



# Nigeria's Relations with the European Union: An Analysis of the Economic Partnership Agreement

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## Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Nigeria and the European Union (EU) aims to enhance economic cooperation and trade liberalization. However, it has sparked significant debate due to its potential implications for Nigeria's economic development and sovereignty. This paper critically analyzes the EPA, focusing on the key issues, challenges, and implications for

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Nigeria. The core concern is whether the EPA's benefits, such as increased market access and development aid, outweigh the drawbacks, including potential revenue loss, unfair competition, and stringent EU standards that could disadvantage Nigerian industries. The analysis employs a qualitative approach, reviewing existing literature, policy documents, and expert opinions to assess the economic, social, and political impacts of the EPA on Nigeria. This includes a comparative analysis of similar agreements between the EU and other African countries to draw relevant parallels and insights. The findings reveal that while the EPA offers opportunities for market access and development aid, it also poses significant risks to Nigeria's economic stability and sovereignty. The paper concludes that Nigeria must carefully weigh these factors, considering its economic priorities and readiness to meet the agreement's requirements. Future relations between the EU and Nigeria will depend on managing these challenges and opportunities, ensuring the partnership promotes mutual growth without compromising Nigeria's autonomy.

*Keywords: EU-Nigeria; economic agreement; West Africa; Bi-lateral relations; economic growth.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, like many developing countries, continues to seek sustainable growth amidst persistent developmental challenges. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's relations with the European Union (EU) have evolved significantly [1]. Shortly after independence, EU member states established diplomatic relations with Nigeria, focusing primarily on trade and economic cooperation, with European countries becoming major trading partners for Nigeria. In the mid-1970s, Nigeria led a coalition of Caribbean and Pacific countries in negotiations with the European Economic Community (EEC), culminating in the formation of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) Economic Community under the Lomé Convention in Togo in 1975. This initiative aimed to foster institutional reform and solidarity between the Global South and North through economic development, cooperation, and leadership engagements [2,3]. Engaging in trade partnerships with other countries within and beyond the region is seen as a critical driver of sustainable development across the ACP regional groupings [4]. Over the years, Nigeria's relationship with the EU has been geared towards promoting social, political, and economic partnerships [5]. The discovery of Nigeria's vast natural resources in the 1970s spurred an oil boom, which attracted substantial EU investment in various sectors such as mass communication, education, infrastructure, urbanization, transport, and health services [6]. Nigeria holds significant economic potential for the EU, ranking among the top five countries in trade dealings with the Union, reflecting the EU's substantial interest in both material and ethical benefits from its relationship with Nigeria, even during periods of military rule [7]. Over time, the

relationship has transcended humanitarian aid to become one of interdependence and mutual reliance [8]. Despite various challenges and opportunities from 1960 to the present, Nigeria-EU relations have remained robust with some underlining challenges regarding the Economic Partnership Agreement. Hence, this study aims to analyze the Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Nigeria.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the longstanding relationship between Nigeria and the European Union (EU), the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the two entities has faced significant challenges and controversies. While the EPA aims to foster trade liberalization and economic cooperation, its implementation has raised concerns about potential adverse effects on Nigeria's economic sovereignty, local industries, and sustainable development goals. Therefore, this study seeks to critically analyze the Economic Partnership Agreement between Nigeria and the European Union, examining the key issues, challenges, and implications for Nigeria's economic development and bilateral relations with the EU.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a descriptive analysis approach to examine Nigeria's relations with the European Union (EU) and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). Data were sourced from a variety of reliable and authoritative materials, including academic journals, articles, books, and reports and publications from relevant institutions. Data sources from previous literatures from Google

Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and DOAJ were utilized to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The collected data were meticulously analyzed to identify key themes, patterns, and insights. These sources provided contextual background and supported the analysis by offering historical data, theoretical frameworks, and previous research findings related to Nigeria-EU relations and the EPA.

### **3. THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS (EPA) WITH WEST AFRICA**

“This theoretical background is crucial for analyzing the EU-ACP Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) as regard to Nigeria economics. In June 2002 the European Union launched negotiations to conclude free trade agreements with different configurations of ACP countries, called Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). One of the groups to be covered by such an agreement is made up of 16 countries in West Africa - the 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) plus Mauritania. The EPA as it concerns ECOWAS was formulated on the basis of the Cotonou Agreement of June 2000 concluded between the EU and the ACP. ECOWAS is itself a party to the agreement, as is UEMOA (the West African Economic and Monetary Union), a further level of regional integration comprising 8 ECOWAS countries. The negotiations with West Africa started in 2003 and lasted until 2014, when the text of the agreement was finally initialed by the chief negotiators. According to the Council [9] negotiating directives, the overarching objective was to conclude an agreement that would promote the smooth and gradual integration of West-African partners into the world economy, spur sustainable development and reduce poverty. A more concrete objective was to assure further free access for West African countries to EU market in line with WTO rules. Since some of the countries in West Africa had graduated from the status of least developed countries (LDCs), without a free trade agreement they risked losing free access to EU market; the EU can grant such access unilaterally only in a non-discriminatory fashion, and it has limited it to LDCs. This situation has been of particular concern to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, two middle income economies that export agricultural products to the EU for which they benefit from

tariff exemptions” [10,11]. “It can be argued that The European Union's push for the liberalization of African, Caribbean, and Pacific economies is rooted in neo-liberalism. William Brown argues that the current EU-ACP development cooperation mirrors historical patterns, restructured to reflect liberal and multilateral norms of international relations” [12]. The multilateral negotiation framework under the World Trade Organization and the preferential trade agreement, such as the EU-ACP EPA, promote free trade.

### **4. CONTENT AND STATUS OF THE AGREEMENT**

“The agreement provides for asymmetric liberalization of trade in goods. While the EU will fully open its market, the African partners can maintain tariffs on 25% of tariff lines in order to protect sensitive sectors. The agreement sets the objective of pursuing sustainable development at all levels of the economic partnership. The agreement establishes a dedicated development programmed, endowed with 6.5 billion EUR for the period 2015-2019, in order to support its implementation. In order to protect the parties from the potentially harmful effects of trade liberalization, the agreements provide for a series of safeguards, including the temporary imposition of customs tariffs and quantitative restrictions in case of a sudden surge in imports threatening local producers. Certain export taxes are temporarily allowed in order to protect infant industries in West Africa. The agreement contains a rendezvous clause providing that the parties will start negotiations on a comprehensive agreement covering services, capital transfers, competition, investment, copy right and sustainable development. The debates on the agreement have focused mainly on two crucial issues: the potential disruptive effects of trade liberalization on agricultural and industrial sectors in West Africa, and the loss of customs duties - an essential source of government revenue in many countries in the region. Concerning the first aspect, during the negotiations phase, civil society organizations from Europe and West Africa as well as West African farmer associations have expressed their concerns about the potential effects on the West African agriculture. Responding to such concerns, the final text of the agreement protects many sensitive agricultural products at the same level as the ECOWAS Common External Tariff” [13,11].

**Table 1. EU–West Africa trade in goods, 2014–2019 (all figures in billions of euros)**

Year	EU imports	EU exports	Balance
2014	33.6	28.1	-5.4
2015	26.0	26.7	0.7
2016	18.7	22.7	4.0
2017	22.8	25.6	2.8
2018	29.7	28.4	-1.3
2019	31.3	28.9	-2.4

Source: European Commission [14]

“The agreement also includes substantial safeguards for protecting emerging industries. Concerning the second aspect, the loss of tax revenue, when liberalization is completed, is estimated by the European Commission to be lower than the GDP growth expected as a result of the EPA. Government revenue in the region should decrease by 2% by 2035 because of the EPA, but the agreement provides for dialogue and cooperation on the matter, including financial resources” [13]. This agreement outlines a model that will gradually phase out trade barriers and other hindrances that are seen as impediments to free trade and the full integration of the global economy. It was designed also as a successor to the erstwhile non-reciprocal trade preferences which the EU had previously given to ACP countries [15]. “The agreement was signed by all EU Member States in December 2014. So far, 15 of the 16 West African countries have also signed it, most recently the Gambia and Mauritania in 2018. However, the EPA needs to be signed by all West African countries to open the way to provisional application. Nigeria is the only remaining West African country that must sign the agreement. It is the region's biggest economy, and its endorsement of the EPA is crucial. More so, during the EPA negotiations, the Parliament supported the objective of concluding asymmetric trade agreements with ACP countries that promote sustainable development, regional integration, and a reduction of poverty. It encouraged the Commission to adopt a flexible and pragmatic approach to negotiations with West Africa. It also insisted on the inclusion of appropriate provisions for the protection of human rights and good governance in the agreement” [16,17].

## 5. THE EPA AND NIGERIA: INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS

“Nigeria has a long tradition of protectionist policies, with a questionable record – as its current economic woes show. The country is

moving towards more opening in terms of trade; in July 2019 after much hesitation, Nigeria signed the Africa continental free trade agreement. At the 49th session of ECOWAS in Dakar, Senegal in June 2016, President Muhammadu Buhari was evasive on the subject, and referred to the need for wider consultation with Nigerians (especially small enterprises and trade unions) before taking any decision on the EPA that was negotiated” [18,19]. Buhari also reiterated this position in April 2018, while receiving a Letter of Credence from the Head of Delegation of the European Union to Nigeria, Ketil Iversen Karlsen, at State House, Abuja [20]. “The fear here, on the part of government, is that it will incur the wrath of influential EPA sceptics within the country. For example, EPA issues of product standardization and sanitary conditions may not favour small businesses in particular and the economy in general [21,19]. Non-state actors such as civil society organizations, which often have considerable influence over the EPA negotiations, especially on the African sides, are not comfortable with this scenario” [22]; they envisage a future of manufacturers struggling to meet sanitary requirements. However, below are some of the contradictions concerning the EPA and Nigeria economy growth:

### 5.1 Potential Revenue Loss and Impact on Local Economies

“The EU-EPA proposals could lead to a significant reduction in Nigeria's tariff revenues from imports within ECOWAS and from the EU. As Africa's largest market, Nigeria relies heavily on these tariffs, and the anticipated benefits of the EPA might not compensate for the financial losses. This could have adverse effects on Nigeria's economy, which has faced numerous crises in recent years” [23,24]. The reduction in tariff revenues would severely affect states like Lagos, which hosts Nigeria's major ports. This loss in revenue could shrink socio-economic activities, leading to increased unemployment and poverty [18]. “Even with a phased removal

of tariffs, Nigeria could lose over 80% of its tariff revenue within the first decade of the EPA's implementation. This situation could limit Nigeria's policy space for tariff politics, negatively impacting its sovereignty" [19].

## 5.2 Questionable Fairness

"Proponents of the EPA, including some West African states, foreign investors, and certain Nigerian policymakers, argue that the partnership ensures fair trade between equal partners. However, the EPA might actually undermine Nigeria's socio-economic progress. The agreement appears skewed in favor of European states, placing Nigeria at a disadvantage due to its weaker industrial and manufacturing base" [25,26]. "The Manufacturing Association of Nigeria's opposition to the EPA highlights the potential negative impact on various sectors, from plastics to textiles" [18].

## 5.3 Standards and Market Access

European states often use stringent standardization and quality requirements to block African products from entering their markets. This practice could continue under the EPA, further disadvantaging Nigerian industries that lack the financial and infrastructural support available to their European counterparts [18,21]. For example, the EU's 2015 temporary ban on Nigerian dried beans due to pesticide concerns illustrates how these standards can be used to restrict market access.

## 5.4 Oil and Economic Diversification

Nigeria's major export, crude oil, does not benefit from the EPA's advantages, which favor non-oil exports [27,28]. At present, Nigeria is one of a number of countries that supply the energy needs of many countries in the EU, and crude oil/natural gas do not face customs barriers when entering the EU [29]. While Nigeria supplies energy to many EU countries without facing customs barriers, aligning with the EPA might not be profitable until Nigeria diversifies its economy to include more agricultural and manufacturing exports. The lack of sufficient assurance from key stakeholders in Brussels exacerbates these concerns, making it crucial for Nigeria to carefully assess its options before committing to the EPA.

## 5.5 Calls for Scrutiny

Emerging economies like Nigeria must thoroughly scrutinize policies to maximize

benefits from the global economy [30]. Some European Parliament members, such as Maria Arena from Belgium and Julie Ward from Britain, recognize the concerns of countries like Nigeria and Tanzania, advocating for more understanding from the EU [28]. However, the EU has yet to adequately address these concerns. Until Nigeria is economically stronger and more diversified, it may be wise to hold off on adopting the EPA framework.

## 6. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN NIGERIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

### 6.1 Economic Development

"The EU has significantly contributed to Nigeria's economic growth, especially in renewable energy, public finance, competitiveness, diversification, and trade promotion. This partnership has provided numerous incentives to help cushion the effects of inflation, support businesses, and cancel debts for capital development" [6]. "Notably, the EU's collaboration has facilitated the creation and development of small and medium-sized enterprises, boosting effective trade. Foreign direct investment from the EU has also supported large-scale industrial projects, leading to substantial economic growth in Nigeria. At the 6th EU-AU Summit in Brussels in February 2022, both sides discussed further cooperation on aid, investments, and security" [31]. The strong trade relations have made Nigeria a key trading ally, particularly in energy and oil. The EU's imports from Nigeria reached 17.5 billion euros, while exports were valued at 11.2 billion euros between 2020 and 2022 [32,33]. The EU has increasingly relied on Nigeria for energy supplies, especially due to the Ukraine conflict and reduced reliance on Russian gas. According to the 2018 data from the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria's top three import categories from the European Union (EU) include refined oil products, chemicals, and machinery. The Netherlands accounted for NGN 1,501,640 (27.8% of total imports), followed by Trade with NGN 377,569.9 (7%), and Germany with NGN 357,731.5 (6.6%). In terms of exports from Nigeria to the EU, the top three destinations were The Netherlands (NGN 2,051,225.5), Spain (NGN 1,934,078.4), and France (NGN 1,513,883.7). These figures represent 24.4%, 23.1%, and 18% respectively of Nigeria's total exports to the EU.

## 6.2 Security Cooperation

Nigeria has faced significant challenges from terrorism, banditry, and kidnapping, which have hampered trade and investment. The strategic partnership with the EU has been instrumental in addressing these issues through the provision of logistics, weapons, intelligence, and training. This cooperation has helped Nigeria make substantial progress in combating terrorism and insurgency in the Northeast [34]. Since 2011, the EU's foreign policy has included a strategy for security and development in the Sahel, collaborating with ECOWAS and the AU to tackle security challenges [2].

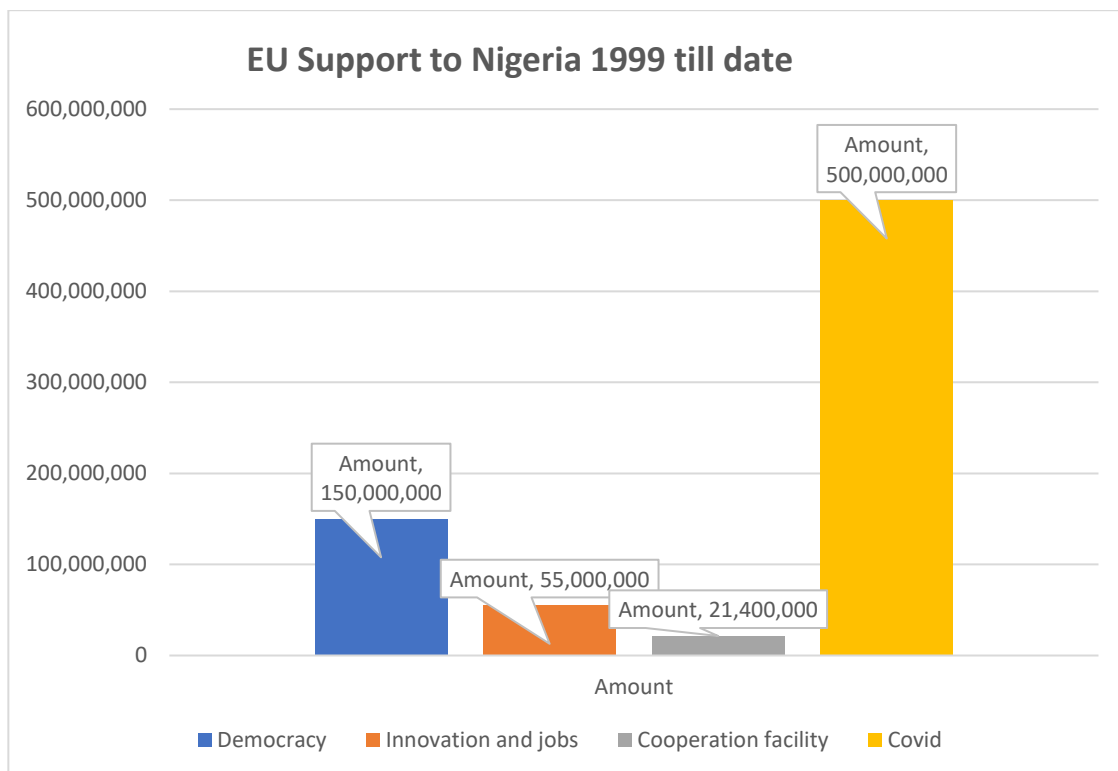
## 6.3 Educational and Social Cooperation

“Educational and social cooperation between the EU and Nigeria has flourished. The joint ministerial roadmap and a seven-year multiannual indicative program aim to reinforce long-term support based on shared priorities and values. Many Nigerian students benefit from EU scholarships, studying either in Europe or with EU sponsorships for career advancements. The EU’s support for the National Drug Control

Master Plan 2021-2025, through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has significantly curbed drug trafficking and promoted authorized drug use” [35].

## 6.4 Democratic Governance

The EU-Nigeria relationship is deeply rooted in shared democratic values. Since 2008, both parties have worked to strengthen Nigerian democracy through dialogue and cooperation on regional integration, human rights, security, elections, and good governance. The EU has supported initiatives like the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and has actively sponsored democracy and election observers in Nigeria [36,37]. For example, “in 2009, EU and Nigeria signed the Nigeria-EU Joint Way Forward which highlights guidelines for developmental cooperation; focusing on certain priority areas: peace and security, governance and human rights, trade and energy, although the logic of the EU partnership and rests in Nigeria since 1999 seems to be based on purely strategic objectives of the EU interests in Nigeria” [2].



**Fig. 1. EU Democracy Support to Nigeria**  
Source: Ike-Jahka & Obuah [38]

## 6.5 Migration Management and Healthcare Collaboration

The EU and Nigeria have partnered to address migration issues, including unregulated migration and brain drain. The EU has supported the establishment of migration centers in North Africa to manage migration flows to Europe [39,40]. "The EU has played a crucial role in enhancing Nigeria's healthcare system by providing drugs, vaccinations, training, and facilities to combat contagious diseases. EU initiatives have included the construction of water schemes, provision of medical equipment, and support for maternal and child health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU donated millions of vaccines to Nigeria, significantly aiding in disease prevention and treatment" [41].

## 7. EU-EPA: WHAT'S IN IT FOR NIGERIA?

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) offers potential benefits for Nigeria, such as increased market access for Nigerian goods in the European Union (EU), support for sustainable development, and financial aid for economic adjustments. These benefits, however, come with significant concerns. The agreement may lead to substantial revenue loss due to reduced tariffs, unfair competitive advantages for European industries, and stringent EU standards that could hinder Nigerian exports. The proponents of the EPA argue that developing countries like Nigeria would benefit from its development priorities, which aim to promote sustainable development and facilitate integration into the global economy. By enabling duty-free imports through trade liberalization, the EPA aims to lower import costs from the EU, boost competitive production structures, and enhance access to EU markets. While these potential benefits appear promising, it is crucial for Nigerians to critically analyze how the EPA could impact the national economy within our specific context. Moreover, the agreement mandates a phased opening of Nigeria's market access to EU markets, requiring 60% of markets to open in the first five years and an additional 25% in the subsequent five years. In essence, Nigeria would liberalize over 80% of its markets to the EU within the first decade of the agreement's implementation. According to Isaac and Bellon-Okafor [18], while seemingly innocuous, numerous pertinent questions arise:

- Is the Nigerian economy sufficiently robust and prepared to capitalize on European markets?
- Does Nigeria possess readily exploitable comparative advantages to penetrate EU markets effectively?
- What types of finished goods can African countries, especially Nigeria, offer to Europe to leverage EU market opportunities? Given the technological and manufacturing disparities between the regions, is Nigeria strategically positioned in this agreement?

In the political realm, the negotiations of the EPA unfold within a framework involving two distinct political groups with vastly unequal powers. It represents a partnership between donors and debtors, former colonial empires, and their former colonies. These dynamic pits some of the world's most advanced economies against a group of the world's least developed, predominantly monocultural economies reliant on raw material exports. This juxtaposition highlights the technological disparity and manufacturing prowess between technologically advanced nations adept at mass production and less advanced economies primarily engaged in exporting crude products and consuming foreign-made goods. Consequently, African countries, including Nigeria, may shoulder a disproportionate burden under this agreement relative to the intended benefits.

## 8. POSSIBLE REASONS WHY NIGERIA SHOULD SIGN OR NOT SIGN THE AGREEMENT

**Reasons to Sign:** The EPA promises improved access to EU markets for Nigerian products, which could boost exports and economic growth. Financial support from the EU could help Nigeria with economic adjustments and development programs, enhancing infrastructure and capacity. The agreement could lead to increased trade and investment flows between Nigeria and the EU, fostering economic cooperation and growth.

**Reasons Not to Sign:** The reduction in tariffs could result in significant revenue loss for Nigeria, impacting public finances and economic stability. This could reduce the government's ability to fund essential services and development projects. Nigerian industries, particularly those in nascent stages of development, may struggle to compete with

established European industries. This could stifle local economic growth and development. More so, signing the EPA could limit Nigeria's policy space, reducing its ability to implement protective measures for its industries and pursue independent economic strategies tailored to its unique needs.

## 9. FUTURE LIKELY PROBLEMS IN EU-NIGERIA RELATIONS REGARDING THE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

**Economic Dependency:** Over-reliance on EU markets and aid could undermine Nigeria's economic independence and bargaining power. This dependency might make it difficult for Nigeria to diversify its economy and develop alternative trading partners.

**Regulatory Conflicts:** Stringent EU standards could create ongoing friction, especially if Nigerian exports are frequently blocked due to non-compliance. This could lead to trade disputes and hinder the growth of Nigeria's export sectors.

**Sovereignty Issues:** The influence of the EPA on Nigeria's economic policies could lead to perceptions of diminished sovereignty and control over national economic strategies. This might spark political and public resistance to the agreement, complicating bilateral relations.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The EPA between Nigeria and the EU presents a multifaceted decision for Nigeria. While the agreement offers promising benefits such as market access, development aid, and enhanced trade relations, it also poses significant risks, including revenue loss, unfair competition, and reduced economic sovereignty. Nigeria must weigh these factors carefully, considering its economic priorities and readiness to meet EPA requirements. The future of EU-Nigeria relations will hinge on how these challenges and opportunities are managed, ensuring that the partnership promotes mutual growth and development without compromising Nigeria's economic autonomy.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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