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Why IGAD Remains A Weak Regional Economic Community?

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INTRODUCTION

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa was endorsed in 1996 to supersede the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), which was founded in 1986. This resulted in the approval of an extended mandate to coordinate and harmonize policy in the areas of economic cooperation and political and humanitarian affairs, in addition to its existing responsibilities. For the second time, it was re-revitalized in 2023, with a view to adapting to the changes on the internal and international scene and the African Union reforms[1]. The new IGAD Treaty, which was adopted by the Heads of State and Government on June 12, 2023, aimed to accelerate regional economic, social, environmental, and political integration, and cross-border cooperation among the Member States[2]. Some of the objectives of the re-revitalized IGAD include hastening trade, investment, social, and economic development cooperation among the Member States by lowering trade and economic barriers; creating a larger market with more opportunities and greater economies of scale for business.

Besides, the African Union recognized the IGAD as one of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs)[3] to act as the building blocks for continental integration, facilitating economic and political development in sub-regions. Hence, IGAD is expected to play an important role in the socio-economic transformation of the sub-region's economies and directed towards the achievement of the establishment of the African Economic Community. Yet, the IGAD region is far from attaining these objectives. It is the weakest REC,[4] especially in terms of the economic pillar. Here, the key questions are: why has IGAD not realized its goal? What are the main internal and external challenges to the attempt to economic integration in the sub-region? This paper attempts a critical assessment of the reasons why IGAD's performance remains weak. Data were collected through primary and secondary sources, and interpretation was made by comparing it with standard literature review and theoretical perspective to draw appropriate findings and conclusions.

1. Lack of Political Will and Commitment

Though the success of regional economic integration depends on a combination of social, economic, and political factors, political commitment is very critical. As one of the important preconditions and features of successful integration, strong political commitment is required to advance towards common objectives. Two decades ago, Asante[5] aptly argued:

.... if a government is unwilling or unable to play an active positive role, then the government itself can be considered a barrier to development or a fundamental cause of failure of policy orientation. This is particularly evident in the case of regional cooperation and integration, where the most crucial factor is a strong and sustainable political commitment to keep to the agreed regional agenda. This makes the African political leaders key figures in cooperation and integration. It is their decision which determines the role of regional organizations and institutions, as well as that of the private sector...Hence, the establishment of effective sub-regional economic schemes crucially depends upon the extent to which the member states have committed themselves to the concept of regionalism in Africa (ellipses mine, Asante, 1997: 71-72).

As indicated in the above citation, willingness to lose part of their sovereignty by the partners is essential for a successful integration scheme to exist. In this connection, the European Union offers the most advanced example[6]. The lesson is that strong

[1] IGAD (2023) Treaty Establishing the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Assembly of Heads of State and Government. Djibouti – se the Preamble

[2] Ibid, See Article 3 of the 2023 Treaty.

[3] African Union (2006). Decision on the moratorium on the Recognition of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) DOC. EX.CL/278 (IX), retrieved from https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/93

[4] African Union (2025). African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements

[5] Asante, S.K.B. 1997 Regionalism and Africa's Development. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

[6] Ibid

and independent institutions, which are endowed with sufficient decision making powers, a sufficient amount of resources and clear mandate, are required for effective integration scheme.

However, strong and sustainable political commitment by IGAD countries have been lacking, which is critical for successful regional economic integration scheme. In this connection, the three key concerns, such as how much to cede to the regional body, how to incorporate regionally adopted policies into national programs, and how to meet the human and financial resource commitments, are crucial but they are not properly steadfast in the IGAD region. Consequently, as discussed below, the IGAD remains a weak regional economic community compare to other RECs in Africa such as EAC and ECOWAS.

2.1 Lack of Super nationality and Governance Deficit

Just like the 1996 IGAD Charter[7], the structure of the new 2023 re-revitalized IGAD[8] is composed of four supreme and hierarchical policy organs: An Assembly of Heads of State and Government, a Council of Ministers, a Committee of Ambassadors and a Secretariat. The Secretariat is appointed by Heads of State and Government (Article 21). This structure is "top-heavy and cumbersome," which resulted in the increased level of politicization of the one-man organization pattern[9]. This was also evidenced in the recent re-revitalization IGAD Treaty, which took place in June 2023, where political elites were not yet ready to cede power.

The re-revitalized IGAD is devoid of power to enforce decisions over its constituencies. As stipulated in the new Treaty[10], IGAD has a supreme organ that comprises Heads of State and Government, a Council of Ministers, a Committee of Ambassadors, and a Secretariat. This structure, like the 1996 Agreement, is top-heavy and burdensome, and allows governments to avoid a loss of sovereignty through unilateral decisions on the applications of regional agreements. So the follow-up of decisions taken at sub-regional meetings is left to Heads of State or to too few ministers and to civil servants in the ministries dealing with cooperation matters. In addition, member states are not willing to give sufficient power to their institution that would enable it to advance its objectives, and major decisions are subject to a consensus rule (Article 12 of IGAD Charter). Consequently, IGAD lacks the power and leverage on governments, which makes it a weak REC.

Although under Articles 34, 35, and 36 of the new 2023 Treaty, Member states claim that they provide an enabling environment for the private sector, the civil society, and professional bodies, as well as gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, the top-down structure as in the past, will restrict the involvement of non-state actors and the people at large[11]. While ECOWAS has developed a more sophisticated peace and security architecture, as well as stronger mechanisms and connections with civil society in setting up a sophisticated early warning system and election monitoring processes, IGAD has yet to build strong mechanisms and foster an effective level of participation by civil society in its peace and security institutions and processes[12]. It can be argued that IGAD, in this regard, has a problem of having mass representation in its framework, which may constrain its progress.

Some contend that IGAD has a patrimonial governance structure, which resulted in essentially the detachment of the public and private sectors from IGAD on a greater scale. Some Member states, such as Uganda, have even ratified laws to oust the political participation of non-state actors from their domestic political system. In Eritrea, elections have never been conducted in its thirty-year history and non-state actors' participation has been nominal[13]. As the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) states, top-down models of governance and weak mechanisms for popular participation further the perception that governance in the HoA serves elite interests[14].

While the experience of each country is unique, all countries of the HoA present an interplay of structural and governance deficits[15]. The unilateral governance arrangement is proven by IGAD in its 2021-25 regional strategy framework by noting that member states are prone to severe governance problems, rampant corruption, and election-related. Thus, integration in the sub-region lacks a strong supranational authority and a governance deficit of involving the public, which has been an inhibiting factor to the attempt at integration in the IGAD sub-region, making the regional block one of the weakest.

The lack of political will on the part of the participating governments is also reflected in their reluctance to give executive independence to the Secretariat in the running and management of the institution. Though the 2023 new re-revitalized IGAD in its preamble claims that it recognizes the need to strengthen the Secretariat with robust mandate, adequate powers and resources, member countries have been unable to articulate minimum conditions for cooperation concerning commitment, and the Executive

[7] See Article 8 of the Agreement (IGAD 1996)
[8] See Article 10 0f the New Treaty (IGAD 2023)
[9] Kifle Wodajo 1995 "Thirty Years of Inter-African Cooperation." Ethioscope, 25-35 Vol.1. No.3.
[10] See Article 10 of the revitalized Treaty (IGAD, 2023)
[11] Interview with lecturers, Hawassa University and Bahr Dar University
[12] Interview with lecturer, Bahr Dar University; Adetula, V., Bereketeab,R. and Obi, C. (2019)
[13] Interview with lecturers, Bah Dar University and Hawassa University, 2023
[14] Ibid.
[15] See Tewodros and Gosa (2019)

Secretary is appointed by Heads of State and Government (Article 25) and accountable to them, so IGAD secretariat is toothless in its sphere of authorities.

As stated above, principles governing IGAD, such as non-interference in the internal affairs, as in the past, will limit the effectiveness of the Organization in carrying out the mandate entrusted to it. It only appeals and urges the disputing parties to refrain from further action without passing a binding resolution. Moreover, the IGAD conflict management action[16] is limited in the sense that it does not provide binding solutions. So IGAD does not have the clout and the necessary abilities to deal with the inter-state and intra-state conflicts due to the lack of political commitment to cede power to institutions like a court and a parliament, which are commanding for a viable REC. Without these institutions, it is problematic for IGAD to be a viable and effective REC, and will make it weak in the near future without real commitment. In this regard, lessons can be drawn from other RECs like EAC and ECOWAS that have created such independent institutions.

2.2 Lack of Commitment to Incorporate Regional Policies into National Programs

Political commitment by governments to incorporate regionally adopted polices into national programs is crucial for effective integration. However, this is not the case in the IGAD sub-region. Despite several efforts made by the Member States, for example, in 2023 Treaty[17] under Articles 26, 27, 28, 29, 34, 38 and 40, to coordinate and harmonize in the development and promotion of transport and communications, tourism, agriculture and food security, investment, education and health policies, progress to that end has remained limited. As the 2025 African Union report[18] indicates, although protocols such as mobility, transhumance, and migration have been adopted by IGAD, their ratification and integration into national legislation remain incomplete, and regional legislation remains weakly binding. This might be because governments have followed mostly national policies designed to achieve national objectives while at the same time they endeavor to pursue common polices towards common objectives[19].

In other words, even though member countries continue to speak of collective action for economic integration, no single country has as yet designed its national plans to be consistent with the promotion of effective integration for development. This is also supported by the recent report of the Institute for Security Study (ISS, 2023) which notes that although countries of the region also have shared aspirations, in practice, national policies and interests of the Horn of African states are not automatically aligned to a traceable set of unifying regional values[20]. As stipulated under Article 6 of the 2023 Treaty, the planning, aligning of policies and resources, monitoring and evaluation and the implementation of the Treaty, policies and programs are left with the Member States[21]. The ISS report[22] further notes that, in spite of the fact that all regional governments have aligned their environmental plans to their developmental priorities, no government in the region has yet performed convincingly on the basic goals, due to incoherence in the implementation of plans, governance challenges and an overall environment of political instability. This may continue without major improvements given the current situation of the region and the absence of commitment, which makes IGAD to remain weak.

In a nutshell, given the absence of commitment to regional economic integration by Member states, such provisions which allow member countries to individually develop their own strategies, plan, and priorities will lead to the mismatch between national and regional economic policies. Consequently, the lack of commitment to harmonize national and regional policies remains not only a challenge to effective integration but also makes it very weak regional grouping.

2.3 Lack of Resources Commitment and Participation

Sufficient resources and a clear mandate are required for an effective and strong integration scheme. Such commitment is not only required at the initial stages, but it must be sustained over a long period[23]. However, members of IGAD do not fulfil such commitments. Some Member States have still not paid their contribution. The organization is facing severe financial difficulties,

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[16] Article 57(1) Dispute Resolution Mechanism; Disputes arising out of the interpretation of the obligations contained in the Treaty shall be settled amicably by the Council of Ministers through negotiations.

[17] Treaty establishing IGAD, 2023

[18] African Union (2025). African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements:

[19] Kifle (1995)

[20] Institute for Security Study (ISS, 2023). Special Report: The State of Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa. ISS, June 2023, Retrieved from *www.compressdsl.com*

[21] Article 6(1) of the Treaty states the Member States shall: (a) plan and align their policies and resources with a view to creating conditions favorable for the achievement of the objectives of IGAD and the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty; (b) co-ordinate, through the organs of IGAD, their policies to the extent necessary to achieve the objectives of IGAD; (c) monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Treaty, policies and programs; 2. Each Member State shall take all necessary measures, including the enactment of legislation, to effectively implement the Treaty.

[22] ISS, 2023

[23] Asante, 1997:150

with five out of eight states have not paid their contribution[24]. Only Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti are reportedly properly discharging their payments. At the end of December 2024, IGAD member countries contributed a total of USD 13,492,040, while the arrears stood at USD 41,347,967[25]. This indicates that the total arrears owed to the secretariat of IGAD is much more than the contributions of the member states.

Let alone carrying out its new expanded mandate, IGAD is not able to financially maintain the organization's personnel. Since the end of 2024, employees of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development have not been paid[26] because most of the member states have not paid their annual dues, In this connection, Article 51(1) of the new re-revitalized IGAD Treaty, stipulates that any member state that is in arrears for the preceding two years and above is not able to speak or host or chair or vote at experts and policy organs of IGAD and is not allowed to present candidates for any position or post within IGAD, or to benefit from any activity of IGAD. Indeed, in December 2021, IGAD suspended South Sudan's membership from the regional bloc after it failed to pay its annual contributions. But in most cases, suspending states that failed to make payment has not been put into practice. The absence of a legally binding mechanism still limits the effectiveness of its institutional integration[27], and will remain the same as long as enforcing mechanisms and independent institutions, such as a court, are not in place.

As some informants[28] remark, the strength of IGAD depends on the internal strength of Member states. However, the IGAD member states are economically poor, lacking a political culture of tolerance, are in crisis, and devoid of independent and strong institutions. One of the informants[29] states, "IGAD is the father of poor countries, which in turn produces poor and weak institutions." It can be argued that even if governments were to pay eventually, their contributions would not be sufficient at any point in time to enable them to carry out their mandated tasks.

To make matters worse, the countries of IGAD are beset by a debt burden. According to the Countryeconomy.com in 2025 the total debt burden of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda is estimated to be 1,410 million, 3,794 million, 61,887 million, 80,339 million 2,355 million, 66,641 million and 28,955 million U.S. dollars, respectively. Although debt burden of IGAD countries in 2025 varies among members, with Eritrea and Sudan facing very high debt-to-GDP ratios, while others like Ethiopia and Djibouti have more moderate levels, the debt-to-GDP ratios for individual IGAD member is a key concern as seen in the following table. The estimated debt-to-GDP ratios in 2025 for Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda is estimated to be 32.86%, 179.66%, 38.74%, 67.34%, 50.68%, 189.64% and 51.49%.

Intergovernmental Authority on Development

Countries	Population	Annual GDP	GDP per capita	HDI	Debt ($M)	Debt (%GDP)	Deficit (%GDP)
Djibouti [+]	1,043,000	$4,086M	$3,918	0.515	1,410	32.86%	-2.60%
Eritrea [+]	3,470,390	$1,982M	$567	0.493	3,794	179.66%	-4.36%
Ethiopia [+]	128,691,692	$159,761M	$1,241	0.492	61,887	38.74%	-2.60%
Kenya [+]	55,339,003	$119,307M	$2,275	0.601	80,339	67.34%	-5.77%
Somalia [+]	18,358,615	$12,109M	$660	0.380			0.05%
South Sudan[+]	11,483,374	$4,648M	$301	0.381	2,355	50.68%	11.68%
Sudan [+]	50,042,791	$49,910M	$997	0.516	66,641	189.64%	-0.29%
Uganda [+]	46,623,000	$56,232M	$1,206	0.550	28,955	51.49%	-3.99%
TOTAL: IGAD	**315,051,865**	**$408,035M**	**$1,295**		**245,382**	**58.70%**	

Source: Countryeconomy.com (2025), https://countryeconomy.com/countries/groups/intergovernmental-authority-development#

What is more, the lack of commitment, by the participating governments is manifested itself in the different meetings. The Heads of States and Governments meeting have not been regularly held. So far only 14 ordinary Heads of State and Government meetings were held but about 40 extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and government have been held. So, most of the meetings have been extraordinary which indicates that they are engaged more on 'fire-brigade' than regular activates and to assess the implementation of projects. Some Member states have even not regularly attended the meeting. For example, in most of the

[24] African Intelligence (October 7, 2025) East Africa IGAD's finances in the red https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/10/07/igad-s-finances-in-the-red,110530628-art

[25] IGAD (2024). Navigating Challenges, Advancing Regional Prosperity, Annual Report 2024.

[26] African Intelligence (October 7, 2025) East Africa IGAD's finances in the red https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/10/07/igad-s-finances-in-the red,110530628-art

[27] African Union (2025). African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements

[28] Interview with lecturers, Hawassa University and Bahr Dar University, 2023

[29] Interview with lecturer, Hawassa University, 2023

meetings of the Heads of State and Government, Uganda was represented by its foreign minister including the recent 14th regular Summit.

As long as there is no super-nationality in IGAD and fundamental principles governing IGAD remain the same, which is based on sovereign equality of all member States and non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States (see Article 4 of the new Treaty)[30], the REC will remain weak. Besides, the lack of commitment which has been reflected in tardy payment of budgetary contribution and a low level of participation in meetings and absence of regular Summit of the Heads of States and Governments will remain the same, which will not only adversely affect the attempt to economic integration in the sub-region of IGAD, but also will make the regional block to remain weak.

2. External Dependency

According to the 2025 African Integration report[31], IGAD's funding, which is based mainly on contributions from member states and donors, is irregular and lacks financial autonomy, exposing the institution to persistent external dependency. In general, the finance of IGAD is unenviable. Even if governments were to pay eventually, their contributions would not be sufficient at any point in time to enable them to carry out their mandated tasks. Indeed, since its inception, IGAD has not been in a position to financially maintain the organization's personnel, let alone the priority areas. Member states have, thus, relied heavily on the financial and technical assistance of the Western states and their institutions who provide 81.5% of the total programs funding in 2020. Member States assessed contributions is only about 12% of the total IGAD budget in the same year[32] and the rest is from non-traditional donors like China, Turkey and Middle-Eastern countries.

This external assistance is even not sufficient to run the envisaged projects for the coming years. For example, the implementation of the 2021-2025 regional strategy requires USD 586,552,759 but the available fund is just USD 105,543,533 which is a shortfall of 82.0%[33] that requires to raise huge funds. This huge amount cannot be covered by member states and remains a barrier for effectuating the re-revitalized IGAD. In more recent years, there have been no such improvements. As indicated in the table below, from 2021 to 2024, on average, about 80% of its expenditure was covered by donors, and 78%, 80%, 81% and 79% in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, respectively.

Table: Fund Received by IGAD from 2021-24

Source Of Funding	**Funds Received**			
	2024	**2023**	**2022**	**2021**
Ms. Contributions	13,492,040	14,400,616	11,580,000	13,166,383
Partner Funding	51,114,054	59,528,983	46,661,823	48,101,572
Others Income	0	0	0	422,748
Total Funding	**64,606,094**	**73,929,599**	**58,241,823**	**61,690,703**

Source: IGAD report 2024

The decades of relationships and assistance have not brought about development nor solved structural problems in the Horn of Africa, rather it prevented the establishment of mutually beneficial economic ties among these countries, and kept the Horn of African countries in a position of suppliers of raw materials for the Western. As Tewodros and Gosa (2019) noted because of IGAD's tenacious dependence on donor organizations, it failed to have autonomous power to decide on the key matters of the organization, a notable example is the initial economic objective of the organization is more dominated by peace and security issues due to the donor's interest[34]. It may even compromise the integrity, legitimacy, and ownership of peace mediation[35]. Thus, IGAD's heavily dependence on outside resources for the maintenance of the organization and functioning of its activities has been and remains one of the fundamental predicaments which diverge its initial economic integration objective that make it one of the weakest REC. This dependence has greatly affected negatively and will continue to make IGAD weak in realizing its short, medium and long-term development plans by its own as envisaged in the 2021-2025 strategic framework as well as in the new

[30] IGAD (2023), Article 4 stipulates the Fundamental Principles Governing IGAD which include among others Sovereign equality of all member States, and non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States

[31] African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements

[32] IGAD (2020), IGAD Regional Strategy The Framework, Information and Documentation Section of IGAD Secretariat,

[33] Ibid.

[34] Tewodros Woldearegay and Gosa Abera Mamo (2019). The way-forward to make inter-governmental authority on development (IGAD) successful in actualizing a viable economic integration, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, Vol. 13(4), pp. 53-61.

[35] Adetula, V., Bereketeab, R. and Obi, C. (2019), "Introduction: Regional economic communities and peace-building in West Africa and the Horn of Africa" in Regional Economic Communities and Peacekeeping in Africa: Lessons from ECOWAS and IGAD, eds., Victor Adetula, Redie Bereketeab, and Cyril Obi, pp1-19, London: Routledge

2023 Treaty. Thus, for a viable economic integration to exist in the IGAD region, the strategy of greater self-reliance that enables it to escape from the historical dependence on the developed countries is important.

3. Overlapping Membership

Several studies[36] have recognized the problem of duplication and overlapping memberships in RECs, which has had the net effect of undermining integration. Partly the problem emanated from AU's decision to recognize the overlapping regional blocs such as IGAD, COMESA & EAC as three distinct building blocks of AU. Overlapping and manifold memberships in RECs have created a complicated web of competing commitments which, combined with different rules, result in high costs of trade between member countries, in effect undermining integration[37]. It will also remain a hurdle to the attempt to sub regional integration in IGAD in the future as the problem has not yet been resolved. Some IGAD member states (Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan) are also member of the Arab League and half of the IGAD Member states are also members of the Red Sea Forum, which has incompatible interest with the aspiration of some other member states particularly Ethiopia. No state in the HoA is found to belong to only one REC, they are rather members of different groupings. For example, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda have also been members of the Eastern African Community (EAC); and all IGAD members except South Sudan are also members of COMESA. Except Eritrea and South Sudan, all IGAD members are also members of the Eastern Africa Standby Force (EASF). All except Djibouti and Eritrea are members of the Eastern Africa Fusion and Liaison Unit (EAFLU). Again, except Djibouti and Somalia, all are members of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI).

Such duplication of functions create constraints in the integration process in that they, in the first place, make regional integration costly, inefficient and ineffective, secondly they cause complications and inconsistencies, policy incoherence due to conflicting mandates and obligations as well as divided loyalty among governments[38]; thirdly, they impose heavy financial and administrative burdens on individual government[39]; and fourthly, it complicates the Horn of Africa's trade and economic relations with the rest of the world, as for example evidenced in the Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations with the European Union[40]. Finally, they lead Member states to adopt different sectoral harmonization models and policies, thus creating dilemmas for countries, leading to delays in the implementation of region-wide program objectives. This will continue to work against integration attempts in the IGAD sub-region unless a mechanism is designed to address the problem.

The divergent positions and interests of IGAD's member states, contribute to decelerating prospects for robust multilateralism and dispersing the allegiance of countries of the region into several multilateral domains[41]. Kenya and Uganda in particular, have divergent interest and need IGAD for political rather than economic reasons. To use the words of ISS (2023) "This distribution of loyalties diminishes IGAD's political clout and creates competition with adjacent or co-dependent multilateral actors, in particular the EAC.

4. Poor Economic Status, Communication, and Infrastructural Development

The success of economic integration in developing countries depends in part on the efficient performance and effective support of the transport and communication sectors, free mobility, and harmonization of coordinating efforts of the partner states. Indeed, Article 26 of the 2023 Treaty states that the Member States undertake to coordinate, harmonize transport and communications policies, improve and expand the existing transport and communications links and establish new ones. Moreover, under the 2021-2025 strategy, IGAD is expected to contribute towards developing a unified regional market with expanded infrastructure and connectivity - underpinned by the AfCFTA with expansion of 30% transport and ICT infrastructure linkages and continental power pools leading to a 15% increase in intra-regional trade, 15% in manufacturing, and 10% in tourism[42]. In terms of human mobility, the signing of the protocols on free movement and transhumance (with a roadmap for implementation) is a remarkable step.

However, this remains on paper. According to the 2025 African Integration report,[43] IGAD scored 0.46, which reflects the low level of operationalization of the protocols signed, the absence of customs harmonization mechanisms, and a common tariff

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[36] Tesfaye Molla (2002), Roadblocks to Economic Integration in the IGAD Sub-Regional, MA Thesis, AAU Publication; Ndomo, Atieno (2009). Regional Economic Communities in Africa A Progress Overview , Study Commissioned by GTZ

[37] Ndomo (2009); Interview with lecturer, Bahr Dar University, 2023

[38] IGAD (2020). IGAD Regional Strategy Framework 2021 2025. Despite IGAD's cross sectoral targeted policy and regulatory frameworks IGAD Member States belong to multiple RECs, subscribing to different policy and regulatory frameworks which has resulted in conflicting national choices on which the policy framework should be adopted in the interest of the wider community.

[39] Interview with Lecturers, Hawassa University

[40] Kinfe (1995) Ndomo (2009);

[41] ISS, 2023

[42] IGAD (2020). IGAD Regional Strategy Framework 2021-2025

[43] African Union (2025). African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements

strategy. Intra-regional communication is still poor. There is no adequate social and physical services such as adequate roads, railways, airways, sea ways which connect the countries of the sub-region. The region's markets remain extremely fragmented, with poor (though improving) infrastructure that raises the costs of transport between and even within countries[44]. These problems are more pronounced in landlocked countries such as Ethiopia and South Sudan, where high transaction costs are the result of their own poor infrastructure and that of their transit neighbors.

Despite the presence of some projects like that of the Lamu Port, South Sudan and Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, Member States of IGAD in general have very poor transport system (road and railway) maintenance records due to "poor government policies and insufficient allocation of funds for maintenance"[45]. IGAD has been trying to secure funds for its projects owing to its emphasis on infrastructure development from its 'partners', but it is not encouraging. Thus constraint of financial resources remains the basic challenge to effective economic integration in the sub-region of IGAD.

Poor communication among the members of IGAD is also manifested in the lack of a common currency. On June 13, 2023, during his address at the Djibouti parliament, Kenya's President Dr. William Ruto urged African countries to adopt a common currency for intra-African trade, proclaiming that relying on the US dollar is harmful to the continent's economic integration and development as it creates transaction costs, exposes African countries to currency fluctuation, and undermines their sovereignty. However, it seems it is a lip service. Because in practice, all member states of IGAD continue to use their own currencies. Let alone the use of common currency, they are not ready even to implement the minimum integration plan.

IGAD designed a minimum integration plan in 2012 to gradually harmonize trade practices and policies of member states and to eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers, yet it is unable to realize it. Compared to other African RECs, IGAD lags behind. It was also expected to establish a Free Trade Area (FTA) and implement free movement within the sub-region in 2017 as per AU Framework of Cooperation but it was not operational. Free movement of persons is critical to regional integration as t can increase trade and tourism, boost intra-African trade, facilitate labor mobility and skills transfer, increase employment opportunities, contribute to social integration, and promote entrepreneurship and innovation[46] In this respect, among the eight AU-recognized RECs, ECOWAS and EAC have advanced most towards making the free movement of persons a reality in their regions[47]. ECOWAS has abolished visas and entry permits for all ECOWAS citizens, with the provision of a 90-day visa-free stay. IGAD has made little progress on establishing free movement.

Moreover, though the IGAD 2023 Treaty emphasizes promotion of regional trade and gradual harmonization of policies and removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to inter-state trade, transport and communications, there are still barriers to the intra-regional trade. These are: major differences in tariff rates among member countries, use of different custom declaration documents, cumbersome administrative procedures, different legal interpretation of insurance claims, restriction of foreign exchange allocation, imposition of unilateral bans and discriminatory procedure at points of entry/exist. The challenge to effective integration is also reflected in the poor records of intra-trade in the sub-region of IGAD. In some Member States, market-based policies have not been fully embraced. Trade among countries in the Horn of Africa were insignificant, which stood at a paltry 5%[48], due to their poor level of development and being producers of primary and similar goods. The bulk (95%) of trade took place outside the IGAD region. The region has not implemented an IGAD FTA. These limited trade links among member states of IGAD restrict the foundation on which regional economic integration scheme between them have been based. Political differences between countries and political instability within countries in the sub-region as discussed below are partly responsible for the low level of official trans-border trade in the sub-region.

5. Conflict, Insecurity, and Mistrust among the Member states

In terms of peace and security, IGAD is one of the most advanced RECs on the African continent, which is attributed to its active role in conflict prevention, mediation, crisis management, and post-conflict stabilization in the Horn of Africa[49]. However, it is not free from conflict. Conflicts constitute one of the greatest barriers currently facing IGAD. As the ISS (2023)[50] stated, "The conflict and dispute spectrum in the HoA is in flux, shifting from interstate conflicts to intra-state conflicts, from conventional to nonconventional methods and from traditional to non-traditional threats, all within the context of political transitions." The sub-region is viewed as being in a state of crisis, and has been characterized by internal strife, conflict and/or civil war as well as drought and humanitarian disaster for the last three and half decades since the establishment of IGAD. To use the words of ISS

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2025) Assessing Regional Integration in Africa ARIA XI, Delivering on the African Economic Community: Towards an African Continental Customs Union and African Continental Common Market
[47] Ibid
[48] IGAD (2020). IGAD Regional Strategy Framework 2021 2025
[49] African Union (2025). African Integration Report 2025: Strengthening the implementation of regional frameworks to fully leverage continental achievements
[50] ISS (Institute for Security Studies) (2023). Special Report: The State of Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa, JUNE 2023

(2023:13)[51], "[w]hile being driven by decades old structural dynamics, conflict situations integrate with systemic climate stress, pandemics and new information and communication technology to alter the threat landscape in the region." It further states, "Although these changes had been decades in the making, the pace at which they are unfolding as well as their complexity cause regional uncertainty in the Horn of Africa." As stated above, the conflict trend is fluid, shifting from interstate conflicts to intra-state conflicts, from conventional to nonconventional methods and from traditional to non-traditional threats using drone even by Al-Shabaab.[52]

Since independence in 1956 Sudan has been in civil war in most years of self-rule. Since 15 April 2023, fighting broke out between General Abdalfattah Al-Burhan and General Mohammed Hamdan Daggle (Hemedtti) forces though the political Framework Agreement was signed on December 5, 2022 by more than 40 political organizations including the military representative which gave hope of a peaceful and stable Sudan. The conflict has become complex as alliances being created and various local and external actors are involved, resulted in the killing of several people and displacement of millions from their home, fleeing to neighboring countries. The chances of resolving the dispute amicably are declining every day that decisive action is needed but not taken[53].

Since the outbreak, IGAD has been trying to engage the two sides aimed at ensuring that parties in conflict conclude a permanent ceasefire but in vain. It has not yet been able to bring the two sides to a round table, let alone initiate an inclusive political process towards a political settlement of the conflict. It has also not been able to broker and settle other major conflicts, such as between Ethiopia and Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Kenya and Somalia. Some informants[54] note that the IGAD region needs leadership who are visionary to transform the region and are not tied to their specific ethnic or religion group, and work for the unity of and the wider interest of the people of the region.

Despite the signing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), in 2018 to culminate the civil war, the implementation has been slow and the opposing forces have fought repeatedly. It can be argued that this has taken much of IGAD's efforts to address such challenges which reduces its exertions towards economic integration. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab also continues to conduct attacks both within Somalia and in neighboring states, targeting civilians, the Somali state, and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The ATMIS and the Somali force have failed to effectively preserve peace and to successfully fight against Al Shebaab. The Crisis in Somalia will continue to challenge the IGAD region and be a hurdle for viable economic integration.

Through the auspices of AU and the US, the Ethiopian government and TPLF reached an agreement to end hostilities and silence the gun in Pretoria, South Africa, but the conflict resumed, and IGAD's role is minimal. Conflict in Amhara and other regions civil conflict continues which calls for the Government to pursue with its efforts in engaging all elements in peaceful dialogue to enhance the gains of peace and ensure full-fledged stability in the country. It is to be noted that these domestic conflicts have negative impact on inter-state relations among the countries of the IGAD sub-region. Moreover, relations between and among the IGAD member states are marked by mistrust, suspicion, and uncertainty. For example, in spite of the hostility cessation agreement signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea, they have remained suspicion of each other.

Another strand of intra-regional competition originates from the tension over transboundary resources (chiefly water) and transnational threats as well as the conflicting approaches to addressing them[55]. One cannot think of a viable economic cooperation and a strong REC, let alone of integration among countries, if relations among states are not underpinned by modes of behavior that foster mutual trust and mutual confidence. The domestic crisis in Member states and tensions between them continue to severely disrupt trade and market functionality, restrict movement of people within the national border, let alone among Member states which is envisage in the 2021-2025 regional Strategy framework and the 2023 re-revitalized Treaty.

6. Absence of Big Brother and External Influences

Regional blocs in most of the developing countries consist of poor states with limited size of national and sub-regional markets, and hence their low level of development may not allow much market expansion through regionalism. It is, thus, proposed that at least one of the partner countries in the bloc should have a reasonably big market to enable the reaping of economies of scale at a regional level[56]. In addition to the enlargement of the size of the market, it is believed that the sub-regional's international status and global bargaining power will be enhanced by inclusion of major trading countries, which are able to assist the regional integration arrangements to assert this power in the world stage. They support their argument by providing examples: such as

[51] Ibid

[52] Interview with Lecturers, Hawassa University and Bahr Dar University; See Dass, R. (2022). Militant and Drones: A Trend That is Here to Stay, RUSI reported that. Al=Shabaab in Somalia has used fixed-wing drones for surveillance and attacks.

[53] Official Statement by Workneh Gebeyehu, IGAD Executive Secretary 1156th Virtual HoSG Meeting of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union on the Situation in Sudan Saturday 27th May 2023

[54] Interview with Lecturers, Bahr Dar University, 2023

[55] Ibid

[56] Bhalla, A.S. and P.Bhalla (1997). *Regional Blocs: Building Blocks or Stumbling Blocks?* London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Germany in the European Union; Brazil in MERCOSUR; the United States in NAFTA; South Africa in SADC; Nigeria in ECOWAS; and India in SAARC.

However, the IGAD region is constrained by the absence of 'big-brother'[57] that would help increase the bargaining power of the sub-region and make the dynamic gains from regional blocs. In recent past, an 'emerging hegemon' in the region - Ethiopia and Ethiopian interests shape IGAD's actions, determined much of IGAD's room for maneuver, particularly in the realm of economic integration and trade, and played a key role in South Sudan mediation efforts,[58] in Somalia, and between Sudan and South Sudan. Some informants[59] have also confirmed this by saying that Ethiopia who had a relatively political and economically powerful played the leading role. IGAD served as a forum for pursuing Ethiopia's foreign policy albeit its role has been diminishing in recent years[60]. Indeed, currently, political power in the IGAD region is dispersed between different countries and across multiple economic, political and diplomatic entities. As ISS[61] (2023) aptly notes, unlike in West Africa, where Nigeria dominates the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in the HoA, no state has the economic, diplomatic and political tools and the agreement of peers to act as an overarching center of gravity. Given the absence of a steady anchor in the IGAD region, the opportunistic deployment of sovereignty and the uncertainty of regional multilateralism make for intra-regional competition which creates rivalry and uncertainty that is regularly exploited by extra-regional actors[62].

Being a strategically and economically important region and an area connecting the three continents, Africa, Europe, and Asia, geopolitical rivalries among old and new powers create the imperative for the countries of the region to pick sides, thereby complicating efforts to establish sustainable collective security mechanisms. In Somalia, the acrimony between the federal Somali government and regional states has been attributed to the increased intervention of external powers backing different sides. Also in Ethiopia, during the conflict between the Federal government and the TPLF, external intervention backing the TPLF prolonged and complicated the conflict. The same is true with respect to the current civil war in the Sudan and tension over the GERD. Besides, conflict outside the region may have implication for the region. The active conflict in Ukraine has had a massive effect on the regional economy inflated the prices of food, fertilizer and fuel. For instance, over the past two years food prices in the IGAD region increased by an average of 55.6% compelling the neediest to spend over 90% on food alone[63]. Therefore, external factor is considered as another major roadblock for effective integration in the region.

Over the last decade, the Red Sea has increasingly become militarized as foreign powers have stepped on each other's toes to establish military bases and naval facilities along the Red Sea[64], which accentuates the peace and security challenges of the IGAD region[65]. The IGAD region has become a fertile center for geopolitical power struggles from Middle Eastern powers (Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt alliance against the Qatar-Turkey-Iran axis); Euro-Atlantic alliance against Eurasian power (Russia); between the Far-East powers China and Japan; and at a global level between US and China[66]. In spite of the recent efforts to drive economic development, external involvement in the Horn of Africa have often engaged in rivalries between foreign powers for influence and local actors' exploitation of such competitions have favored the persistence of endemic political instability that have had devastating consequences for the wider region[67]. For example, Middle Eastern outreach is on the upswing, shaping

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[57] Regional blocs in most of the developing countries consist of poor states with limited size of national and sub-regional markets. Their low level of development may not allow much market expansion through regionalism.

[58] Ibid

[59] Interview with Lecturers, 2023

[60] Interview with Lecturers, Hawassa University March 2023; Bahr Dhar University, March, 2023

[61] ISS (2023).

[62] Ibid

[63] IGAD Executive Secretary, Dr. Workneh Speech

[64] Pamba, Edmond J. (2021).Foreign Powers and the Geopolitics of Instability: The Case of North and the Horn of Africa, In the Horn of Africa Bulletin, Volume IV, Issue I January-February 2021

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[66] IARAN, Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network (March 2017) East Africa and the Horn in 2022: Mahmoud, O. S. (2020, January 28). The Middle East's Complicated Engagement in the Horn of Africa. United States Institute of Peace Retrieved from https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/middle-easts complicated-engagement-horn-africa; Pamba, Edmond J. (2021).Foreign Powers and the Geopolitics of Instability: The Case of North and the Horn of Africa, In the Horn of Africa Bulletin, Volume IV, Issue I January-February 2021; Telci, I. N..(2021). The Horn of Africa as venue for Regional competition: Motivations, Instruments and Relationship Patterns. Insight Africa

[67] Ylonen, A. (2022). A Scramble of external powers and local agency in the Horn of Africa. CIBOB, Newsletter, Notes International 280

dynamics in Somalia and Sudan, and between Ethiopia and Somalia[68]. In Somalia and Sudan, internal force are backed by external forces which affect stability in these countries[69].

IGAD established a Taskforce on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, in 2019, and appointed a Special Envoy to lead the development of multidisciplinary policy-oriented research to triangulate responses and Chart a common position for safeguarding the security and economic interests of the region[70]. However, the establishment of the Taskforce appears to be rather defensive. There is no also legal mechanism under the new Treaty which imposes on member states to harmonize and adopt common positions within the Authority on issues relating to international negotiations like the Red Sea with third parties in order to promote and safeguard the interests of the IGAD region.

Moreover, the financial and weapons support provided to radical groups like Al-Shabaab by some countries outside the region is not negligible in undermining the role of IGAD; and Egypt, for example, has been repeatedly accused of spoiling the peace initiatives taken or endorsed by IGAD.[71] To reduce external influence requires the IGAD region to act in one voice to handle the problem, which in turn calls for the renaissance of IGAD in adopting binding legal framework which imposes obligation on member states to harmonize and adopt common positions in order to promote and safeguard the interests of the IGAD region.

7. CONCLUSION

The African Union recognized the IGAD as one of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs)[72] to act as the building blocks for continental integration. Yet, the IGAD region is far from attaining these objectives. Several recurrent obstacles that militate against a viable regional integration in the IGAD region among which include unrelenting lack of political will and commitment in terms of unresponsive to multi-level participation of private and civil society, unwilling to cede power to the sub-region and to incorporate regionally adopted policies into national programs; heavy economic dependency, and failing to honor financial contribution; multiple and overlapping membership that cause complications, policy incoherence and divided loyalty; poor level of economic status, communication and infrastructure; state-centric approach, intra- and inter-state unabated conflicts, mistrust and suspicion among the Member states, and absence of ‘big brother’ and external influence. All these may continue to create tension and mistrust among IGAD Member states which has a negative outcome for the viability of the re-revitalized Treaty and for the REC to be one of the least developed RECs. To be effective, IGAD and its member states need to devise and reconsider their concrete commitments which is sustained over a long period of time and not easily be backtrack towards a viable regional economic integration.

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