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# *Port of Cotonou and Accessibility of Landlocked ECOWAS Countries to the International Market*

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**Abstract – The port plays a key role in serving landlocked countries in general and those in the ECOWAS region. The port of Cotonou is a hub that serves as an interface between the northern countries and the ECOWAS hinterlands by facilitating the import of manufactured goods and the export of local and mining products. The overall objective of this study is to analyse the contribution of the port of Cotonou to the free trade area of the ECOWAS region.**

**Documentary research, direct observation and field surveys are the techniques used to collect the data. The questionnaire addressed to economic operators, concessionary port operators, transporters, and drivers. Thus, two hundred and ninety-five (295) socio-professional actors in the field of transport, port and maritime were surveyed. The results showed that Benin's economy is dependent on foreign trade (90%) which is carried out through port and maritime activities. The study reveals that, in terms of trade integration, almost all EU countries have an above-average score, except Benin (0.474), Niger (0.467) and Guinea-Bissau (0.307). Most maritime and port actors interviewed admitted that more than 71% of the flow of goods through the port of Cotonou is destined for the consumer and distribution markets of the Sahel countries, especially the Republic of Niger. Services have been put in place in several structures to improve and accelerate the fluidity and speed of transit. Certainly, efforts remain to be undertaken to make the port of Cotonou more competitive in the West African row to capture more customers from landlocked countries.**

**Keywords – Port of Cotonou, ECOWAS, Accessibility, Landlocked countries, International market.**

**Résumé – Le port joue un rôle primordial dans la desserte des pays enclavés en général et en particulier ceux de l'espace CEDEAO. Le port de Cotonou est une plate-forme tournante qui sert d'interface entre les pays du Nord et les hinterlands de la CEDEAO en facilitant l'importation des produits manufacturés et l'exportation des produits locaux et miniers. L'objectif global de ce travail est d'analyser la contribution du port de Cotonou dans la zone de libre-échange de l'espace CEDEAO.**

**La recherche documentaire, l'observation directe et les enquêtes de terrain sont les techniques utilisées pour bien collecter les données. Le questionnaire adressé aux opérateurs économiques, opérateurs portuaires concessionnaires, transporteurs et conducteurs. Ainsi deux cent quatre-vingt-quinze (295) acteurs socio-professionnels du domaine des transports, portuaire et maritime ont été enquêtés. Les résultats obtenus ont montré que l'économie du Bénin est tributaire des échanges extérieurs (90 %) qui se font par les activités portuaires et maritimes. L'étude révèle qu'au niveau de l'intégration commerciale presque tous les pays de l'Union ont un score au-dessus de la moyenne, sauf le Bénin (0,474), le Niger (0,467) et la Guinée-Bissau (0,307). La majorité des acteurs maritimes et portuaires interrogés ont avoués que plus de 71 % de la part des flux de marchandises passant par le port de Cotonou sont destinée aux marchés de consommation et de distribution des pays du Sahel surtout la république du Niger. Des services ont été mis en place dans plusieurs structures pour améliorer et accélérer la fluidité et la célérité du transit. Certes, des efforts restent à entreprendre pour rendre plus compétitif le port de Cotonou dans la rangé Ouest-africaine pour capter plus de clientèle des pays enclavés.**

**Mots clés – Port de Cotonou, CEDEAO, Accessibilité, Pays-enclavés, Marché international.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, nearly 80 per cent of world trade by volume and more than 70 per cent of its financial value is carried by sea and ports [1]. The percentages are even higher for most developing countries. Access to international trade markets today is only possible through ports, which account for more than 2/3 of intercontinental trade [2]. These ports are the driving force behind several development activities. Thus, the ports of the ECOWAS region play an essential role in regional and international trade by being the main gateway to regional and international trade and the interface of the different modes of transport to connect with the hinterland [3].

In addition, port and maritime actors face a dynamic and uncertain environment, both in terms of regulation by national and international institutions, accessibility of the port hinterland and competition. Similarly, the development of regional economic integration and the acceleration of trade globalisation have profoundly modified the role of the different actors of the port and maritime platform, as well as the place of ports in the organisation of flows.

In this respect, it is essential to simplify the process of moving goods between countries and to reduce the costs of trade transactions. Trade facilitation actions that reduce the costs of engaging in international trade must be at the heart of long-term development policy in developing countries. The need for trade facilitation is greater in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere because of the greater burden of trade costs currently placed on the ECOWAS community compared to the rest of the world [4].

Indeed, trade policy reforms and the reduction of port and border bureaucracy are reducing the trade transaction compliance costs associated with the administration of international trade flows. Thus, reducing these costs will lead to lower prices for consumers who buy mostly imported goods. For African small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Union in particular, the reduction in the cost of export-related formalities will allow more of them to access global markets.

However, the link between ports and hinterlands is a crucial issue for the effective integration of ECOWAS member countries, in the current context marked by a clear political will that have been translated into the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The AfCFTA is a free trade area project being created on the entire African continent with the establishment of eight (08) regional economic communities (RECs), of which the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is one. The objective of the project is to eventually integrate all 55 African Union states into a free trade area. It will gradually eliminate tariffs on intra-African trade, with a view to enabling African companies to trade easily on the continent, responding favourably to the demands of the growing African market and taking advantage of the benefits it offers.

In fact, within the regional economic community of ECOWAS, the ports of the countries with a maritime frontage play a primordial role in serving the landlocked countries (Burkina-Faso, Mali, and Niger) of the Union. However, the port of Cotonou is positioned as a hub that serves as an interface between the northern countries and the ECOWAS hinterlands by facilitating the import of manufactured products and the export of local and mining products.

This study analyses the contribution of the port of Cotonou to the free trade area of the ECOWAS region.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological approach adopted is based on three main data collection techniques, namely documentary research, observation, and field surveys.

### 2.1. Study area: geographical position of the ECOWAS Regional Economic Community

ECOWAS was established on 28 May 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos. The community, located in the West African region, comprises 15 member countries (Figure 1): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde (Cabo Verde), Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (ECOWAS, 2015). The region is divided into two groups, namely: maritime and landlocked countries. There are twelve (12) countries with at least one commercial seaport. These main ports serve a common international hinterland, composed of three (03) landlocked countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) and must operate in a highly competitive environment. The headquarters of the institution is located at 9°02'32" North and 7°31'31" East in the city of Abuja, the federal capital of Nigeria. Figure 1 illustrates the fifteen (15) ECOWAS states.


**Figure 1:** ECOWAS Community Member Countries

**Source:** Google map

The ports of the ECOWAS countries have near-monopolies in the markets of their home countries but compete for transit cargo to the three landlocked countries and transhipment traffic to other ports.

Imports and exports from and/or to these landlocked countries pass mainly through the ports of Cotonou (Benin), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Lomé (Togo), Tema (Ghana) and Dakar (Senegal), which are not only the gateways to the landlocked countries but also the main transit ports in the region. The steady growth in the flow of goods transiting through the ports on the coast is confronted with certain regulatory, enforcement and infrastructural constraints, which put a strain on the service to landlocked countries.

### 2.2. Data collected in the framework of this study

The types of data collected include

- qualitative data collected from economic operators (Niger, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mali) related to the organisation of economic exchanges

- quantitative data (volume of transported goods, storage areas, warehouses, transport costs, etc.) from institutions (PAC, CNCB, CBC, CNUT)

- port statistics (PAC, PAL, UNCTAD)

- data on the quality of infrastructure

### 2.3. Data collection techniques and tools

#### 2.3.1 Documentary review

The review was based on the consultation of various books, publications and reports produced by structures and organisations. It was carried out at the documentation centre of the Conseil National des Chargeurs du Bénin (CNCB), and at the port of Cotonou. Literature collected on the Internet from various sites was an integral part of the search for information useful for the demonstration.

#### 2.3.2 Observation

This is an *in-situ* observation that refers to concrete situations, the objective being to capture the practices and behaviours of handlers, port users and transporters that the surveys themselves cannot capture. Indeed, the port of Cotonou is the epicentre of international commercial transactions in its immediate hinterland.

### 2.3.3 Sampling method

The choice of the sample depends on the involvement of each actor in maritime and port activities, as well as maritime and land transport, and in the process of routing goods and the nature of relations with the Sahelian countries in the hinterland of the port of Cotonou. The selection criterion is the number of years of activity, which is at least two years.

Given the density of the actors involved and the extent of the study area, it was possible to define a certain number of parameters for the sample in a reasoned manner by the main groups that are the economic operators (importers, exporters, forwarders, transporters, etc.), the port administration, the concessionary port operators, the public operator managing the port of Cotonou.

Indeed, the determination of the sample size was possible thanks to the method of Schwartz (1995). His formula is as follows:

$$N = Z\alpha^2 PQ / d^2$$

With the following parameters:

- N: sample size per user of the port

- $Z\alpha^2$: deviation fixed at 1.96 corresponding to a confidence level of 95%

- P: number of respondents from the facility/total number of respondents from all the facilities chosen to conduct the research study

- Q: 1-P

- d: margin of error which is equal to 5%.

By proceeding in this way by category of actor, a sampling rate of 60% is applied to the result to determine the exact number of households to be surveyed. We developed a questionnaire addressed to 295 respondents distributed according to socio-professional groups.

The application of the Schwartz formula resulted in 288 actors to be interviewed. Given the relevance and importance of our research topic, we increased the number of people to be interviewed for certain actors. Instead of three (03) authorised consignees to be interviewed, 10 actors in this field were taken. In sum, the total number of people chosen, all categories combined, is 295.

All these actors were taken at random, considering their mobility, their availability, and their relationship with the Cotonou port platform.

### 2.3. Data processing and analysis

The survey forms were analysed manually (coding of data) and automatically (integration of coded data into the computer using Access, SPSS 11.01, and the Excel spreadsheet). The results of the data processing constitute part of the database to be used. Statistical data collected from the Port Authority (PAC), CNCB, CBC, CNUT and EMABE and in the field completed this database. The quantitative data were processed automatically, which made it possible to produce tables and graphs.

## III. Results And Analysis

### 3.1. Improved competitiveness of enterprises and increased intra-African trade and investment

The AfCFTA will gradually remove tariff barriers to intra-African trade, making it easier for African companies to trade within the continent, meet the demands of the growing African market and be represented in the international market. In fact, the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area will accelerate the integration of the eight RECs, as the regions concerned will have to align themselves with the provisions of the Agreement on the Establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the obligations arising from it. In addition, the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers between members of the RECs will boost intra-African trade and promote the competitiveness of African businesses. African business enterprises will be able to trade more easily, with access to the external market.

Indeed, the integration of the ECOWAS community states into a single trading area offers great opportunities for business enterprises in each member country to ensure sustainable development and investment in the Union.

### 3.1.1 Analysis of the results of the Index of Regional Integration in Africa (IIRA): the case of the WAEMU

According to the results of the African Regional Integration Index [5] (Figure 2), we find that in regional infrastructure, WAEMU countries have an average score[1] of 0.303 over the period 2010-2019, which is well below the average (0.5). This low infrastructure score suggests that member states need to invest more to address the infrastructure deficit in the Union. However, there is an above-average score in the areas of trade integration (0.527) and free movement of persons (0.792).

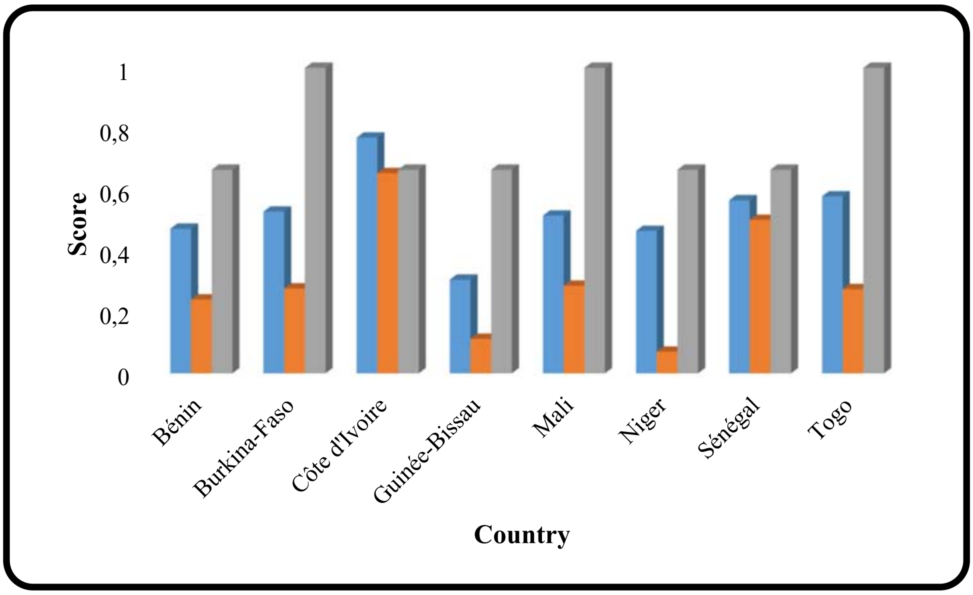



**Figure 2:** Some average ARII scores in WAEMU countries

**Source:** Vodoungnon Anignikin PADONOU, ARII statistical data, 2019

It is true that, in general, UEMOA scores very low on the ARII in the area of regional infrastructure (all infrastructure combined). However, if we go deeper into the analysis, we find that as far as WAEMU is concerned, only two countries - Côte d'Ivoire (0.656) and Senegal (0.503) - have achieved a high performance in regional infrastructure. Other countries such as Mali (0.287), Burkina Faso (0.278), Togo (0.276) and Benin (2.42) recorded a performance that can be described as moderate. On the other hand, Guinea-Bissau (0.113) and Niger (0.071) recorded the lowest performance in the Union.

About trade integration, almost all EU countries score above average, except Benin (0.474), Niger (0.467) and Guinea-Bissau (0.307). The best performance of the EU Member States lies in the dimension of free movement of people. The average score of each country is well above the average and ranges from 0.667 to 1.

### 3.1.2 WAEMU Trade Integration Policy

The Economic Policy and Internal Taxation Department (EPD) is responsible for the Union's common trade policies, which include

- Harmonisation of the legal and accounting framework of public finances,

- Harmonisation of domestic, direct, and indirect taxation and implementation of the fiscal transition programme,

- Multilateral surveillance of convergence and performance of macroeconomic policies,

- Assistance to Member States in negotiations with international financial institutions; Economic analyses, studies, and forecasts,

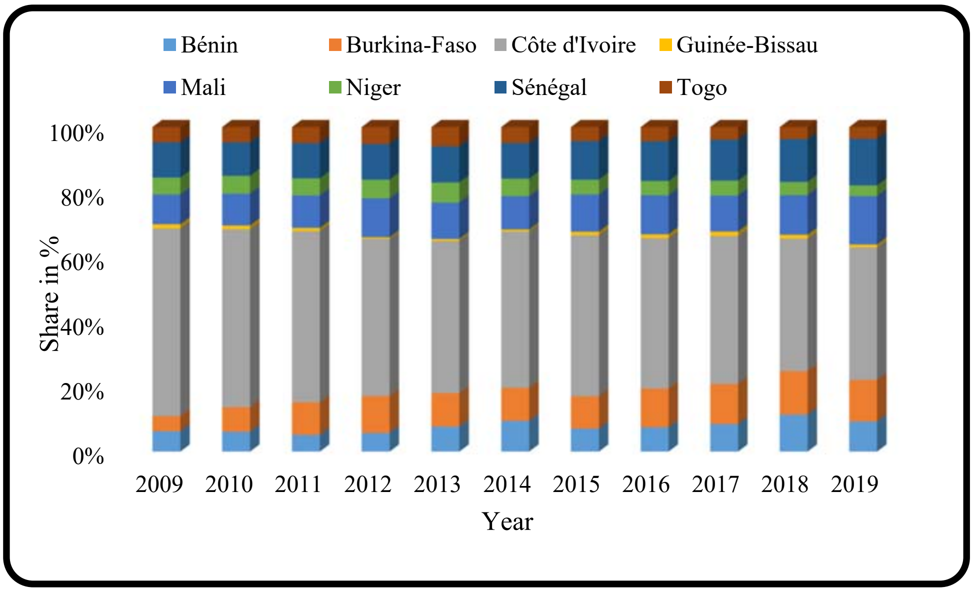
- Capacity building of Member States in economic policy formulation and evaluation,

[1] Scores are calculated from 0 (low level) to 1 (high level)

- Production of statistics for the Union's organs and specialised institutions and improving the performance of national statistical systems,

- Monitoring monetary policy, financial markets, and microfinance as well as the implementation of the free movement of capital (goods and services).

The common trade policy put in place by ECOWAS and WAEMU has had a positive influence on the structural evolution of intra-community trade. Indeed, the total volume of intra-community trade in value terms for 2019 is estimated at 2589.7 billion, compared with 2495.9 billion in 2018, an increase of 3.8%. On the other hand, the volume of total extra-WAEMU exports of goods by value stood at 17 984.4 billion in 2019, up by 10.6% compared with the level recorded in 2018. The following figure illustrates the contribution of each member country to the Union's exports of goods outside the Union over the period 2009 to 2019.

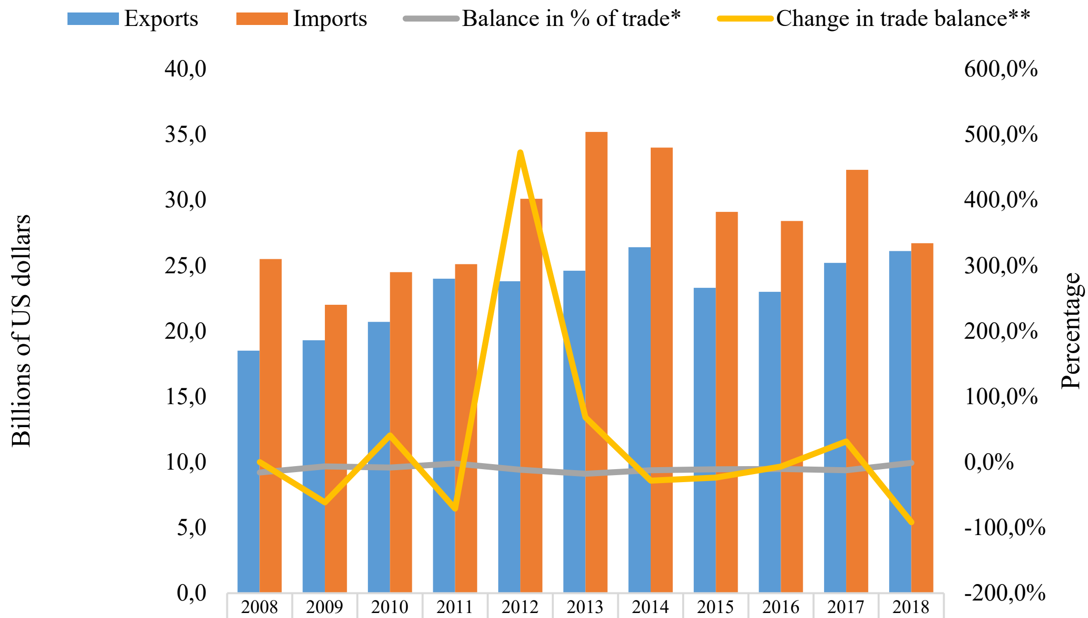



**Sources:** Vodoungnon Anignikin PADONOU, BCEAO, Customs statistics

**Figure 3:** Share of contribution of each member country to the Union's exports from 2009-2019

Analysis of Figure 3 shows that the shares of exports by country show the predominance of Côte d'Ivoire, which accounts for 40.7% of the community's external sales in 2019 as in 2018, followed by Mali (14.9% against 12.2%), Senegal (14.4% against 13.2%) and Burkina Faso (12.9% against 13.5%). Niger's share fell by 0.8% to 3.3% in 2019 from 4.1% (2018). Togo's share declined by 0.1 percentage points to 3.6% in 2019 from 3.7% a year earlier. The shares of Benin and Guinea-Bissau also declined by 2.1% and 0.3% to 9.3% and 0.9% respectively in 2019. Contributions to export growth were 4.3 points, 4.2 points, 2.7 points, 0.8 points and 0.3 points in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Senegal, Burkina, and Togo respectively. Benin, Guinea-Bissau, and Niger are the countries where contributions decreased by 1.2 points, 0.1 points and 0.5 points respectively in 2019.

Intra- and extra-community trade in the community trade within the WAEMU is developing positively. However, the share of the eight (08) Member States in international trade is still very low. According [6], in 2019, trade in goods of all WAEMU countries amounted to 55.6 billion euros. The following figure illustrates the evolution of the Union's trade in goods on the international market.




| | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exports | 18,5 | 19,3 | 20,7 | 24,0 | 23,8 | 24,6 | 26,4 | 23,3 | 23,0 | 25,2 | 26,1 |
| Imports | 25,5 | 22,0 | 24,5 | 25,1 | 30,1 | 35,2 | 34,0 | 29,1 | 28,4 | 32,3 | 26,7 |
| Balance in % of trade* | -15,9% | -6,5% | -8,4% | -2,2% | -11,7% | -17,7% | -12,6% | -11,1% | -10,5% | -12,3% | -1,1% |
| Change in trade balance** | 0,0% | -61,43% | 40,7% | -71,1% | 472,7% | 68,3% | -28,3% | -23,7% | -6,9% | 31,5% | -91,5% |

**Source:** Vodoungnon Anignikin PADONOU, World Trade Statistics, 2020

**Figure 4:** Evolution of WAEMU extra-community trade from 2008 to 2018

**NB**: ** Balance in % of trade =(X-M)/(X+M), otherwise written: (Export-Import) / (Export + Import)*

***Variation in Trade Balance = ((M1-X1) - (M0-X0)) /(M0-X0), otherwise written: ((Import1-Export1) - (Import0-Export0)) / (Import0-Export0)*

The analysis of Figure 4 shows that the countries of the Union trade more with the outside world than within the WAEMU area. Trade remains one of the essential barometers of effective sub-regional integration and openness to the world market. Over the entire study period, the value in billions of US dollars of the Union’s exports on the international market is largely below that of imports. However, in 2018, there was a slight difference in the value of imports of six (6) million US dollars over that of exports. The rate of coverage of imports by exports stood at 76.7% in 2018 compared to 83.3% in 2017, a decrease of 6.6%.

There was an overall deficit in the Union’s trade balance over the period 2008 to 2018. Nevertheless, in 2018, there was a sharp decline in the zone's trade deficit (from -7.1 billion in 2017 to -0.6 billion in 2018) due to a significant increase in exports of gold (+9.6%), cotton (+9.4%), cashew nuts (+4.5%) and petroleum products (+10.3%), despite the decline in some key exports (cocoa (-12.8%), rubber (-14.4%)).

However, the community’s trade openness rate fell by 0.5% to 29.3% in 2018, compared with 29.8% in 2017. But trade in goods was relatively low (6%) compared to the Union’s economic growth of 8.0%. Thus, integration is a major challenge for the development and accessibility of the countries of the Union to the sub-regional and international market, which should be reflected in the implementation of the "*effective common market*", with effective instruments allowing for the free movement of goods in the sub-region.

### 3.2 Transport of goods between the port of Cotonou and the hinterland countries

The agreement on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which came into force on 1 January 2021, will promote logistical fluidity that will benefit the autonomous port of Cotonou (PAC), which will be able to take advantage of institutional reforms aimed at securing business development and private sector investment in Benin. For the past ten years, traffic has been growing at the port of Cotonou, marked by the gradual increase in containerised traffic, despite the crises of land border closures with its commercial neighbours.

### 3.2.1 Evolution of import and export tonnage

Port of Cotonou traffic is made up of imports and exports of all kinds to or in transit through the port of Cotonou.

Thus, imports concern products such as foodstuffs, cereals and similar products, fertilisers and insecticides, limestone and slag, construction materials, lubricants and bituminous materials, equipment, vehicles and parts, sulphur, hydrocarbons, clinker, gypsum and miscellaneous.

In addition, exports include cotton seeds and cotton, cashew and shea nuts, vegetable oils, oil cakes, wood, other containerised and non-containerised products. The evolution of Benin's import and export traffic in tonnage over the last twenty-one years is illustrated in Figure 5.

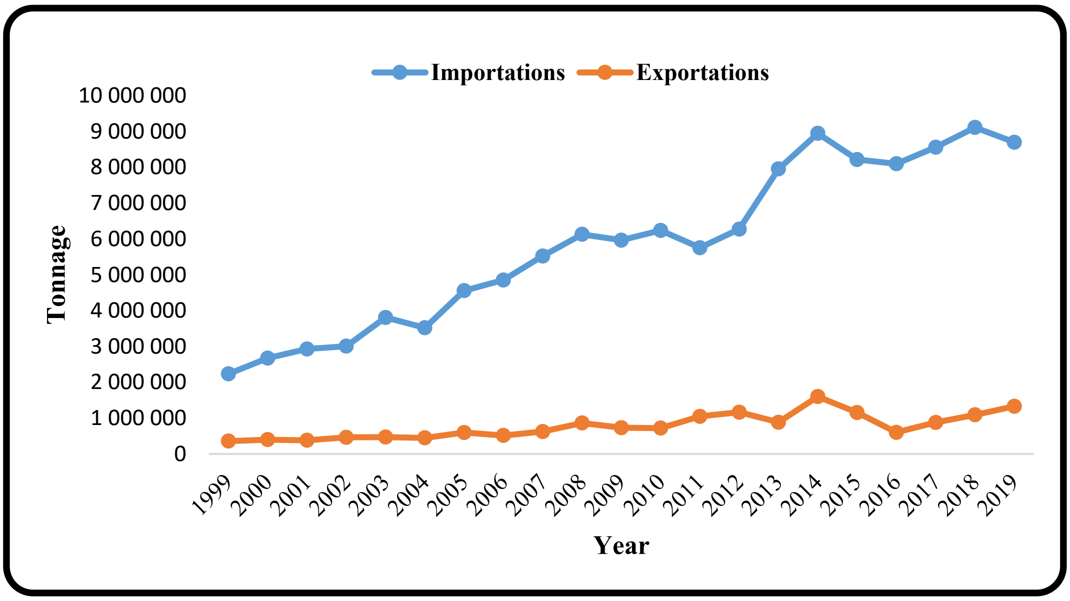



**Figure 5:** Evolution of import and export traffic tonnage

**Source:** Vodoungnon Anignikin PADONOU, DCM/PAC statistics department, 2020

Figure 5 shows that from 1999 to 2019, imports and exports from the port of Cotonou have increased overall, but on different scales. Most Benin's external trade passes through the port of Cotonou. In fact, in the port of Benin, as in most ports in the ECOWAS region, there is an evolution of traffic characterised by a quasi-dominant and permanent imbalance of imports over exports.

Imports account for 84.47% of annual traffic against 15.53% for exports (for the 2019 period). Imports normally represent six to seven times exports. Since 2000, there has been a large increase in imports at the expense of exports. This is due to the significant decline in export products and the increase in imported manufactured goods (which are in high demand on the local consumer market). Similarly, there has been a very slight improvement in export products, as well as in re-exports since 2011.

In fact, exports of cotton products, cotton grains, raw cashew nuts and oilseeds to European and Asian markets over the last decade have boosted Benin's exports.

### 3.2.2 Economic importance of transit traffic from Sahelian countries

External port trade consisting of imports and exports accounts for more than 90% of Benin's foreign trade in goods. Similarly, the share of port transit traffic occupies an important place in Benin's national economy, thanks to its financial spin-offs.

Indeed, the port of Cotonou records a significant transit traffic from and/or to landlocked African countries, especially those of the ECOWAS region. In fact, transit traffic is a part of international traffic that corresponds to imports and exports of all kinds of products using the sea route.

Transit traffic in the port of Cotonou has increased very rapidly since the implementation of the new port of Cotonou in the 1960s. Indeed, goods in transit at the port of Cotonou from and to the Sahel countries are mostly exports and imports.

Products destined for export from landlocked ECOWAS countries are generally agricultural products (shea nuts, cashew nuts, cotton seeds, cotton, and tanned hides, etc.) and mining products (uranium, uranate, oil, coal, etc.). However, import products in transit through the port of Cotonou to the hinterland include food products (rice, wheat flour, sugar, and cereals), construction materials, vehicles and spare parts, hydrocarbons, chemicals (fertilisers, insecticides, bituminous and lubricants) and sulphur. Among the import products of landlocked countries that use the port of Cotonou, food products hold an important place in transit traffic. However, each Sahelian country has its own dominant products.

According to the maritime and port actors surveyed, a large part of the goods is destined for the consumer markets of the hinterland countries. Figure 6 illustrates the share of goods flows destined for hinterland countries according to the opinions of the respondents.

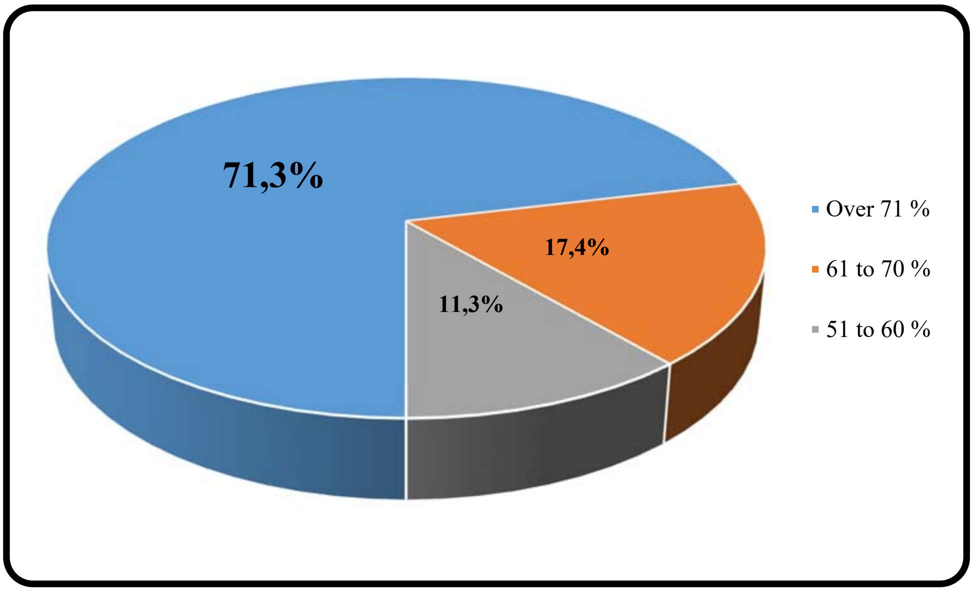



**Figure 6:** Share of goods flows to hinterland countries

**Source:** Fieldwork, October 2020

According to the analysis of Figure 6, the majority of maritime and port actors admitted that more than 71% of the share of goods flows passing through the port of Cotonou are destined for the consumption and distribution markets of the Sahel countries, especially the Republic of Niger.

### 3.2.3 Dynamics of the economic performance of the port of Cotonou

The port activity of Cotonou is significant and positively linked with economic growth. Indeed, recent investments and policy strategies put in place by the Beninese government are important determinants of Benin’s port economic growth and GDP. Investment is a vital element for the growth of Benin's port economy.

Indeed, the port of Cotonou contributes a lot to the national budget through port fees, customs duties and other taxes collected by related structures. Trade between the port of Cotonou and its international hinterland (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) has increased over the decade 2009-2018.

In addition, the volume of goods traffic handled at the port of Cotonou has increased steadily, except for the insignificant counter-performance observed in 2004, 2009, 2011, 2015 and 2016. The volume went from 1,119,174 tonnes in 1990 to 9,799,133 tonnes in 2018, an increase of 88.58%. Over the period 1990 to 2018, both national and transit traffic have grown. Figure 7 shows the evolution of national and transit traffic transiting through the port of Cotonou to supply the local market and the hinterland.

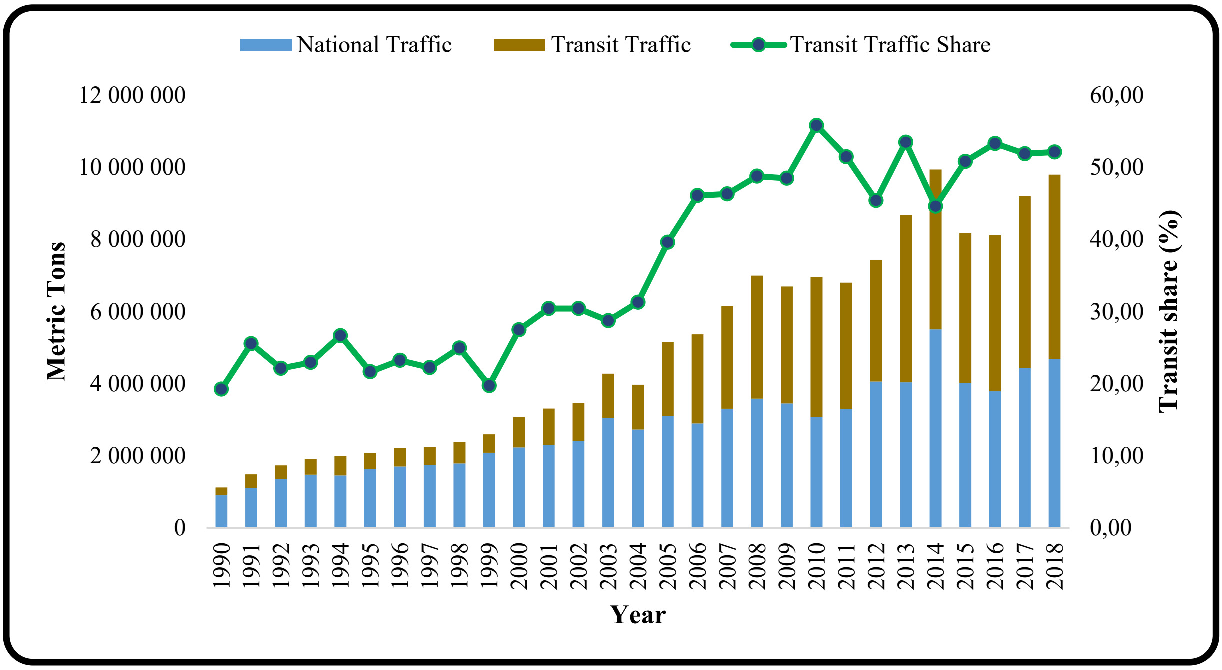



**Figure 7:** Evolution of national and transit traffic growth

**Source:** Vodoungnon Anignikin PADONOU, based on SESPAM port statistics, 2020

Figure 7 shows that between 1990 and 2018, transit traffic grew progressively until it equalled national traffic, which used to be in the majority. From 2010 to 2018, the share of transit in total traffic exceeded the 50% threshold, in 2010 (55.83%), in 2011 (51.48%), in 2013 (53.49%), in 2015 (50.82%), in 2016 (53.32%), in 2017 (51.9%) and in 2018 (52.14%). However, there was a slight drop in this share below 50% in the periods 2012 and 2014, to 45.4% and 44.61% respectively.

In fact, throughout the period 1990-2018, transit cargo traffic occupied a very large share of the total volume handled in the port of Cotonou. Transit traffic has remained on the increase throughout the period, except for the decreases observed in 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015, when traffic varied by (-5.11%), (-11%), (-3.72%), (-4.74%) and (-6.72%) respectively, compared with the respective years 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014.

The rapid growth observed in transit traffic is explained by the diversification and intensification of traffic towards the hinterland. Similarly, the modernisation of the port tool through the installation of new generation gantries, as well as generously dimensioned facilities, have contributed to an increase in transit and national traffic for national and regional trade.

Transit traffic with Sahelian countries is predominantly import products. The trade flows of products from the three main ECOWAS landlocked countries that use the port of Cotonou are illustrated in Figure 8.

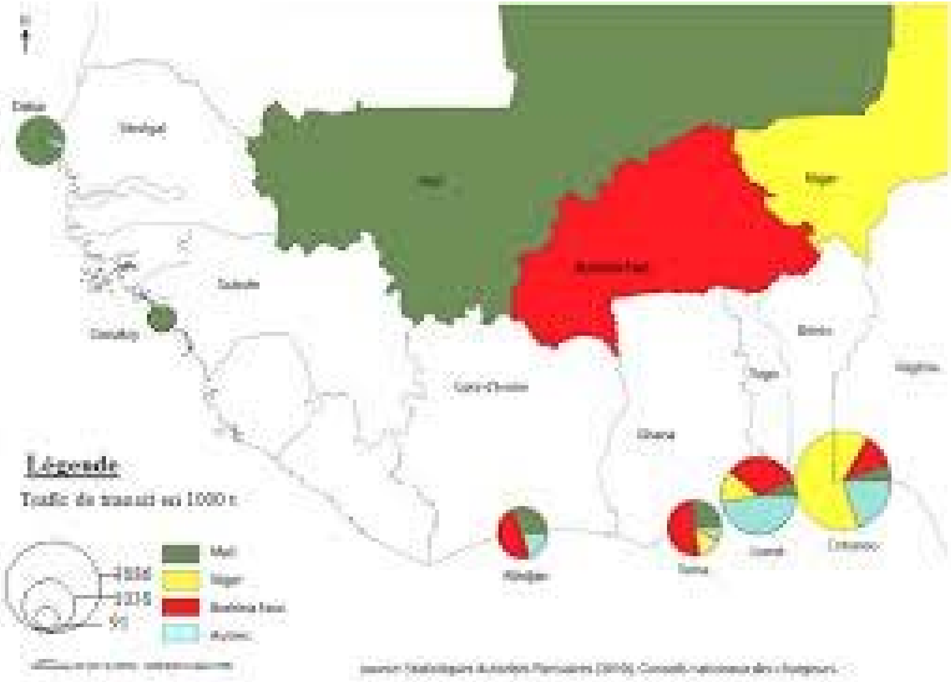



**Figure 8:** Trade flows of landlocked countries in transit through the port of Cotonou

**Source:** Messan LIHOUSSOU, 2010

Figure 8 illustrates the proposal of goods (import and export) in transit at the port of Cotonou. A significant variation can be observed in the proportions according to the movements. The landlocked ECOWAS countries import more goods, i.e., 81% for Niger, followed respectively by Burkina Faso with 13% and Mali with 6%. However, Burkina-Faso predominates over Niger and Mali in terms of exports of products transiting through the port of Cotonou for the period 2019, with 78% of exports in transit through the port of Cotonou and 22% for Niger and 0% for Mali respectively.

The Republic of Niger is the leading hinterland country using the port of Cotonou with a transit traffic of 81.71% of total transit traffic, well above the other countries (Burkina Faso (10.18%) and Mali (8.11%)).

## IV. Discussions

The present research, by focusing on the role of the port of Cotonou in serving landlocked countries, aims to fill an information gap on transit traffic, port, and maritime activities, as well as international trade carried out on the Cotonou port platform. Despite the difficult competitive environment of the companies, the non-accessibility of certain port authorities and the mistrust of the latter, as well as the Covid 19 pandemic, the obstacles were overcome to achieve the objective set for this research.

To return to the results obtained from this field survey, they are relatively close to the achievements of previous research carried out on the issue in the port and maritime domains of Northern countries (Europe, America, and Asia).

On the other hand, almost all international trade in the Republic of Benin is carried out by sea, more than 90% of it. In fact, the port and maritime sector plays an important role in the national economy and in the socio-economic life of the Beninese population. It is clear that the port of Cotonou is becoming an inseparable link in Benin's port and maritime sector and the cornerstone for more than 80% of tax revenues, and a lever for sustainable development, where administrative and financial formalities were highly corruptible and constraining. Port and financial administrative formalities (PAC, CNCB, Customs, etc.) were burdensome and port actors, especially those in the international hinterland of the port of Cotonou, fled to neighbouring ports.

This perception is corroborated by the authors' research ([7]; [8]; [9]). Indeed, they argue that ports are the local economic engines in terms of activities related to the port and maritime sectors, but also in terms of the industrial activities they generate.

However, the geographical position of the port of Cotonou constitutes a natural favourable asset for the various international trade exchanges that transit through its port ([10]; [11]). The country's political and socio-economic stability is a factor in the growth of port and maritime activity flows [12]. Thus, some researchers have confirmed that the geographical position of a port on the link/junction between a maritime foreland and a terrestrial hinterland favours commercial exchanges ([13] and [14]).

Despite everything, the port of Cotonou must rely on trade (exports and imports) from its international hinterland (Niger, Burkina-Faso, and Mali), from which it must draw much of the transit traffic flow. Thus, the port authorities of Cotonou must build loyalty and provide quality services to reassure the Sahelian countries of the WAEMU without a maritime frontage, as the international hinterland of the port of Cotonou is in strong competition with the ports of West Africa (Lomé, Lagos port complex, Abidjan, Tema, etc.).

## V. Conclusion

The port of Cotonou being the expression of international trade links between the major commercial maritime routes of its international foreland and the economic activities in its national and international hinterland. The port of Cotonou thus becomes an indispensable platform characterised by the commercial exchange relations of the traffic of products to and/or from the countries of the hinterland, and vice versa for the international foreland. In fact, the choice of a port nowadays is becoming more and more a strategic and economic issue for the Sahelian countries of the ECOWAS region. Nowadays, the hinterlands of the ECOWAS region are increasingly at stake in economic competition for all the ports of this economic community, each of which is seeking to take market shares in a perspective of competition and monopoly of traffic.

Indeed, the port of Cotonou's maritime traffic has grown rapidly for all types of cargo but faces great challenges due to the lack of efficient land links with the hinterland. The port of Cotonou is the most secure and least rugged ocean gateway to serve the 65 million inhabitants of Mali, Burkina-Faso and Niger, the leading transhipment port to Nigeria, with its 206 million consumers (Worldometer, 2020).

The port of Cotonou, a true transit port and the first transit port of Niger, has been investing for a decade in reforms and extension and modernisation projects to withstand competition from the ports of the West African Coast (WAC), its immediate neighbours, the port of Lomé and the port complex of Lagos. However, the port of Cotonou has the assets to compete with the ports of the West African row, particularly those of ECOWAS, with an extensive hinterland and significant volumes. Similarly, its geographical position is strategic, and it constitutes a back-up port for the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Therefore, no port, in particular the port of Cotonou, can develop without good commercial relations with the international hinterland through the factors of exchange and distribution that are the traffic of goods (exports and imports), the port and maritime infrastructures, and the transit corridors.

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