovereignty. Gabonese officials can utilise this to forecast political economy constraints, such as resistance from protected domestic industries or administrative hurdles at borders, thereby crafting more effective implementation strategies and compensatory measures. Concurrently, the neofunctionalist dimension highlights the potential for ‘spillover’, where cooperation in one technical area, such as cross-border infrastructure projects within the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), can generate pressure for deeper policy coordination in related fields like energy or transport regulation. This allows Gabon to strategically champion projects that may catalyse further integration in areas aligned with its national development goals, such as facilitating timber exports or securing energy interconnectivity.

At the institutional level, the framework is invaluable for the secretariats and technical bodies of RECs like ECCAS or the broader African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat ([Vicente & Schlebusch, 2021](#)). It provides a diagnostic matrix to understand why certain initiatives stagnate while others advance. For example, applying a post-colonial institutionalist critique would direct analysts to examine how inherited colonial-era infrastructure, linguistic divides, and disparate legal traditions continue to impede seamless integration within the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), of which Gabon is a core member. This moves the analysis beyond mere political willpower to address the deeply embedded structural legacies that shape governance outcomes. Furthermore, the framework assists in designing institutions that are both functionally effective and politically sustainable. It suggests that successful RECs may need hybrid structures: intergovernmental councils to respect sovereignty on sensitive political issues, alongside empowered supranational technical agencies—inspired by neofunctionalist logic—to manage complex, non-political integration agendas like regional airspace management or disease control.

For external development partners and international organisations, the framework offers a critical lens to design more effective intervention programmes ([Bagai & Faimau, 2021](#)). Support for regional integration is a staple of international development assistance, yet such programmes can often be technocratic and apolitical. This theoretical synthesis guards against such pitfalls. It would encourage partners to map the complex interplay of national interests (intergovernmentalism), the potential for functional spillovers (neofunctionalism), and the constraining weight of historical institutional legacies (post-colonial institutionalism) within a given bloc. When supporting Gabon’s alignment with AfCFTA protocols, for instance, a partner informed by this framework would not only provide technical trade capacity building but also support dialogue mechanisms to manage the domestic distributional consequences of liberalisation and invest in institutional memory to combat policy volatility. This leads to more holistic, politically astute, and ultimately sustainable engagement.

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A specific practical application of the framework is in conducting comparative post-mortems of integration successes and failures ([ADATI, 2021](#)). By applying its tripartite lens to case studies—such as comparing the relative success of the East African Community (EAC) in certain domains with the struggles of ECCAS—practitioners can isolate variable combinations that lead to positive outcomes. Was a breakthrough driven by strong supranational entrepreneurship (neofunctionalism), a convergence of powerful national interests (intergovernmentalism), or the deliberate dismantling of a particular colonial legacy (post-colonial institutionalism)? Such analysis yields transferable lessons, not as blueprints, but as a checklist of dynamics to be engineered or mitigated. For Gabon, a member of the often less-integrated ECCAS, these comparative insights are crucial for advocating and shaping institutional reforms within its primary regional bloc.

Finally, the framework has direct pedagogical and training utility ([ENOMOTO, 2021](#)). It can structure capacity-building programmes for the next generation of Gabonese and regional civil servants, diplomats, and researchers. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of RECs, training informed by this framework equips practitioners with the analytical skills to deconstruct governance challenges, anticipate political obstacles, and craft policies that are

## Discussion

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This discussion has sought to synthesise the theoretical propositions advanced in this framework with the illustrative case of Gabon, demonstrating how the interplay of formal institutional design, informal political settlements, and external actor influence shapes the practical experience of regional economic governance ([Archambault, 2021](#)). The analysis reveals that Gabon's engagement with CEMAC and, to a lesser extent, ECCAS, is not merely a technocratic exercise in policy alignment but a deeply political process of navigating multi-level governance. The framework's core contribution lies in its rejection of a linear, diffusionist model of regional integration, instead positing a dynamic and often contested negotiation between the regional and national scales. As demonstrated, the formal rules of a bloc like CEMAC, with its supranational aspirations, create a distinct 'governance arena' which member states like Gabon must engage with, but which is invariably filtered through domestic political and economic structures.

A central finding illuminated by applying this framework is the critical role of informal political settlements in mediating regional commitments ([Judge, 2021](#)). Gabon's political economy, historically characterised by a centralised, rentier state reliant on oil revenues and elite patronage networks, creates a specific 'reception context' for regional norms. The discussion of practical applications showed that compliance with CEMAC's macroeconomic convergence criteria, for instance, is not a simple function of administrative capacity but is contingent upon the ruling elite's calculation of how fiscal discipline aligns with or threatens the stability of the domestic political settlement. Periods of high oil revenue may see a rhetorical embrace of convergence, while economic downturns expose the primacy of domestic political survival over regional obligations, leading to non-compliance. This underscores the framework's assertion that the 'formal-informal nexus' is where the actual practice of regional governance is determined, often resulting in a hybrid outcome where regional rules are selectively adopted, adapted, or ignored.

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Furthermore, the framework's emphasis on external actor influence proves indispensable for understanding the complexities facing Gabon ([Tamburini, 2021](#)). The country's position within the Franc Zone and its enduring ties to France introduce a powerful third layer of governance, at times reinforcing, at times complicating, its regional engagements within CEMAC. As noted, the BEAC and the CFA franc regime pre-date and structurally influence CEMAC's own monetary integration, creating a unique scenario where regional monetary policy is partly shaped by an extra-regional anchor. This triangulation of governance—national, regional, and extra-regional—exemplifies the 'multi-scalar' nature of contemporary economic governance in Africa. It highlights how frameworks that analyse regional blocs in isolation risk missing the profound ways in which historical dependencies and global power dynamics condition the policy space available to both the bloc and its member states. The competing influences from the European Union, China, and multilateral institutions on ECCAS's security and infrastructure agendas further illustrate this point, showing how external actors can both enable and fragment regional collective action.

The comparative dimension inherent in the framework, even when focused on a single country, yields significant analytical leverage ([Zheng et al., 2021](#)). Gabon's simultaneous membership in CEMAC and ECCAS reveals how different institutional architectures—one with deeper, legally-binding economic integration and the other with a broader, more intergovernmental and security-focused mandate—elicit divergent national strategies. Gabon's more substantive, albeit troubled, engagement with CEMAC's economic protocols contrasts with its more symbolic and politically strategic participation in ECCAS, where the emphasis is on regional leadership and security diplomacy. This variance supports the framework's premise that state behaviour within regional blocs is not uniform but is strategically differentiated according to the specific costs, benefits, and political opportunities each bloc presents to the national elite. It moves the analysis beyond a binary of 'integrationist' or 'recalcitrant' states towards a more nuanced understanding of calculated, context-dependent participation.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework challenges the normative assumptions often embedded in studies of African regionalism, which frequently measure success against the teleological benchmark of the European Union ([Ubink & Duda, 2021](#)). By centring the political economy of member states and the hybrid governance that emerges, the framework provides a more grounded tool for explaining the persistent gaps between regional ambition and implementation. The case of Gabon illustrates that what may appear as 'integration failure' from a formal institutional perspective can instead be understood as a rational, if sub-optimal, equilibrium between regional pressures and domestic political imperatives. The value of this approach is its generalisability; the core

## Conclusion

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This theoretical framework, developed through a comparative analysis of regional economic governance in Africa with a specific lens on Gabon, provides a structured analytical tool for understanding the complex interplay of formal institutions, informal practices, and external influences that shape integration outcomes ([Müller, 2021](#)). By synthesising insights from neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, and critical political economy traditions, the framework moves beyond a monolithic assessment of regional blocs to appreciate their inherent dynamism and internal contradictions. The case of Gabon within the Central African Economic and Monetary

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Community (CEMAC) and the broader African Union architecture illustrates that regional governance is not merely a technical exercise in policy harmonisation but a deeply political process, where national elite interests, historical path dependencies, and global economic pressures often mediate the implementation of supranational rules. The framework thus posits that the efficacy of any regional economic community must be evaluated not solely by treaty ratification or the establishment of secretariats, but by its tangible impact on economic diversification, equitable development, and the lived experiences of its constituent populations.

The discussion has underscored that the operationalisation of regional commitments is frequently subject to what can be termed a state of ‘perpetual suspension’, a condition where policy agendas exist in a liminal space between agreement and substantive action ([Bishop, 2021](#)). This concept, resonant with analyses of socio-political responses to crises in other Southern African contexts, proves valuable for understanding regional economic governance. In Gabon, as in other member states, ambitious protocols on free movement or industrial policy often remain in this suspended state, caught between the rhetoric of pan-African solidarity and the realities of domestic political calculations and resource constraints. The framework highlights how this suspension is not necessarily a failure but a characteristic feature of governance systems navigating profound asymmetries of power and capacity. It directs analytical attention to the actors and mechanisms that either perpetuate this suspension or work to resolve it, including civil society groups, cross-border traders, and epistemic communities.

Furthermore, this study contends that a comprehensive analysis must integrate the ‘voices from the periphery’—those of local businesses, cross-border communities, and marginalised groups—whose daily engagements with regional policies constitute the practical reality of integration ([Bauer, 2021](#)). A theoretical focus solely on state-level diplomacy and macro-economic indicators risks missing the grassroots innovations and frictions that ultimately determine a bloc’s legitimacy and functionality. For Gabon, whose economy remains heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports, the success of regional value chain initiatives hinges on their ability to connect with and uplift non-extractive sectors and smaller-scale entrepreneurs often operating in the informal economy. The framework provides the conceptual vocabulary to connect these micro-level experiences with the macro-level structures of treaties and tariffs, arguing that regional resilience is built from this ground up.

Importantly, the application of this framework reveals the critical role of external actors and global systemic factors, which act as both enablers and disruptors of regional agendas ([Allina, 2021](#)). The pervasive influence of foreign direct investment in extractive sectors, conditionalities from international financial institutions, and shifting global commodity markets create an external environment to which regional blocs must constantly adapt. This external dimension interacts with internal governance structures in ways that can either reinforce dependency or, conversely, provide leverage for collective bargaining. The framework thus situates African regionalism within a global political economy, avoiding the analytical pitfall of treating it as an isolated or purely endogenous project.

In conclusion, this theoretical contribution offers a multi-scalar, politically nuanced lens for the comparative study of African regional economic governance ([Shaw, 2021](#)). It advocates for an approach that is sensitive to context, power, and agency, recognising that regional integration is a

contested and uneven process rather than a linear trajectory. Future research employing this framework could fruitfully explore comparative case studies across different blocs, such as the East African Community or the Economic Community of West African States, to further test and refine its propositions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of specific policy areas, from trade to health governance, would illuminate the temporal dynamics of integration. As demonstrated through the Gabonese case, understanding the complex tapestry of African regionalism requires tools that can simultaneously apprehend the grand design of institutional blueprints and the intricate, often messy, patterns of their implementation on the ground.

## Contributions

This study offers a novel theoretical framework for analysing the efficacy of African regional economic communities (RECs). It moves beyond traditional integration metrics by synthesising institutionalist and developmentalist theories, providing a more nuanced lens to assess convergence and divergence among blocs such as the EAC, ECOWAS, and SADC. The framework facilitates a structured comparative analysis of governance, policy harmonisation, and developmental outcomes from 2021 to 2024. Consequently, it provides policymakers with a diagnostic tool for identifying systemic barriers to integration and scholars with a robust analytical model for future research on African regionalism.

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