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Zambia's Overlapping Membership in SADC and COMESA[1]

Ch. Singuwa, G. Singuwa

Chimuka Singuwa – PHD Student (International Relations), Department of Theory and History of International Relations, Assistant Lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages, Peoples Friendship University of Russia (RUDN); 6 Miklouho-Maklaya Ulitsa, Moscow, 117198, Russia; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0812-9234; jonathanial@yahoo.com

Gospel Singuwa – Student (Political Science) Department of Comparative Political Science, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN); 6 Miklouho-Maklaya Ulitsa, Moscow, 117198, Russia; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0812-9234; singuwajuniorgospel@gmail.com

Abstract

Africa's aspiration for integration exceeds that of any other continent. This goal has resulted in an unsustainable situation in which African countries frequently belong to two or more regional entities. It is vital to emphasize that regardless of the shared objectives of any African regional economic community, most members will prioritize their national interests over anything else. As a result of this predicament, some countries, such as Zambia, have chosen a strategy of overlapping membership, belonging to various organizations within the region. The study's goal is to objectively examine overlapping membership as a benefit and a barrier to regional integration. This article uses Zambia's experience in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) as a case study. This article examines Zambia's overlapping membership in these regional economic communities (RECs) using realist theory and integration theory. The authors find that, while Zambia is an active participant and reaps benefits in both regional communities, being a dual member of SADC and COMESA presents economic and legal challenges.

Keywords: Zambia, Overlapping Memberships, Regional Integration, Africa, COMESA, SADC, Regional Economic Communities, RECs

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Introduction

The history of African regional integration, which can be traced back to the Pan African movement aimed at uniting Africa, has been viewed as a solution to the continent's diverse political and economic problems. This concept of integration was also upheld by post-independence African leaders as a development goal to increase trade between states and to synchronize socio-economic and political policies. African governments that had recently gained independence, as well as the wave of summits that took place between these states, provided critical lessons and

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experiences that culminated in the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on 26 May 1963.

In addition, African leaders have often emphasized the importance of improved coordination and harmonization among the continent's multiple regional economic groupings. The most important of these attempts is the Abuja Treaty, which established the African Economic Community (AEC). The importance of building the AEC is emphasized in Chapter XIX of the Abuja Treaty, through the coordination, harmonization, and progressive integration of the activities of regional economic communities. It also encourages member nations "to promote the coordination and harmonization of the integration activities of regional economic communities of which they are members with the activities of the Community."

Although rationalization is not directly stated in these documents, African leaders and policymakers largely recognize that the region's integration objectives are hampered by the region's multiple, overlapping memberships in regional economic groups. Recently, Africa has seen the formation of various new regional economic blocs. East and Southern Africa, for example, is home to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

Despite the African Union's efforts thus far, the institutional settings of RECs in Africa are overlapping like a spaghetti bowl, making Africa's regional integration process very complex and confusing, with member countries burdened with high political commitments and institutional requirements. Furthermore, the problem of multiple RECs and overlapping membership renders Africa's regional integration (institutional) system extremely duplicable, requiring much too many resources for what is generated.

The deadlock caused by overlapping regionalism in the integration process has been a primary influencer for the establishment of larger free trade agreements (FTAs) such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), a free trade zone encompassing most of Africa that is intended to resolve the issues of overlapping memberships in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Methodology of the Study. This research was conducted based on secondary sources of data. It was done through various sources and publications, including previous related research and the reports made by the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union Commission as well as RECs such as SADC and COMESA.

Review of Related Literature. Regional agreements such as SADC and COMESA demonstrate that regional integration in Africa has taken centre stage in countries' economic agendas [Alemayehu, Kibret, 2002]. However, as Severine Rugumamu [2004] pointed out, there is unprecedented overlap in membership among RECs in the Eastern and Southern African region. The overlapping membership of the region's countries, such as Zambia, has become the centre of discussion. State interests are similar, particularly within a region, because they have many common aims, and regional integration is the common path that most governments have taken to pursue and achieve these shared goals. However, regardless of similar objectives, most states would prioritize their own national interests over everything else [Amuhaya, 2018, pp. 56–61]. As a result countries such as Zambia have chosen the policy of overlapping membership and thus belong to various organizations within the area. However, Zambia's participation in SADC and COMESA overlaps, posing hurdles to regional integration.

Zambia in Regional Economic Communities

RECs are regional groupings of African States. RECs have undergone significant changes individually and have different objectives and structures. It is important to note that RECs aim to facilitate regional economic cooperation between countries of the individual regions and throughout the wider AEC. RECs are increasingly taking an active role in coordinating the African Union (AU) member states' interests in vital areas such as development and governance, peace, and security [Biswaro, 2012].

Many recognized African RECs, such as the Economic Community of the Western African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC) are closely integrated with the AU's work and serve as its building blocks. The mutually beneficial relationship between the AU and the recognized RECs is mandated by the Abuja Treaty, the AU Constitutive Act, and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation in the Area of Security and Peace Between the AU, RECs and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of the Eastern and Northern Africa [Kostyunina, 2006, pp. 44–53].

However, there is overlapping membership among RECs in the Southern and Eastern parts of Africa. This situation has a bearing on the costs and benefits of regional integration.

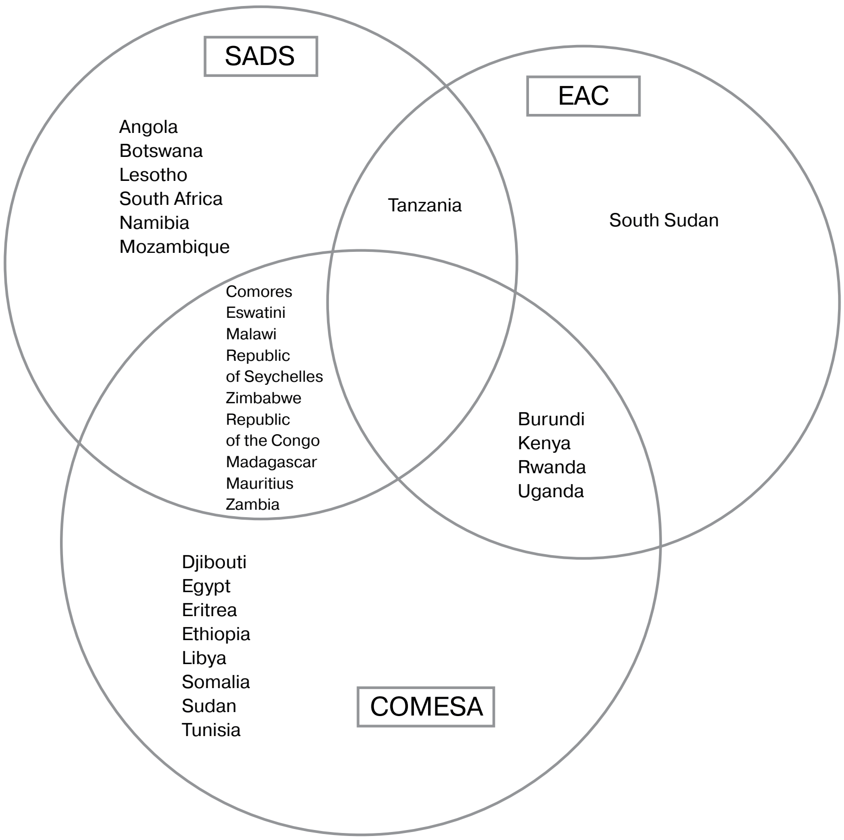

Fig. 1. Overlapping Memberships in South and East Africa's Subregional Economic Organizations

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of [Amuhaya, 2020, p. 100].

The growth of regional economic integration is associated with a tendency for one country to join several RECs. Zambia is a politically stable country in Southern Africa. Copper exports have controlled its economy for years. Seventy-seven percent of exports are non-value-added mining, which is significantly influenced by variable global commodity prices. Zambia's economy needed to diversify and add value to its commodity exports. As a result, the Government of Zambia (GRZ), in its Seventh National Development Plan (7NDP) (2017–21), committed to building a diverse and resilient economy for long-term growth and socio-economic transformation, fuelled in part by agriculture. Tourism and industry are also important economic areas.

The country has a large urban population due to the location of its major cities along train lines and near large-scale copper mines. Despite the country's consistent economic growth from 1990 to 2015, poverty remains the country's largest impediment to national development. Zambian governments have made concerted attempts to reduce the debt burden by increasing internal revenue from both local and international trade.

Zambia's imports and exports must cross many borders en route to seaports because the country is landlocked. The country's main seaports for imports and exports are the Port of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania and Durban Port in South Africa. These routes are plagued by numerous delays and non-tariff barriers (NTBs).

COMESA and SADC are Zambia's two largest RECs. The government intends to increase commerce with neighbours by lowering trade barriers and improving trade facilitation. However, the country's membership in more than one regional economic community creates administrative challenges in several trading regimes, regulations, and standards.

COMESA and SADC established an FTA in 2008. COMESA is focused on reducing or eliminating trade or non-trade barriers to accumulate the benefits of integration. On the other hand, SADC is designed to promote economic trade and collective political security needs. Different policies govern these different approaches by SADC and COMESA toward regional integration. They will plausibly induce different outcomes; thus, as countries assume memberships in both RECs, conflicts of goals and interests may arise.

Moreover, the RECS in Southern and Eastern Africa wish to move to a customs union (CU). However, membership in more than one customs union is technically impossible. At present, SADC and COMESA member states with multiple memberships have to balance the costs and benefits of belonging to one or another CU grouping. Solely concentrating on tariffs and revenue foregone would mean missing out on some of the more fundamental aspects of regional integration [Panke, Stapel, 2018, pp. 635–62]. Daughert and Pfalzgraff define integration as "a process leading to a condition of political community." The integration process is perceived by integrations theorists as consensual, based principally on the development of shared norms, values, interests, or goals [Amuhaya, 2018, pp. 53–61].

Sometimes states choose to join RECs not mainly for economic reasons. Tanzania, for example, is the SADC member state that joined and withdrew its membership from COMESA. Even though studies reveal that it will benefit more in COMESA than SADC, it has ignored those facts just because of Kenya's dominance in EAC, the REC in which Tanzania is a member state In this respect, Tanzania's continued membership in SADC reveals most clearly that it is not economic arguments alone that play a role in regional trade bloc membership decisions. The analogous memberships are usually because a single regional group only satisfies some of the member states' strategic, political, and economic needs and objectives [Amuhaya, 2018, pp. 53–61].

Zambia is a signatory to the AfCFTA. The country signed and deposited instruments of ratification in 2021. The AfCFTA is implementing various protocols boosting trade in goods and services within the continent, and it is expected that once fully implemented, the agreement will enable the free movement of goods, services, and persons involved in business activities [Fituni, Abramova, 2017, pp. 14–27]. Although Zambia signed the AfCFTA, it has yet to finalize its full participation in the agreement and requested more time to consult with the

Zambian private sector. This arrangement may be related to the fact that 55 out of 55 countries in Africa have signed the agreement, but only 43 African countries have ratified it.

Why Overlapping Membership for Zambia

A critical review of the historical background and context of three historical aspects—Zambia's nation-building endeavour, its participation in the establishment of COMESA and SADC and the evolution of overlap, and its previous and current efforts to mitigate the effects of overlapping memberships—helps to explain Zambia's experience with overlapping regionalism.

After achieving independence from Britain in 1964, Zambia sought to unite a country made up of dozens of ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs. This was no simple task. The first democratic elections were hampered by ethno-linguistic rivalry [Simson, 1985, p. 15]. In response to the unrest and in the interests of fostering national unity, President Kaunda declared Zambia a one-party state. Zambia's sovereignty was precious, and nation-building was the paramount goal. "One Zambia, One Nation," a national motto and ideal coined by Kaunda, is still heard throughout Zambia today.

Along with Zambia's efforts to construct a nation, there was a push to join forces with other African countries through regional integration programmes. The two RECs, COMESA and SADC, are undoubtedly the most ambitious of the various projects. They stand out as vital players, with mandates ranging from trade and market integration to national resource management and peace and security. However, Zambia's dual membership in both COMESA and SADC poses hurdles for both the country and regional integration as a whole.

The first and most crucial fact is that Zambia is a founding member of both COMESA and SADC. COMESA's history dates back almost four decades to the establishment of its precursor, the preferential trade area (PTA). The PTA pact was signed in Lusaka in 1981, and the formal inauguration took place in the same city in 1982 [Anglin, 1983, p. 685]. Zambia had particularly strong relations with the PTA at the time. Similarly, Zambia had a significant role in the formation of SADC's precursor, the Southern African Development Community Conference (SADCC), which was also established in Lusaka in 1980 [Bokeria, Singuwa, 2023, pp. 49–56].

Both the PTA and the SADCC had political goals and were concerned with economic development. However, the two RECs varied fundamentally in crucial areas: the PTA treaty advocated for economic integration, market integration, and trade liberalization, whilst the SADCC aspired for development through more informal and flexible forms of collaboration [Dirar, 2010, pp. 217–32]. SADCC was created by the so-called frontline states in order to undermine apartheid South Africa's economic dependency. At first, the SADCC was thought to be more political, while the PTA was thought to be more economic. Members of the two groups overlapped more than mandates. That would soon change.

Since the country's return to multiparty democracy in 1991, power has been peacefully transferred three times via democratic elections, each time from one opposition party to another (The United National Independence Party (UNIP) 1991—Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) party, 2011—Patriotic Front (PF) Party, 2021—United Party for National Development (UPND)). Zambia's political stability is a benefit as it favours the country's membership in the continent's integration process.

Zambia is a developing country, and it achieved middle-income status in 2011. Through the first decade of the 21st century, its economy was one of the fastest-growing in Africa, and its capital, Lusaka, was the fastest-growing city in the SADC region [Southern African Development Community, 2022]. However, due to a lack of agreements between previous governments and creditors, the country became the first in Africa to default on its debt last year, with loans estimated at 12.7 billion euros, a third of which is owed to Chinese creditors. Zambia's new government, led by President Hakainde Hichilema, has made tremendous headway in restoring the country's economy, confidence, and solvency two years after taking over a deeply indebted country.

Zambia's economy is among the strongest in the region, and it is expected to develop even quicker as a result of the nation's various important policies. Vision 2030 is a long-term perspective plan aimed at achieving prosperous middle-income status by 2030 through the creation of an environment that supports sustainable socio-economic growth. It is one of the primary measures. Therefore, the most sensible and practical reaction has been that Zambia has decided to use overlapping membership, or belonging to numerous RECs, as a tactic to accomplish particular goals.

While overlapping membership in different RECs can be costly, having more than one REC offers multiple benefits since most of them were established for specific purposes rather than as a building block for the African Economic Community [Amuhaya, 2018, pp. 53–61].

In terms of its trade policy for the region, L. Edwards and R. Lawrence note that Zambia has positioned itself fairly well. Being a dual participant in the SADC and COMESA free trade agreements, it is among the select few whose exports can reach duty-free markets in both the north and the south of Africa [2012, p. 1]. They point out that apart from the primary reason for Zambia's dual membership—market access—these free trade agreements have established an institutional framework that has made it possible for participants to address trade barriers, particularly those related to trade facilitation and regional infrastructure policies, which are crucial concerns for Zambia [Ibid.]. In addition, they argue that Zambia has a great deal of flexibility to manage its extra-regional tariffs and international trade relationship as it sees fit because SADC and COMESA are free trade agreements, and its World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments are not very restrictive [Ibid.].

Another main reason for Zambia to be a member of both COMESA and SADC relates to the fact that it is landlocked, and its location is strategic as it connects Southern Africa to the Eastern part of Africa and has good infrastructure. Zambia boasts Southern and East Africa's most vital international trade and investment links. It serves as a transport corridor and a logistics, tourism, banking, and services hub, all underpinned by significant infrastructure development.

Furthermore, on the one hand, Zambia's membership in SADC and COMESA is a way for the political leadership to play a game of political strategy, increase Zambia's influence in the region, and further Zambia's national interest in economic development and poverty reduction via having a seat at tables in both RECs. On the other hand, in COMESA, Zambia's membership in SADC provides an opportunity for the head of state and the ruling elite to meet with other leaders to strengthen personal friendships and gain international support and recognition, indirectly strengthening their hold of political power in Zambia.

COMESA and SADC offer broad markets for domestically produced Zambian products. In addition, through the COMESA Free Trade Area, Zambia can access several duty-free economies in Southern and Eastern Africa. The dual membership in SADC and COMESA has helped expand Zambia's export and import market. If Zambia were only a SADC member state, the country would not have this beneficial trade opportunity [Alnäs, 2009].

Though many countries belong to multiple RECs and regional tariffs affecting their intra-regional trade flows have been mainly removed, trade remains restricted by complex rules of origin. In SADC's regional integration, rules of origin have been set on a product-level basis. In contrast, more straightforward rules of origin are imposed on intra-regional trade amongst COMESA member states [Babic, 2020]. In addition, membership in different RECs has also generally induced divided loyalties and a lack of commitment to the obligations set by the regional trade agreements, thereby hampering policy implementation. Every county's commitment to regional integration entails forging domestic institutions and national policies to accommodate the goal of regional integration and increased trade flow. It is important to note that institutional convergence at some level is required to achieve any regional trade agreement's primary goal, which is hindered by the existence of multiple memberships. It is evident in different African RECs that rules of origin, tariff schedules, and implementation periods are the main three factors where the existence of multiple memberships complicates the trade flow as they are differently set across different RECs.

The conflicting nature of RECs can also induce trade inconsistencies through the setting of tariffs. For example, a state belonging to two RECs will have to reduce tariffs to a trading partner under its regional trade agreement with it [Mwanawima, 2011, pp. 465–81]. However, it must maintain its tariff levels under a different mandate in its other trade agreement. Additionally, multiple members may also have a propensity to coerce other member states of a REC or trade agreement into a third-party agreement. This was case with the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) when South Africa entered into a trade agreement with the European Union (EU), thereby forcing Lesotho and Zimbabwe to enter into the agreement as well, rendering them susceptible to a volatile market that eventually affected their intraregional trade performances. In the case of Zambia, it has been caught up in a quagmire in that, under the SADC trade protocol, Zambia agreed to remove tariffs for SADC members to zero [Braude, 2008].

Consequently, since South Africa is a member of SADC, Zambia has agreed to dismantle tariffs on South Africa to zero. At the same time, Zambia, as a member of the COMESA Customs Union, agreed to a standard external tariff regime for countries that are not members of COMESA. As a non-member of COMESA, this did not apply to South Africa. This scenario shows that Zambia agreed to reduce tariffs for South Africa under the SADC trade agreement conditions but to maintain tariffs for South Africa under COMESA provisions. This situation leaves Zambia in a challenging situation [Chingono, Nakana, 2008, pp. 396–408].

In addition, in 2010, many of Zambia's customs duty tariffs were aligned to the SADC Customs Union standard external tariff but not to the COMESA Customs Union tariffs. This situation forced Zambia to take on more tariff liberalization and trade reform while carefully considering the economic and political implications. In addition, solidarity, belonging, and good neighbourliness have been the reoccurring concepts perpetuating perceptions of Zambia's overlapping membership in RECs. It is not easy to imagine Zambia leaving one of the organizations, not only because of how Zambians would react but also how fellow member states would react. Zambia's attachment to the two RECs is accentuated by its strong historical links to the RECs' founding. Even if many studies show that it will be more beneficial for countries like Zambia to belong only to one and reap the maximum benefits, Zambia still wants to retain membership in both, not necessarily because of economic benefits but because of how the two organizations were founded. If Zambia were to leave either organization it could be considered a betrayal by other member states, making it challenging for Zambia.

Even with Zambia's considerable record of trade liberalization via its dual membership in SADC and COMESA, the widespread presence of NTBs, such as high bureaucratic processes, restrictive rules of origin, and prohibitively expensive import licenses continue to impose high costs on Zambian consumers and high import prices on producers. For example, Zambia frequently announced ad hoc import and export bans on agricultural products such as maize to protect domestic producers or ensure adequate local maize supplies. In addition, it maintained a de facto ban on agricultural products with genetically modified content through restrictive legislation and regulations. Other NBSs include intellectual property infringement, preferential treatment of state-owned enterprises, local labour requirements in transportation, and an overly cumbersome and often arbitrary non-transport regulatory environment. NTBs limit the benefits of trade, regional integration, and economic cooperation.

Trade flows between countries with dual membership in SADC and COMESA are also severely constrained by high costs associated with weak regional infrastructure and inefficient customs procedures (including transport costs, time delays, transit times, terminals, telecommunication, and banking systems) [Muhabie, 2015, pp. 417–25]. These trade and transport costs are very high and put the Zambian economy in a disadvantageous position compared to some of its neighbours—physical and non-physical barriers to trade cause the high costs. For instance, on average, it takes Zambian companies 44 days and $2,687 to export a standardized container of goods by ocean transport via member states with an exit to the ocean. These trade-related expenses have a significant effect. As Edwards and Lawrence point out [2012, p. 3] for landlocked nations like Zambia, who rely on their neighbors for access to the outside world, they diminish trade flows and limit access to both regional and international markets. Furthermore, they impede the admission of new companies into the export industry and limit admittance to untapped markets. Exports of manufactured goods, which frequently depend on having access to inexpensive imports for intermediate inputs, are particularly affected by these effects. As a result, trade expenses prevent Zambia from diversifying its export portfolio to include new exporters, markets, and products [Edwards, Lawrence, 2012, p. 3; Romanchuk, 2015, pp. 44–53].

Another challenge for Zambia's dual membership in SADC and COMESA is that the multiple membership fees are expensive to pay and maintain. The country must pay its dues to all RECs to which it belongs. Zambia is still a developing country, meaning it does not have enough to spare, and even though regionally, especially in Southern Africa, it is one of the most competitive economies, the funds it is spending on its multiple memberships in RECs could be diverted into other development areas within the country. Zambia must thus take its geopolitical location and development needs into consideration when making decisions and responding to any policy challenge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, regional integration remains critical for attaining African economic development so that the continent can fulfil its economic potential and assume its rightful place in the world. However, if the different challenges of regional integration are anything to go by, regional integration is becoming increasingly elusive. This situation is because of the increasing economic developments and political challenges of member states in different RECs. In addition, given that each country is unique and has unique economic interests, overlapping membership has presented an opportunity for many countries to address their needs. However, multiple memberships by different countries have tended to show that they are not pulling together toward the goal of regional integration. Instead, each overlapping member has concentrated on identifying its own economic and political interests without regard for the other country's interests.

The story of Zambia's dual membership in regional RECs such as SADC and COMESA thus far do make for good reading. It is visible that Zambia benefits and faces a few challenges from the practice of dual membership in these RECs. As Edwards and Lawrence observed [2012, p. 18], Zambia's advantageous membership in both COMESA and SADC would be undermined by a new tripartite free trade agreement. It would therefore only be advantageous for it to participate in that project if the agreement included enhanced trade facilitation, less stringent origin restrictions, and other steps to lower trade costs. As a result, the study suggests Zambia centers its tripartite FTA negotiations on the non-tariff aspects of the deal. The Zambian economy will benefit greatly from new, audacious agreements for trade facilitation that significantly lower trade costs.

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