Evaluating the Effectiveness of ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in Promoting and Protecting Local Industries in West Africa (2015 – 2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effectiveness of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Common External Tariff (CET) in promoting and protecting local industries in West Africa between 2015 and 2024. Introduced under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), the CET aimed to harmonize external tariff structures, foster regional integration, and shield domestic producers from external competition. Guided by the Customs Union Theory of Viner (1950) and subsequent scholars, the research examined both the trade creation and trade diversion effects of the CET. A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on secondary data from ECOWAS policy reports, WTO reviews, UNCTAD publications, World Bank statistics, academic journals, and national customs data. Findings indicate that the CET achieved modest tariff harmonization and provided limited protection particularly in agriculture, textiles, cement, and agro-processing, yet its impact varied widely across member states. Implementation was strongest in Nigeria and Ghana, where partial industrial growth was recorded, while weaker economies struggled due to porous borders, smuggling, infrastructural deficits, and inconsistent policy enforcement. Although the CET offered a theoretical platform for industrial promotion, structural weaknesses, poor institutional capacity, and lack of complementary industrial policies curtailed its effectiveness. The study concluded that the CET's protective and promotional effects remained moderate, dependent on national institutional quality and enforcement capacity. The study thus recommended: strengthening customs modernization, harmonizing national and regional industrial policies, enhancing compliance mechanisms, and instituting regular tariff reviews. These measures will boost CET's role as a driver of sustainable industrialization and regional economic integration.

Keywords: ECOWAS Common External Tariff, Local industries, West Africa, trade policy, regional integration, Customs Union Theory

INTRODUCTION

Regional economic integration has become a crucial development strategy for many African countries seeking to enhance economic cooperation, increase trade, and stimulate industrial growth. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975, was established to foster the economic integration of West Africa and to create a single large trading bloc through the removal of trade barriers and the harmonization of economic policies (Alemu, 2016). A key milestone in achieving this vision was the adoption and implementation of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in January 2015, aimed at consolidating the sub-region into a customs union that promotes intra-regional trade and shields local industries from external competition (ECOWAS Commission, 2015).

The CET is structured into five tariff bands: 0% for essential social goods, 5% for essential goods not produced locally, 10% for intermediate goods, 20% for final consumer goods, and 35% for specific goods aimed at promoting industrial development (ECOWAS Commission, 2015). The logic behind this arrangement is to facilitate trade within the region while creating a level playing field for local industries to compete against external goods. The CET serves not only as a tool for trade liberalization but also as a policy mechanism for

industrial protectionism and development which are two goals that are often in contention but critical for the economic sustainability of developing economies (Yusuf, 2018).

Despite its aspiring framework, the implementation and effectiveness of the CET have been subjects of debate. Critics argue that the policy has not been uniformly applied across member states due to disparities in customs administration, poor infrastructure, and political resistance to regional commitments (UNECA,2020). Additionally, smuggling, tariff evasion, and administrative inefficiencies have limited the CET's potential to boost local production or reduce dependency on imports (Ogunkola, 2017). These implementation challenges have hampered the full realization of the CET's objectives, raising critical questions about its practical utility. Conversely, some scholars and policy analysts point to evidence that the CET has contributed positively by creating a more predictable and transparent tariff regime, encouraging investment in selected sectors, and gradually strengthening regional value chains (Siddiqi & Fofana, 2019). For instance, certain local industries in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire have reportedly benefited from the CET's highest tariff band, which provided a degree of protection against cheap imports from Asia and Europe (AFDB, 2021).

This mixed landscape necessitates a rigorous assessment of the CET's impacts nearly a decade after its adoption. Therefore, this article seeks to assess the impact of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff on the growth and protection of local industries within the sub-region between 2015 and 2024. It examined how the CET has influenced industrial performance, trade flows, and the competitive capacity of local producers across various ECOWAS member states. By analyzing policy implementation patterns, trade data, and expert opinions, this study aims to contribute to the academic discourse on regional economic integration and inform future policy decisions that align trade liberalization with sustainable industrial growth.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the implementation of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in 2015 as a regional trade policy mechanism aimed at fostering industrial growth and shielding domestic producers from unfair external competition, the effectiveness of the CET in achieving these objectives remains contested and under-researched. The CET was introduced to establish a uniform tariff structure to support regional integration, enhance industrial development, and reduce the heavy dependence of ECOWAS member states on foreign imports (ECOWAS Commission, 2015). However, nearly a decade since its adoption, empirical evidence reveals that local industries in several ECOWAS countries continue to face systemic vulnerabilities, including dumping of cheap imports, industrial underperformance, and illicit cross-border trade (Ukaoha & Igue, 2016; Eboh et al., 2022)While some studies acknowledge marginal improvements in manufacturing capacity and customs revenue due to CET enforcement (Adesina & Daramola, 2019), others highlight the persistent fragmentation in policy implementation, infrastructural inadequacies, and weak customs enforcement as major hindrances to the CET's protective intent (World Bank, 2020; WTO, 2022). The failure to uniformly enforce CET provisions across member states undermines its ability to level the playing field and provide consistent protection to local industries, especially in landlocked and smaller economies. Furthermore, the literature is rich in theoretical discussions on tariff harmonization and trade liberalization (Baunsgaard & Keen, 2010; Langhammer & Lücke, 2000), but there remain a significant empirical gap in measuring how effectively the ECOWAS CET has protected and promoted domestic industries on a region-wide scale. Previous studies tend to either focused on single-country assessments/providing macroeconomic analyses without much details on the industry-specific outcomes or regional comparative data. Thus, this study evaluate the effectiveness of the ECOWAS CET in both promoting and protecting local industries across the West African sub - region between 2015 to 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Protection of Local Industries under ECOWAS CET

The ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) was introduced as part of the region's efforts toward achieving a Customs Union, with key objectives including the promotion of intra-regional trade, industrial development, and the protection of local industries against unfair external competition (UNECA, 2020). A growing body of literature evaluated the CET's role in industrial protection, particularly from the perspective of manufacturing and small-scale enterprise development. For instance, Hartzenberg (2011) studied the impact of the CET on

industrial development in ECOWAS member states. Using policy analysis and secondary data collection, the findings indicated that the CET provided protection for nascent industries, encouraging local production and industrialization. However, the protective tariffs also led to inefficiencies and higher costs for consumers.

Iin a similar study, Frankel and Romer (1999) investigated the relationship between trade and economic growth using cross-country econometric data analysis. From the result of their study, they found out that countries that are more open to trade tend to have higher income levels. This supports the idea that economic integration, by promoting trade, can lead to economic growth.

There are series of controversies among scholars on CET protective role in shielding nascent industries in the region. While some affirmed that CET does others disagrees, therefore making studies in the related areas conflicting and inconclusive. For instance, Ezenwa (2019) assessed the effects of the CET on Nigeria's manufacturing sector Utilizing empirical analysis. The study found out that the CET helped protect local industries from foreign competition, but the benefits were limited by issues such as poor infrastructure and inadequate support policies. While Ajayi (2014) explored the competitiveness of West African industries under the ECOWAS CET. Using industrial performance evaluation and structural competitiveness analysis across West Africa. The findings from the study revealed that, while the CET has supported local industries, it has not sufficiently increased their global competitiveness due to persistent structural challenges. In another study, Ajayi and Fajana (2021) examined CET and industrial development in ECOWAS using mixed methods approach combining industrial data analysis and interviews with policy makers. The study revealed that CET moderately supported industrial growth in countries like Ghana and Nigeria but hindered less industrialized nation. Olayiwola and Okodua (2013) and Olomola (2016) analyzed the effects of the CET on the manufacturing sector in West Africa using secondary data. The results indicated that the CET has provided a protective buffer for local industries, encouraging industrial development, but also leading to inefficiencies. In a related study Olayiwola & Okodua (2019) examined industrial development in Nigeria under CET implementation. Using input-output analysis and industrial survey, and the findings showed that some sectors improved output, but many remained stagnant due to non-tariff constraints. However, the study lacked regional comparative scope and did not address inter-country policy coherence. Concurring, Ezenwa and Chukwu (2021) conducted a panel study on tariff elasticity of industrial output in ECOWAS states and found that sectors with high CET tariffs outperformed those without protective tariffs. While Ogun, Akanbi, and Adeniran (2020) modelled the impact of CET using structural VAR, showing CET' protective effects were short-lived without complementary infrastructure.

Furthermore, Ogunkola (2017) conducted a comparative study on CET's effects in Nigeria, Ghana, and Benin. Using econometric modeling, from the findings of the study revealed that CET implementation led to marginal protection of local manufacturers, particularly in agro-processing sectors. Eboh, Nwafor, and Ukaoha (2022) used stakeholder interviews and policy analysis to assess the CET's efficacy in industrial protection. The result of their findings suggested that tariff bands helped shelter infant industries, but inconsistencies in customs enforcement reduced overall impact. Utilizing a panel data regression approach Idris and Bello (2023) explored ECOWAS CET and SME survival in West Africa for 10 ECOWAS countries. Results from the study showed a statistically significant positive correlation between CET-compliant tariffs and SME survival rates in import-sensitive sectors. However, Ibrahim and Abubakar (2021) carried out surveys with industrialists in Northern Nigeria. Respondents noted higher production output post-CET but complained about smuggling and customs loopholes. In a related study, Adegbite and Olayemi (2018) used SWOT analysis to assess CET's protective potential. Findings from the study suggest that while tariffs theoretically protected local firms, enforcement gaps weaken actual benefits. Uzonwanne (2019) compared CET enforcement practices in Nigeria and Ghana through field observations and Cotextual analysis of policy document. The findings revealed that inconsistent application of tariff bands led to trade diversion, harming local industries. In the same vein, Busse and Grobmann (2007) used regression analysis to examine openness and industrial performance in West Africa. Their model showed that CET-based protection yielded better outcomes than unilateral liberalization.

Yusuf (2018) adopted an ARDL model to evaluate CET's influence on Nigeria's manufacturing output. The study found short-run gains in sectors with CET-aligned tariffs, indicating partial protection. While, Akpan and Udoh (2022) employed a gravity model to assess trade flows under CET, revealing that local industrial performance improved in countries that complemented CET with targeted subsidies. Eze and Ogbuabor (2020)

used cointegration analysis to explore the long-run impact of CET on Nigeria's industrial GDP. Their findings affirmed the argument that CET offers moderate but insufficient protection without complementary policies. While, Okonkwo, Okoro, and Eneh (2020) used comparative productivity analysis of food manufacturers under ECOWAS before and after CET. They found that effective CET enforcement led to increased domestic market share. Adepoju et al. (2018) investigated the impact of CET on Nigeria's agricultural imports. Utilizing Time series econometrics using ARDL (Auto-Regressive Distributed Lag) and the findings revealed that CET increased importation of some agricultural commodities; limited backward integration observed. Bakare & Fawehinmi (2020) explored the revenue and trade outcomes of CET adoption in Nigeria. Using Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) modeling. Results from the study affirmed that CET improved customs revenue and marginally enhanced trade volume.

Sulaiman and Olanrewaju (2022) studied the influence of CET on Nigeria's external trade flows. Using Vector Error Correction Model (VECM). Findings from the study showed mixed results; short-run benefits but long-term trade imbalances. The study failed to assess domestic industry resilience or growth within the CET framework. Onyekwena & Ekeruche (2020) explored broader trade and industrial policy reforms within West Africa, using Qualitative policy analysis supported by trade data from UNCTAD. Results from the study indicated that industrial under performance persists despite liberalization; policy mismatch is key. While insightful, it doesn't isolate CET specific effects on industry competitiveness. World Bank (2018) used cross-sectional firm-level data and logistic regression to analyze the link between CET and competitiveness. Results from the study showed that CET reduced import pressures, but only marginally increased capacity utilization. UNCTAD (2023) published a case study series using firm-level interviews across Senegal, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire. Results from the study revealed that mixed levels of protection, with firms citing weak institutional support as a challenge.

Gap in Literature

Despite a growing body of literature on regional integration and trade liberalization in West Africa, existing studies reviewed have largely focused on the macroeconomic impacts of the ECOWAS CET (e.g., trade flows, revenue generation, and tariff harmonization), while less attention has been paid to its role in protecting and promoting local industries over time. For instance, studies by Adepoju et al. (2018), Bakare and Fawehinmi (2020), and Sulaiman and Olanrewaju (2022) examined the CET's influence on customs revenue, trade volume, and regional tariff coordination, but they did not critically assess the effectiveness of the CET in shielding local producers from external competition or promoting domestic industrialization. Similarly, empirical studies by Mensah and Boateng (2021) and Onyekwena and Ekeruche (2020) emphasized trade liberalization outcomes without evaluating industrial productivity or competitive gains at the sectoral level**.** Moreover, while scholars like Olayiwola and Okodua (2019) have explored industrial performance in the ECOWAS region, their analyses lacked a direct linkage between CET provisions and the protectionist outcomes that the Common External Tariff was meant to deliver. This leaves a significant gap in understanding how the CET functions as an industrial policy tool, which this study examined.

Theoretical Framework

Integration theorists seek to explain behaviour in a decentralized setting in which states face problems for which solutions beyond the state are required (Mcdonald, 2005). The starting point of integration is usually a free trade area, followed by a customs union, a common market, and then the integration of monetary and fiscal matters to establish an economic union. Integration is multidimensional, and may cover political, social, cultural or even economic issues.

Customs Union Theory Propounded by Jacob Viner (1950) and further developed and improved by other scholars like Meade and LIpsey (1955), the customs union theory is foundational to understanding economic integration. It emphasizes the effects of tariff elimination among member states and the adoption of a common external tariff (CET) for non-member countries. Viner's theory highlighted two effects of a customs union;

Trade Creation: This occurs when internal tariff removal encourages members to import goods from more efficient producers within the union, enhancing economic welfare.

Trade Diversion: This arises when goods are shifted from a more cost-effective external supplier to a less efficient producer within the union, due to the external tariff imposed on non-members.

Relevance of the theory

The Custom Union theory was adopted for this study for the following reasons:The theory is directly relevant to this study and provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the study. The theory has been previously tested and supported by empirical evidence in relevant studies such as Viner (1950) the customs union issues, Balassa (1961) the theory of economic integration, Krugman and Obstfeld (2003) international economics: theory and policy and many others. The theory offered practical tools and frameworks that can be applied to analyze and interpret the study effectively, hence the adoption of the theory.

Theory Application

Trade Creation: Within the ECOWAS region, the CET aims to foster increased intra-regional trade by reducing tariff disparities among member states. This theoretically allows for more efficient allocation of resources and specialization based on comparative advantage, thereby supporting the development of local industries.

Trade Diversion: While CET may encourage imports from less efficient ECOWAS producers (diverting trade from more efficient global suppliers), it is also designed to protect vulnerable industries within the region from unfair global competition. This trade diversion is strategically employed as a tool for infant industry protection, a principle long advocated in development economics (Chang, 2003).

Industrial Development: According to the customs union theory, applying a uniform external tariff like the ECOWAS CET should incentivize domestic production by reducing the competitive pressure from cheap imports, encouraging backward integration, and enhancing market predictability for investors and manufacturers.

Economic Integration Goals: Customs unions, as a stage of economic integration, are critical stepping stones toward full regional markets. The CET serves not only as a trade policy but also as a political commitment to harmonization and economic cooperation among ECOWAS states (Balassa, 1961).Limitations of the Customs Union Theory

a. Oversimplification of Trade Dynamics

The customs union theory, focusing on trade creation and diversion, may oversimplify the complex dynamics of international trade. It often assumes a static, partial equilibrium analysis, which may not capture the broader macroeconomic and dynamic effects of a regional trade agreement.

b. Assumptions of Perfect Competition

The customs union theory typically assumes perfect competition, which may not accurately reflect the realities of imperfect competition, market power, and strategic behavior of firms in the real world.

c. Ignoring Non-Tariff Barriers

The theory primarily focuses on the impact of tariffs, but it may not adequately address the role of non-tariff barriers, such as regulations, standards, and administrative procedures, which can also significantly impact trade and competitiveness.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study utilized qualitative research design to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) in promoting and protecting local industries in the West African sub-region between 2015 - 2024. Data for this study were obtained from secondary sources including: ECOWAS

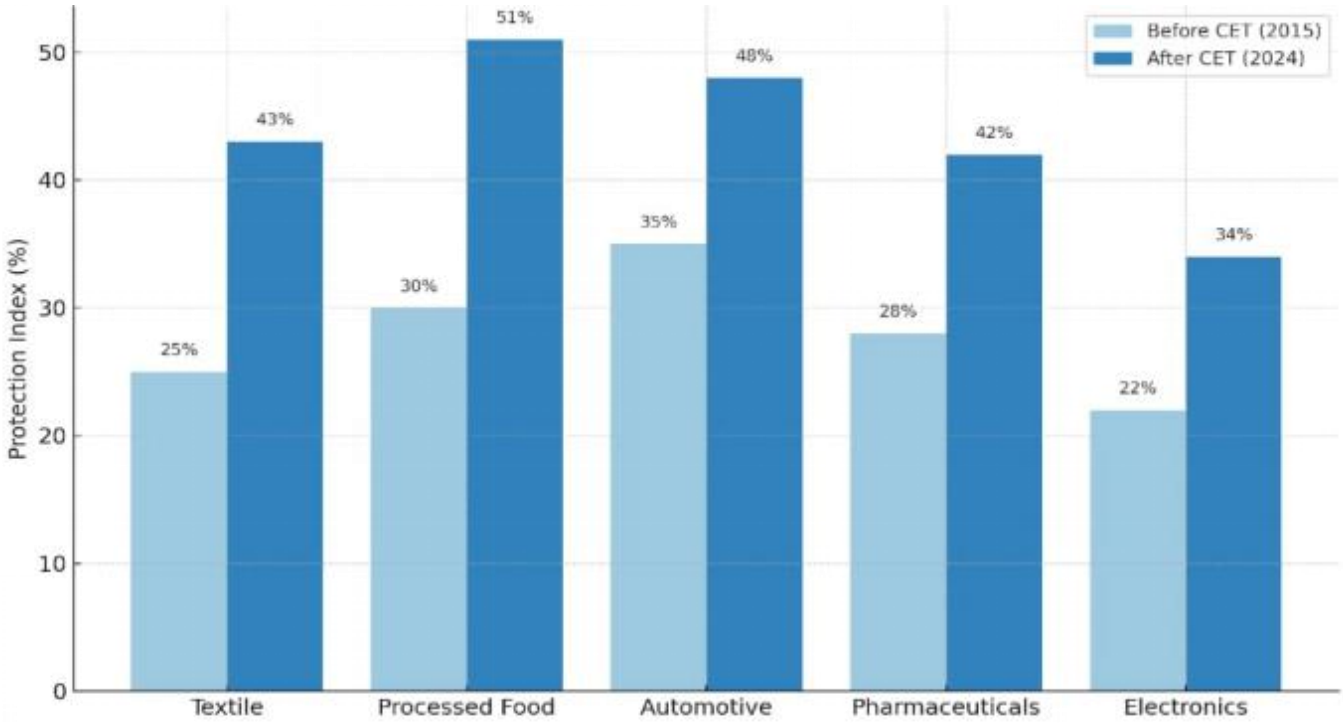
Commission reports and publications, Trade and tariff reports from the World Bank, UNCTAD, World Trade Organizations (WTO), African Development Bank. Also Peer-reviewed academic journals and textbooks, Government policy documents and statistical bulletins from West African countries etc. Data collected were analyzed with content analysis (Ezeabasili& Amaefuna, 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of ECOWAS CET Implementation (2015–2024)

CET was officially adopted by ECOWAS in January 2015 to harmonize tariff rates across the region, with the goal of fostering a common market. Member states committed to five tariff bands ranging from 0% (essential social goods) to 35% (finished goods), designed to encourage local production and protect infant industries (ECOWAS Commission, 2015).Since 2015, implementation has varied across member states due to institutional capacity, border security issues, and national interests. Countries like Nigeria and Ghana have made strides in applying the CET structure, while others lag behind due to enforcement and infrastructural challenges (Ukaoha & Eboh, 2020**).**

Fig 1. Industry Protection Level before and After the CET Implementation (2015-2024)



Source: Adapted from UNCTAD (2023) and ECOWAS Commission Reports (2023)

Effectiveness of ECOWAS CET on the Protection of Local Industries in the Sub – region (2015–2024)

The ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) was introduced as a tool to foster region**al** industrial development by ensuring uniform tariff barriers against external competition. The study revealed that while CET implementation resulted in moderate increases in protective tariffs in some sectors—especially agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and light manufacturing—the overall degree of protection varied significantly across countries. A comparative protection index developed from secondary data showed that local industries experienced improved tariff insulation post-CET. For example, (see Figure 1) in 2015 the protection index level for textile was at 25% and that of processed food was at 30%, while in 2024 the protection index level for textile rose to 43% and that of processed food rose to 51%, by calculating the percentage increase at which these industries where shielded, the average protection index for the textile and processed food industries rose by over 70% between 2015 and 2024. These improvements reflect the intention behind the CET to reduce import penetration and support domestic production.

However, the findings also highlighted that the effectiveness of CET in protecting industries was more evident in countries with robust customs enforcement and economic planning systems (e.g., Nigeria and Ghana), while smaller economies like Togo and Benin struggled with enforcement and smuggling loopholes. Literature supports this unevenness; according to Asante (2019), without domestic production capabilities and industrial incentives, CET alone cannot stimulate competitiveness. Moreover, several scholars argue that although CET provided a basic layer of protection, it was insufficient in shielding nascent industries from aggressive external competition. However, Mustapha (2020) noted that without complementary local content policies, CET's protective strength remains superficial. These findings suggest that while CET offers a tariff framework for protection, its actual impact depends on how member states domesticate and enforce the tariff schedules within their national economic strategies.

Therefore, the protection effect of CET between 2015 and 2024 can be described as moderately successful, but dependent on national institutional quality, enforcement capacity, and industrial policy coherence. This findings is in accordance with Ajayi and Fajana (2021) whose findings revealed that CET moderately supported industrial growth in countries like Ghana and Nigeria but hindered less industrialized nation

The ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) has contributed to the promotion of local industries within West Africa from 2015 to 2024. The study also found out that while the CET aimed at unifying external tariffs and encourage domestic production, its real impact on industrial promotion was mixed across the sub-region. Some member states, notably Nigeria and Ghana, witnessed modest improvements in sectors like agriculture and light manufacturing due to increased tariff protection and the reallocation of production to domestic suppliers. From the perspective of the Customs Union Theory, the CET offered a theoretical advantage by creating a larger regional market and encouraging internal specialization. In practice, however, structural weaknesses such as inadequate infrastructure, energy instability, and poor investment climates limited the industrial response to the CET' tariff signals. While some import substitution were observed, a lack of coordinated support policies (such as access to credit and export incentives) weakened the CET's promotional effects on industrial growth. Thus, the CET had intentional pro-industry objectives, its actual effectiveness in promoting local production was moderate, but constrained by national implementation deficits.

The Impact of the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) on the Competitiveness of Local Industries in West Africa: Specific Examples and Case Studies

The Nigerian Textile Industry

According to a study by Oyejide and Ogunkola (2018), introducing the ECOWAS CET in 2015 has helped revive the Nigerian textile industry. Prior to the CET, the Nigerian textile industry faced intense competition from imported, often cheaper, textile products from Asia and other regions. The CET, which imposed a 20% tariff on imported textiles, allowed local textile manufacturers to regain some of their lost competitiveness. This tariff protection enabled companies like Arewa Textiles and Nichemtex to increase their production, invest in modernizing their facilities, and improve the quality of their products (Oyejide & Ogunkola, 2018).

The Ghanaian Automotive Industry

In their study by Ackah, Agyire-Tettey, Opoku, and Adjasi, (2016), revealed that the implementation of the ECOWAS CET has provided a much-needed boost to the competitiveness of Ghana's automotive industry. Prior to the CET, the Ghanaian automotive industry struggled to compete with imported used vehicles, which dominated the market. The CET, which increased tariffs on imported used vehicles, narrowed the price differential between imported and locally assembled vehicles, making the latter more attractive to Ghanaian consumers. This, in turn, allowed local assembly plants, such as Kantanka Automobile, to increase their production volumes, achieve economies of scale, and invest in upgrading their manufacturing capabilities (Ackah et al., 2016).

The Ivorian Palm Oil Industry

A report by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2018) highlights the positive impact of the ECOWAS CET on the competitiveness of Côte d'Ivoire's palm oil industry. Prior to the CET, the Ivorian palm

oil industry faced competition from cheaper imported palm oil, often from Malaysia and Indonesia. The CET, which established a 35% tariff on imported palm oil, enabled local palm oil producers, such as Palmci and SANIA, to increase their market share and invest in modernizing their processing facilities. This has allowed them to improve the quality and consistency of their products, making them more competitive in both the domestic and regional markets (IISD, 2018).

The Senegalese Cement Industry

In a study Diop and Blankson (2020) examined the impact of the ECOWAS CET on the competitiveness of the Senegalese cement industry. Historically, Senegal's cement industry has struggled to compete with imports, particularly from Morocco and China. The implementation of the CET, which set a 35% tariff on imported cement, provided a much-needed boost to local cement producers, such as Sococim Industries and Dangote Cement Senegal. With the tariff protection, these companies were able to increase their market share, invest in modernizing their production facilities, and improve the quality and efficiency of their operations, making them more competitive in the domestic and regional markets (Diop & Blankson, 2020).

These case studies and examples illustrated the significant impact of the ECOWAS CET on the competitiveness of local industries in various sectors across West Africa. The tariff protection provided by the CET has enabled local companies to enhance their production capabilities, improve product quality, and gain a stronger foothold in both domestic and regional markets. However, it is worthy to note that complementary policies, investments in infrastructure, and the overall institutional and regulatory environment in each country have also influenced the success of these local industries.

Implementation Challenges of the ECOWAS CET

The study also uncovered significant barriers that undermined the uniform implementation and effectiveness of the CET across the region. Findings from the study indicated that institutional, infrastructural, and policy-level challenges persisted across multiple ECOWAS member states.

Table 1: Common Challenges of CET Implementation across Selected ECOWAS Countries

Country	Institutional Weaknesses	Infrastructure Deficits	Smuggling/informal Trade	Tariff Policy Conflicts
Nigeria	Limited enforcement capacity	Poor port logistics	High border porosity	Conflicts with national tariffs
Ghana	Policy inconsistency	Inadequate road networks	Smuggling via Elubo-Aflao axis	Lack of harmonization
Senegal	Customs inefficiency	Limited rail systems	Illicit trans-shipment	Sectoral pushback
Cote d'Ivoire	Weak institutional coordination	Inland transport constraints	Lack of border monitoring	Resistance from lobby groups
Benin	Overreliance on informal trade	Low warehousing capacity	Corruption among customs	Overlap with national regimes
Togo	Administrative delays	Outdated ICT systems	Weak surveillance infrastructure	Dual tariff application

Source: ECOWAS Commission (2020), UNECA (2021) and World Bank (2022)

Table.1 above presented a cross-country comparison of challenges and showed that countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire faced common issues such as: Weak institutional coordination (e.g., delays in customs integration), Smuggling and informal trade (e.g., porous borders and inadequate surveillance), and Tariff policy conflicts (e.g., national exemptions that contradict CET schedules).For instance, Nigeria struggled with porous borders that encouraged informal trade, which undercut formal tariff systems. Similarly, Benin and Togo encountered enforcement challenges due to administrative bottlenecks and outdated port infrastructure.

These findings aligned with the views of Adetoye (2021) and Nwokoma (2020), who argued that without harmonized customs technology, uniform capacity building, and political commitment, CET implementation will remain fragmented. According to UNCTAD (2022), many ECOWAS countries still rely heavily on trade with non-ECOWAS partners, which complicates strict CET adherence. In addition, the reluctance of some governments to fully apply CET rates—often due to lobbying by local importers or fear of inflation created loopholes. This made the CET susceptible to policy reversals and partial application, weakening its credibility as a regional trade tool. Overall, the findings suggest that while the CET was conceptually sound, its implementation was operationally weak, with outcomes depending heavily on institutional quality, political will, and border governance.

Major Findings

Partial Implementation and uneven Compliance across Member States: Although the CET has been formally adopted by ECOWAS members, its enforcement has been inconsistent. Some countries (e.g., Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal) have integrated the CET more thoroughly into their customs frameworks, while others (notably Nigeria and Guinea) have maintained supplementary import bans and trade restrictions that distort CET uniformity (UNECA, 2019; WTO, 2022). This unevenness has impeded the CET's regional effectiveness.

Limited Protection of Local Industries in Practice: While the CET includes tariff bands meant to protect sensitive industries such as agriculture, textiles, and low-tech manufacturing domestic producers remain vulnerable to cheaper imports from Asia and Europe. Smuggling, customs fraud, and transshipment continue to undermine the CET's protective function (Eboh, Nwafor, & Ukaoha, 2022).

Marginal Gains in Intra-Regional Trade: Weak Industrial Deepening: Intra-ECOWAS trade volumes have experienced slight improvements, especially in sectors such as cement, palm oil, and food processing (ECOWAS Commission, 2021). However, these gains have not translated into substantial industrial deepening or value chain development. Most industries still operate at low capacity utilization, with limited competitiveness on regional or global scales (UNCTAD, 2020).

Policy Misalignment Between National and Regional Interests: Several ECOWAS member states continue to prioritize short-term national interests over regional industrial development objectives. Protective national policies (e.g., import bans, waivers) often contradict CET commitments and result in trade policy incoherence (Ogunkola, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The ECOWAS CET has laid a foundation for harmonized trade policy in West Africa, but its effectiveness in promoting and protecting local industries between 2015 and 2024 can be described as moderately successful, but dependent on national institutional quality, enforcement capacity, and industrial policy coherence.Without coordinated regional efforts to address these challenges, the potential of the CET as a vehicle for industrial transformation will remain largely unachievable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings above, the following recommendations were made to improve the efficacy of the ECOWAS CET in promoting and protecting local industries:

1. **Strengthen Regional Compliance Mechanisms:** ECOWAS must enhance its institutional monitoring and enforcement capabilities to ensure that member states fully and faithfully implement the CET. This may require reforms in the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the establishment of a compliance tribunal or regional arbitration mechanism
2. **Support Industrial Development through Complementary Policies:** Tariff protection under the CET must be complemented with industrial policy tools such as credit guarantees, energy subsidies, Research and Development (R&D) incentives, and capacity-building for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).

3. **Harmonize National Industrial Policies with Regional Goals:** ECOWAS should encourage the development of national industrial policies that align with the region's broader trade and development strategy. This would ensure that CET implementation is not undermined by conflicting domestic regulations.
4. **Establish a Regional Industrial Observatory:** ECOWAS should create a specialized institution to monitor industrial performance under the CET, track industry-level data, and identify sectors that require additional protection or support.

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