

Regional Integration and Food Security in West Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Sustainable Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Regional integration and food security are pivotal aspects of sustainable development, especially in the context of West Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents one of the regional arrangements on political cooperation and economic integration in Africa. While regional integration holds the promise of bolstering food security through collective efforts, its success in fostering food security has encountered a myriad of challenges in West Africa. This study analyzed the problems and potential opportunities of regional integration in West Africa. From the analysis, it became evident that the ECOWAS faces unique challenges and opportunities as it strives to achieve a balance between economic collaboration and ensuring an adequate stable food supply for its growing population. Some of the problems of regional integration in West Africa include trade barriers, lack of unified agricultural policy, border issues and environmental problems. Notwithstanding these problems, collaboration within the ECOWAS framework presents avenues for member countries to unlock economic potential, foster stability, and collectively address food security challenges. It is therefore recommended that the ECOWAS needs to adopt a common agricultural policy, implement water management strategies, develop various market information systems and embark on different capacity building programmes in order to ensure food security among ECOWAS countries.

Keywords: ECOWAS, food security, integration, cooperation, regional bloc

1. INTRODUCTION

Regional integration has been a recognizable feature of international trade relations. In the post-war era, the global trading system has witnessed a resurgence of interest in preferential trading arrangements and other forms of economic cooperation to promote regional integration among different regions of the world. Regional integration implies the process through which countries in a particular region or sub-region come together to form a bloc for economic, social and political cooperation. Fundamentally, regional integration can be purposively used to expand intra-regional trade in food and, thereby, improve food security (DeRosa, 1998). Evidence from practice and integration theory indicates that effective regional unions play a very important role in achieving food security. For example, the EU Joint Programming Initiative on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change (JPI) typifies one of the regional integration practices aimed to address food challenges among European countries through joint research programmes and initiatives.

Many scholars have established a strong link between regional integration and food security (Grossman and Helpman 1995; Mathews, 2013; Silfvast, 2015). It is argued that regional integration can enhance food security through various practices and actions. Common agricultural policies, coordinated research and information sharing among members states

contribute to improved productivity in food products (Cervantes-Godoy and Dewbre 2010). The pooling of resources allows for efficient infrastructure development, such as transportation networks, facilitating the movement of food among countries of the region. Additionally, trade agreements can promote stability in food supply by reducing barriers and ensuring a steady flow of goods. Also, several integration theories have emphasized on the benefits of a unified market in addressing food security challenges by fostering collaboration and resource optimization among participating nations. For example, the idea of custom union focuses on the removal of tariffs on trade with other member states and the application of common trade policy. In this regards, regional integration is instrumental for creating a common tariff that will remove restrictions on factor mobility (such as capital, labour) between members as well as freeing trade in goods and services.

In West Africa, just like in other regions of the world, regional integration facilitates sustainable development and ensures food security. As a regional arrangement, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ensures political cooperation and economic integration among member states. As an inter-governmental organization, the ECOWAS was established with the aim of promoting cooperation and integration within the region, in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among Member States and contribute to the progress and development of the African Continent (Economic Community of West African States, 1993). Over the years, the ECOWAS has made strides in areas such as trade liberation, common external tariffs and the free movement of goods and services, which have help to increase intra-regional trade among members of ECOWAS and enhance food security within the communities. For example, the ECOWAS Trade Liberation Scheme (ETLS) has helped to eliminate trade barriers and enhance economic cooperation. This has led to increased movement of food products across borders. The ETLS has been said to have enabled West African countries to import food that may not be efficiently produced domestically (Akims, 2014). In spite of these collective efforts, many of the ECOWAS member states are still bedeviled with food crisis (Ashante, 2018). This region faces unique challenges and opportunities as it strives to achieve a balance between economic collaboration and ensuring an adequate stable food supply for its growing population. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of regional integration for food security in West African communities is essential for addressing immediate concerns related to hunger and public health, as well as for promoting sustainable practices that ensure long-term food availability while minimizing environmental impact. This multidimensional approach is critical for creating a resilient and sustainable global food system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW - THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

West Africa is made of 17 countries with an estimated population of 419 million people as of 2021 (World Population Prospects, 2022). The region is primarily an agrarian region, with agriculture playing a crucial role in the economy. West Africa remains one of the fastest growing demographic and economic regions on the African continent. Yet, the region is bedeviled with the scourge of food insecurity (Ibitoye, Ogunyemi, Ojo and Ibitoye, 2018). According to the World Bank (2022), agricultural productivity in the region is among the lowest in the world and this seriously erodes the competitiveness of its products on world and domestic markets. The implication is that the region is yet to meet up with the three dimensions of food security as identified by the World Food Summit in 1996 (FAO, 1996). According to the World Food Summit, food security exists when “*all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life*”. This means that food must be available, people must have access to food and food supply must be stable at all times.

In the context of West Africa, none of the countries meets the food requirements for their entire populations. For example, Sachs et al. (2022), noted that more than twenty-seven million people in West Africa are experiencing severe hunger, the highest number in ten years. Allegedly, food crises have increased across most of West Africa, including Burkina Faso,

Niger, Chad, Mali, and Nigeria. In another instance, approximately 27 million more individuals have required emergency food aid from 2015-2022 (Sachs, et al. 2022). Providing adequate food for their population has been one of the major challenges for the fifteen member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Observations and statistics have revealed that food insecurity and all forms of malnutrition keep growing in the region (Oloruntoba, 2020). In 2022, the Food Security Monitor reported that about 106.1 million people in the region did not have sufficient food for consumption (Food Security Monitor, 2022). Countries like Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea are said to have high levels of insufficient food for consumption. The continuous persistence of food crisis and insecurity in West Africa can be attributed to a number of factors which have been established in the literature. Most of these studies agreed that continued insecurity in some areas (including the Lake Chad Basin, North-Western Nigeria, and Central Sahel), rampant inflation and high food prices (Food Security Highlights, 2022) are the major causes of food insecurity in the region. However, the need to further examine the challenges and opportunities of regional integration in curbing food insecurity in the region is crucial.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Regional Integration and Food Security In West Africa: Major Challenges

As contended by Almame et al. (2018), regional integration offers enormous opportunities to foster food security. Regional integration facilitates enhanced food security by promoting collaborative efforts among neighboring nations and allowing member countries to collectively address food shortages, improve agricultural productivity, and ensure the well-being of their populations. While regional integration holds the promise of bolstering food security through collective efforts, its success in fostering food security has encountered a myriad of challenges in West Africa. It is therefore imperative to delve into the landscape of challenges surrounding regional integration in the context of West Africa, specifically within the realm of ensuring food security. Some of these challenges include:

- **Diverse Agricultural Practices.** It is evident that West Africa has a wide range of agricultural practices, and integrating these diverse methods poses a challenge in creating a unified approach to address food insecurity in the region. There are disparities in regulations, subsidies and strategies among West African countries. For examples, the policy outcomes of Ghana's Planting for Food and Jobs program and Nigeria's Anchor Borrowers' Program differ. This makes it difficult for ECOWAS to deal successfully with the problem of food insecurity despite the introduction of several regional tools such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), regional agricultural policy (PAU) and ECOWAS agricultural policy (ECOWAP) to mitigate food insecurity and assure sustainable food security in the member states (Abdoulaye and Yilmaz, 2020). It is apparent that the regional tools (West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Economic Community of West African States agricultural policy (ECOWAP) are becoming ineffectual as a result of divergent approaches among West African countries that have led to inefficiencies, uneven growth and challenges in addressing shared agricultural issues such as land use, water management and imbalances in regional agricultural production.
- **Political Instability.** Another issue that has continued to hinder a harmonized regional strategy for food security in West Africa is political instability. The region has witnessed different forms of political volatility, inter-communal and criminal violence ranging from the incidence of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the attempted coups in countries like Guinea-Bissau, Sierra-Leone, Gabon etc. crisis in Sahel, to the Touarangs' conflict in Mali. The recent military coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Niger and Mali were typical examples of political instabilities in the region. The implication is that these crises and political unrest disrupt regional cooperation efforts and impact the implementation of integrated solutions to food security within the region. The inability of ECOWAS to curb

this incessant unrest poses a significant challenge to food security, disrupting agricultural activities and distribution channels (Musah and Fayemi, 2000). For example, in Mali, persistent conflict has displaced farmers, hindering crop cultivation and leading to food shortages (Okafor and Aniche, 2017). In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency has disrupted trade routes, affecting the movement of essential food supplies. The political instability in Burkina Faso has resulted in the displacement of populations, disrupting traditional farming practices and exacerbating food insecurity. All these happen in spite of the ECOWAS protocol on democracy, election and good governance in the region.

- **Health Barriers.** Some studies argue that extreme health issues poses the greatest danger to food security in West Africa (Adebayo and Ojo, 2012; Balasubramanya and Lele, 2022). West Africa grapples with a complex interplay of health challenges and food insecurity, creating a multifaceted crisis. The region faces recurrent outbreaks of diseases such as malaria, cholera, Covid-19 and Ebola, straining already fragile healthcare systems. These health threats not only pose direct risks to the population but also indirectly contribute to food insecurity by disrupting agricultural activities, trade, and transportation (Dodo, 2020). High rates of malnutrition and inadequate access to clean water further compromise the well-being of communities (Agunyai and Ojatorotu, 2021).
- **Environmental Challenges.** West Africa faces significant environmental issues that threaten food security. As indicated by West African Science Service Center on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use (WASCAL) (2021), West African is prone to extremes of climate change, alternating between severe cyclical droughts and heavy flooding. Erratic climate change has visited a heavy toll on human life, food security, and health across the region in recent years. Climate change affects food security in West Africa in diverse and often complex ways. It not only affects food availability through its impacts on crop yields and livestock productivity, but also shifts in agricultural potentials due to climate change will have profound effects on crop and livestock choices and consequently on local food value chains. For example, flood risk is a significant issue in many coastal areas of West Africa and particularly affects rural areas (Dickson et al. 2012, GCLME 2010, Douglas et al. 2008). In 2009, many West African cities experienced torrential rains that caused loss of life and the destruction of farm products (GCLME 2010). In Nigeria, floods represent a major issue for rural areas due to the low-lying topography, limited capacity of drainage systems, and blockage of waterways and drainage channels (Adeoye et al. 2009). The implication is that this incidence often affects agricultural yields and further reduces household's income (Leight et al., 2015).
- **Infrastructure Gaps.** Infrastructures, such as transportation, good roads and water, are effective tools for combating food insecurity (Harrigan, 2008). When food products are being produced, there is need for adequate distribution of food products to ensure food security. West Africa faces significant infrastructure gaps that impede food security. Inadequate transportation networks hinder the timely and efficient movement of agricultural goods, leading to post-harvest losses. Insufficient storage facilities contribute to spoilage, exacerbating food shortages. Additionally, a lack of reliable energy sources hinders food processing and distribution. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) recently facilitated a few road networks such as the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Highway Development Project, but there seems to be no regional rail network that would have helped to enhance the transportation and distribution of agricultural goods across the region (Agarwal, 2018). The absence of adequate transportation does not only hinder the efficient movement of food across

borders but also limit the benefits of regional integration for addressing food security in West Africa.

- **Limited Financial Resources.** The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) grapples with a significant dearth of financial resources, hindering its capacity to address food insecurity effectively. Insufficient financial resources at both national and regional levels impede the development of necessary infrastructure and support systems for effective regional integration in addressing food insecurity. As contended by Salamatu (2016), the ECOWAS is facing severe “financial difficulties” and can no longer fight terrorism and other threats in the sub-region. Salamatu (2016) revealed that member states have continually failed to honour the payment of their mandatory community levies. This is hugely affecting the operation of the commission in the wake of increasing reports of food insecurity, terrorism and piracy challenges among others. The countries in ECOWAS have different production and economic structures, which make it difficult to achieve a well-functioning and durable monetary union. The loss of an independent monetary policy and the need for a unified financial regulatory system and harmonized institutions are long-term considerations for ECOWAS leaders as most West African countries are still tied to their colonial overlords.
- **Border Problems.** There are numerous border issues that have always hindered the efficient movement of food across borders. As noted by Abubakar (2014), the issues of extortion at the border by the personnel of the agencies concerned, is an established stumbling block to achieving the desired ends of abolishing food insecurity within the ECOWAS community. The un-professional ethics, corrupt attitude of personnel, customs, immigration, the coastal guards, the police, the other personnel that are manning the border hinders the aims and objectives of the ECOWAS community, and has become a source of concern, and continue to constitute a problem to effective integration of the West African community. It results in apathy to these businessmen and farmers alike. For example, business men and farmers that transact businesses on the Lagos-Cotonou-Accra-Abidja axis, complain bitterly about the high rate of extortion and intimidation at these routes (Abubakar, 2004). This has affected trade cohesion in the sub-region, closure of some border countries have hampered trade amongst the member states. Also, ongoing cross-border conflicts between neighbouring countries complicate collaborative approach in combating food insecurity.
- **Trade Barriers.** There is an agreement among scholars that regional integration helps to facilitate trade liberalization and remove all trade barriers that may hinder free movement of goods and services across borders (Akims, 2014). It is presumed that trade liberalization remains a driving force of economic development in a region (Herath, 2010). It is an important instrument in building external links among member states of a regional organisation such as the ECOWAS. However, trade barriers in West Africa, such as tariffs, quotas, and non-tariff barriers, have significant effects on food security in the region. By trade barriers, we mean government policies, regulations and measures that are capable of hindering the free flow of food between countries, creating obstacles to inter-border trade. For example, the closure of borders by the Buhari administration reflects how trade barrier hindered the free flow of agricultural products across the Nigerian borders. The implication is that farmers often face challenges in reaching broader markets and this discourages the production of agricultural goods (Ibukun and Adebayo, 2021). In a nutshell, the closure of borders by the Buhari administration makes it difficult for other West African countries to share food staples among countries of the region. This barrier also disrupts regional cooperation in addressing food shortages.

- **Lack of Data Sharing.** For regional integration to solve many political, social, economic and environmental problems, countries must be willing to share relevant data among themselves. As argued by TeVelde (2006), a regional approach facilitates learning and sharing of information related to trade development and trade policy or other areas of functional cooperation such as agriculture and food security, environmental (e.g. water) and health (communicable diseases) governance. Data sharing plays a crucial role in fostering regional integration by enhancing collaboration and informed decision-making among participating nations. It facilitates the exchange of critical information, such as economic indicators, trade patterns, and infrastructure developments, enabling a deeper understanding of regional dynamics (Holmes, 2005). Shared data promotes transparency, streamlines regulatory processes, and helps identify common challenges, thereby fostering trust and cooperation. In turn, this synergy can lead to the development of more effective regional policies, resource optimization, and collective responses to shared problems. The inadequate data sharing among ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) member countries hampers effective coordination for addressing food security challenges. Without comprehensive information exchange on agricultural practices, market trends, and resource availability, member nations struggle to implement coordinated strategies (Iyoha, 2000). This lack of collaboration often leads to inefficient resource allocation, duplication of efforts, and an inability to respond promptly to food crises.

b. Regional Integration and Food Security in West Africa: Opportunities

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) stands at the threshold of transformative opportunities through regional integration. In a world marked by globalization, collaboration within the ECOWAS framework presents avenues for member countries to unlock economic potential, foster stability, and collectively address food security challenges. By leveraging synergies in trade, infrastructure development, and coordinated policies, ECOWAS can propel its member nations towards food security. The following are the opportunities that regional integration holds for ECOWAS and the broader West African region in terms of food security.

- **Enhanced Resource Utilization.** According to Gutman *et al.* (2012), resource utilization implies the efficient allocation and deployment of available resources, such as time, manpower, and materials, to maximize productivity and achieve optimal outcomes in a given task or project. It involves managing and optimizing the use of resources to ensure that they are employed effectively and without unnecessary waste. Within the context of regional integration, optimizing resource utilization through collaborative efforts can help to increase resilience to food security challenges. Through shared policies, coordinated efforts, and joint investments in agriculture, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can optimize resource utilization for enhanced food production and distribution. As opined by Beghin, Maertens and Swinnen (2015), a regional approach allows for the pooling of expertise, technology, and resources, leading to increased agricultural productivity. This will enable more efficient and coordinated use of agricultural inputs, technology and expertise to boost overall food production within the West African community.
- **Market Access Expansion.** It is incontrovertible that regional integration fosters market access expansion by creating a unified economic space among neighboring countries. By eliminating trade barriers, such as tariffs and quotas, regional blocs enhance cross-border cooperation, facilitating the seamless movement of goods and services (Usman and Haile, 2019). ECOWAS is endowed with the opportunity to expand market access by creating robust channels for the efficient distribution and availability of diverse food products within its community. As trade barriers diminish through regional integration,

agricultural producers gain broader access to markets, fostering increased production and income. This will encourage investment in the agricultural sector, technological advancements, and improved farming practices in the region. Consequently, a more resilient and diversified food supply chain emerges, reducing vulnerability to external shocks. Enhanced market access enables timely response to fluctuations in supply and demand, contributing to overall food security by ensuring a stable, accessible, and diverse supply of nutritious food for the West African populations. In another dimension, Usman and Haile (2019) agreed that access to improved markets can influence household food and nutrition security through multiple pathways. Market access can increase smallholder farmer's income through decreased transaction costs, improve food consumption, and reduce poverty and household food insecurity. Improved market access also increases the variety of available foods, thereby increasing opportunities for consumption diversification.

- **Knowledge Sharing and Technology Transfer.** Knowledge sharing and technology transfer (transaction) are core aspects of regional integration (Markman, Gianiodis, Phan and Balkin, 2005). Regional integration serves as a catalyst for technology transfer, as it streamlines regulatory frameworks and promotes cross-border investments, enabling the efficient dissemination of advanced technologies. ECOWAS has the opportunity to foster knowledge sharing and technological transfer among member states. This is necessary for enhancing food security within the region. For example, sharing agricultural best practices and innovations across regions will enable farmers to adopt more efficient and sustainable methods, increasing crop yields. Technology transfer, such as the dissemination of advanced irrigation systems or resilient crop varieties, will empower communities to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Access to improved agricultural machinery and processing technologies will further boost productivity and reduce post-harvest losses. Collaborative efforts in research and development will enhance overall agricultural capabilities, ensuring that diverse regions can benefit from shared expertise. Ultimately, the combination of knowledge sharing and technological transfer will contribute to building resilient food systems and addressing regional food security challenges.
- **Risk Diversification.** Another important benefit that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can offer through regional integration mechanism is risk diversification. By spreading agricultural activities across different countries within the region, ECOWAS can help to mitigate localized risks, such as adverse weather conditions, pests and diseases, thereby ensuring a more stable and diverse food supply. The West African countries are faced with volatile food prices, climate change and other agricultural risks (Adeoye et al. 2009) that can only be mitigated through regional integration practices.
- **Harmonized Policies.** Regional integration fosters harmonized policies among participating nations, leading to a more cohesive and efficient approach to shared challenges. By aligning policies, member states can streamline regulations, trade practices, and economic strategies, promoting a unified vision for sustainable development and ensuring food security. ECOWAS can use its mechanism to facilitate a coordinated approach to agricultural practices, trade, and distribution. This synchronization will help streamline the flow of food across borders, reducing trade barriers and enhancing overall efficiency in the food supply chain in the region. According to (Ntakyo and van den Berg, 2019), common policies can address issues such as standards for quality and safety, leading to increased reliability in the production and distribution of food products. Moreover, collaborative efforts in research and technology transfer can improve agricultural productivity, making the region more resilient to food-related challenges.

c. Sustainable Solutions

Food insecurity has been a major problem in the West African region and this problem needs to be addressed. Addressing food insecurity requires sustainable solutions that go beyond short-term fixes. Given to the growing population in the West African region, coupled with environmental concerns and economic disparities, there is need for a comprehensive and enduring approach that ECOWAS can utilise to foster food security within the region. In this section, we seek to highlight some sustainable solutions that will not only alleviate immediate hunger but also ensure long-term food security in the West African region.

- **Common Agricultural Policy.** ECOWAS can develop and implement shared agricultural policies to promote sustainable farming practices, efficient resource use and technology adoption. This will further reduce disparities in agricultural development across the region. As contended by Ombeni (2015), a common agricultural policy is imperative to address shared challenges and maximize agricultural potential. A unified policy framework facilitates equitable access to resources, promoting balanced growth and reducing disparities among member states. In the pursuit of food security and economic stability, a common agricultural policy becomes a strategic imperative for West African nations. ECOWAS countries need to work together to develop and implement policies that promote economic integration, improve resource allocation, and enhance the capacity of financial institutions to support trade and investment. This could involve strengthening regional institutions, promoting cross-border cooperation, and improving the overall business environment.
- **Water Management Strategies.** Implementing effective water management strategies is crucial for sustainable solutions to food insecurity in West Africa. ECOWAS needs to implement policies to manage water resources. This can lead to sustainable irrigation practices and enhanced water-use efficiency. As noted by Nin-Pratt, Diao and Bahta (2008), water management strategies are crucial for maintaining agricultural productivity and ensuring food security. For example, conservation practices, such as drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting, optimize water use in agriculture, ensuring crops receive adequate hydration. Investment in modern infrastructure, like water-efficient technologies and improved distribution systems, enhances agricultural productivity.
- **Operational Custom Union.** There is need for ECOWAS to become a custom union as envisaged by the ECOWAS commission. This is necessary because of the tremendous increase in the regional intensities of trade (RIT) and the significant reduction in food insecurity experienced when the region became a free trade area (FTA). Being a custom union is expected to further strengthen the integration among member states because member countries will impose a unified tariff on imports from non-member countries. Also, as a custom union, ECOWAS will be able to streamline trade barriers and facilitate smooth movement of food across borders. This is crucial to food security and agricultural development in West Africa, as it can create economies of scale in food production.
- **Market Information Systems (MIS).** Grossman and Helpman (1995) emphasized the importance of technology to trade liberalization. The scholars agreed that establishing market information systems could help to decision makers and farmers to make informed decisions and reduce market uncertainties. With effective Market Information Systems (MIS), ECOWAS will be able to collect, analyze, and disseminate real-time data on market trends, prices, and supply chains. This will make it easier for ECOWAS to make and implement decisive policies. Not only that, the availability of market information systems will empower farmers to optimize production based on demand, reducing post-harvest losses and ensuring fair market prices. In essence, ECOWAS can use Market Information Systems (MIS) to address market imbalances and strategically intervene in times of crisis.

- **Research and Innovation Collaboration.** The role of research and innovation in combating food insecurity should not be undermined. Joint research initiatives and the sharing of agricultural innovations can enhance productivity and resilience among ECOWAS countries. By pooling resources and knowledge, West African nations can collectively address challenges such as climate change impacts on agriculture. Interdisciplinary research facilitates the discovery of innovative solutions to challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity. Through joint projects, scientists, policymakers, and agricultural experts can address the complexities of global food systems. By sharing knowledge, technology, and best practices, ECOWAS can enhance agricultural productivity and promote inclusive growth, which can contribute to long-term food security.
- **Capacity Building Programmes.** Capacity building programs are instrumental in addressing food insecurity by empowering individuals and communities. ECOWAS countries need to invest in joint training programs and knowledge exchange initiatives. These initiatives will enhance the skills and knowledge of farmers, policymakers, and agricultural practitioners. Training in modern farming techniques, sustainable practices, and effective resource management will equip participants to improve agricultural productivity. By promoting entrepreneurship and diversification, these programs will create self-sufficiency by reducing vulnerability to food shortages.
- **Policy Coordination on Food Safety and Standards.** Effective policy coordination on food safety and standards is fundamental to ensuring food security among ECOWAS countries. Harmonizing food safety standards and regulations ensures that all member states adhere to consistent and high-quality standards, fostering trust in regional food products and promoting health and safety. When all ECOWAS countries collaborate across sectors, they can address systemic issues, prevent foodborne illnesses, and enhance overall food quality. Well-coordinated policies also promote fair trade practices, encouraging a level playing field for producers. By establishing robust frameworks for food safety, ECOWAS can safeguard public health, boost agricultural productivity, and contribute significantly to the long-term alleviation of food insecurity in the region.

4. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to shed light on the linkages between regional integration and food security in West Africa. For this purpose, an overview is presented on the state of food security in the West African region. It is revealed that none of the ECOWAS countries meets up with the three dimensions of food security as depicted by the World Food Summit. This means that the region is faced with continuous persistence of food crisis and insecurity. It is in this regards that this chapter further looked into the challenges limiting the benefits of regional integration for addressing food security in West Africa. The study revealed that the key challenges include diverse agricultural practices, political instability, environmental issues, infrastructure gaps, limited financial resources, border problems, trade barriers and lack of data sharing. However, the importance of regional integration was reemphasized in this study by elaborating on the opportunities of regional integration in mitigating food insecurity in the West African region. As discussed, regional integration offers ECOWAS with the opportunities to enhanced resource utilization, market access expansion, knowledge sharing and technology transfer, risk diversification and harmonized policies. The last section of this study recommended that ECOWAS needs to adopt a common agricultural policy, implement water management strategies, develop various market information systems and embark on different capacity building programmes in order to ensure food security among ECOWAS countries.

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