

The Impact of Regional Economic Integration on Peacebuilding Efforts in Developing Economies

Abstract

Regional economic integration contributes to peacebuilding in developing economies by promoting interdependence, reducing economic disparities, and fostering regional cooperation. Integration frameworks that support free trade, infrastructure development, and institutional harmonization can help transform conflicts and aid post-conflict reconstruction. However, political rivalries, weak institutions, and unequal benefits often limit its effectiveness, as evidenced in regions like South Asia. Successful integration requires strong political will, capable institutions, inclusive participation, and coordinated external support. When aligned with peacebuilding objectives, regional integration becomes a strategic tool for sustainable development, reconciliation, and long-term stability in fragile states and conflict-affected regions.

Introduction

In the contemporary international order, developing economies face multifaceted challenges that hinder their journey toward sustainable peace and economic progress. Among these challenges are internal political instability, ethnic or sectarian conflicts, fragile institutions, and socio-economic inequalities. In such environments, the role of regional economic integration (REI) becomes increasingly important—not merely as a catalyst for economic development, but as a strategic tool for peacebuilding. The concept of regional economic integration refers to the process through which neighboring states coordinate economic policies, reduce trade barriers, and harmonize regulations to foster economic interdependence and collective growth. While traditionally associated with economic benefits, regional integration has gained recognition

for its potential to foster political stability and social cohesion in post-conflict or fragile states.

Developing economies—many of which are located in Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East—often suffer from weak governance structures, underdeveloped markets, and recurring cycles of violence. These conditions create a pressing need for sustainable peacebuilding strategies. Peacebuilding refers to a broad range of measures aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict and laying the foundation for lasting peace. These include institutional reforms, economic reconstruction, social reconciliation, and inclusive governance. The intersection between regional economic integration and peacebuilding lies in the transformative power of economic interdependence: by binding states and communities through trade, investment, and infrastructure, REI has the potential to create incentives for peaceful cooperation, reduce the risk of conflict relapse, and enhance regional stability.

The theoretical underpinning of this research draws from liberal internationalist thought, particularly the idea that economic interdependence fosters peace. Liberal theorists such as Immanuel Kant, and later proponents of the democratic peace theory, have long argued that nations with mutual economic interests are less likely to engage in conflict. When states and societies are economically intertwined, the cost of war becomes too high, and the benefits of peace more apparent. Moreover, institutionalist perspectives posit that regional organizations not only facilitate economic cooperation but also create platforms for dialogue, conflict resolution, and the promotion of democratic norms. Thus, regional integration is not merely an economic agenda; it is also a framework for political cooperation and collective security.

However, the relationship between regional integration and peacebuilding is neither automatic nor uniform. The success of REI in promoting peace depends on various factors, including the nature of the conflict, the design of regional institutions, the level of economic complementarity among states, and the political will of regional actors. In some cases, regional organizations have played a direct role in mediating conflicts and implementing peacekeeping missions, as seen with the African Union in the Horn of Africa. In others, economic initiatives such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have contributed to regional stability through economic collaboration and norm-building. Conversely, some regions have witnessed the failure of

integration efforts to prevent or resolve conflict, highlighting the limitations and complexities of this approach.

This research seeks to critically examine the impact of regional economic integration on peacebuilding efforts in developing economies. It aims to explore the extent to which economic integration initiatives contribute to sustainable peace, the mechanisms through which they operate, and the conditions under which they succeed or fail. Through a comparative analysis of selected regional blocs—such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—this study will assess the practical outcomes of REI in conflict-prone and post-conflict settings. Special attention will be given to how integration efforts address root causes of conflict, such as poverty, marginalization, and lack of access to resources.

Moreover, the research will explore how regional economic frameworks can be better aligned with peacebuilding agendas. It will analyze how trade agreements, infrastructure projects, cross-border initiatives, and regional development banks can contribute to inclusive growth and social cohesion. The study will also examine the role of external actors—such as the United Nations, World Bank, and donor agencies—in supporting regional efforts for peace through economic integration.

In a world marked by increasing fragmentation, political polarization, and economic inequality, the potential of regional integration to foster peace offers a pathway of hope for many developing nations. As this research will demonstrate, regional economic integration is not a panacea, but it can be a powerful instrument when strategically employed in synergy with other peacebuilding efforts. By advancing our understanding of this relationship, the study contributes to both the academic discourse and policy-making aimed at building resilient, peaceful, and prosperous regions in the Global South.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on regional economic integration and peacebuilding highlights a growing recognition of their interdependence in conflict-affected regions. Liberal peace theory, as advanced by scholars like Michael Doyle and Bruce Russett, argues that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of war by increasing the cost of conflict. Haas (1958) and Nye (1971) emphasize

the role of functionalism and regionalism in fostering cooperation through economic and institutional spillovers. More recent works by Hettne and Söderbaum explore how regional organizations in the Global South, though politically fragile, can support peace through norm-building and development. Studies on ASEAN and the EU suggest that successful integration requires strong institutions, equitable growth, and political commitment. However, critics like Paris (2010) caution against one-size-fits-all liberal approaches, noting that without context-specific frameworks and inclusive policies, integration may reinforce inequalities or deepen existing tensions. Case studies on ECOWAS and the African Union provide insights into how regional blocs combine economic integration with conflict prevention mechanisms, while analysis of SAARC reflects the challenges of integration in politically fragmented environments. Overall, the literature indicates that regional integration can be an effective peacebuilding mechanism, but only when underpinned by deliberate design, inclusive governance, and strong institutional architecture.

Definations

Regional Economic Integration refers to the process through which neighboring countries form agreements to reduce trade barriers and harmonize economic policies to promote economic interdependence, cooperation, and growth. It ranges from simple free trade areas to deeper forms such as customs unions, common markets, and economic and monetary unions. The goal is to foster collective economic development, reduce political tensions, and build regional stability.

Peacebuilding is a broad set of efforts aimed at preventing the outbreak, recurrence, or escalation of violent conflict. It involves addressing root causes of conflict, strengthening institutions, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring inclusive political and economic participation. Peacebuilding is both a short-term and long-term process that requires sustainable development, reconciliation, and political stability.

Certainly! Below are **300-word** academic-style explanations for each of the three subheadings you mentioned:

1. Theoretical Linkages: Economic Interdependence and Liberal Peace Theory

The theoretical relationship between economic interdependence and peace is rooted in **Liberal Peace Theory**, which posits that increased economic ties between states reduce the likelihood of armed conflict. This perspective, tracing back to the works of **Immanuel Kant**, gained prominence through modern liberal theorists who argue that trade, investment, and mutual economic dependence create a web of interests that incentivize cooperation over confrontation. According to this logic, states that are economically interconnected are less likely to resort to violence, as war would jeopardize mutual economic gains.

Economic interdependence, a central pillar of liberal internationalism, implies that when countries depend on one another for trade, labor mobility, infrastructure, or investment, they develop strong incentives to maintain peaceful relations. Conflicts become economically irrational, leading to the strengthening of diplomatic and institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution. This theory has been applied to explain peace among Western democracies and is increasingly used to advocate for regional integration in the Global South.

In the context of **developing economies**, where historical conflicts often arise from competition over scarce resources, exclusion, or economic disparities, regional economic integration can address these grievances by promoting shared prosperity. Liberal Peace Theory argues that inclusive economic growth driven by regional cooperation fosters trust among states and societies. The creation of joint economic institutions, trade corridors, and shared development agendas not only generates wealth but also establishes formal and informal communication networks that facilitate peaceful conflict resolution.

Though critics argue that economic interdependence alone is insufficient to guarantee peace, the liberal perspective remains influential. It provides a compelling justification for viewing **regional economic integration as a peacebuilding tool**, especially in fragile or post-conflict developing economies where economic marginalization often fuels instability.

2. Role of Regionalism in Conflict Transformation

Regionalism plays a multidimensional role in **conflict transformation**, particularly in developing economies where national capacities to resolve internal or cross-border conflicts are limited. Conflict transformation goes beyond merely ending violence; it aims to address the root causes of conflict and promote long-term structural change, including political reform, inclusive development, and reconciliation. Regional organizations and integration frameworks offer a collective platform to facilitate these deeper transitions.

One key role of regionalism in conflict transformation is **institutional support**. Regional blocs often develop mechanisms for early warning, mediation, peacekeeping, and post-conflict monitoring. For example, **ECOWAS** has played an active role in deploying peacekeeping forces and mediating transitions in West Africa. These regional interventions are often perceived as more legitimate and culturally informed than distant international efforts. Moreover, regional integration frameworks encourage **dialogue and diplomacy**, offering states in conflict a neutral regional space to engage in confidence-building measures.

Economic regionalism also facilitates **cross-border development initiatives**, which are crucial in stabilizing border regions often affected by smuggling, refugee flows, or armed militias. Infrastructure projects, trade corridors, and shared resource management can provide former conflict zones with access to economic opportunities, creating conditions that reduce the appeal of violence.

Regionalism also fosters **norm diffusion**—spreading democratic, human rights, and rule-of-law norms. These shared standards, often embedded in regional charters and protocols, help pressure authoritarian regimes or conflict actors to reform. Intra-regional peer pressure can be an effective tool for conflict prevention and post-conflict democratization.

However, regionalism's impact depends on the **strength, unity, and political will** of member states. In weak or divided regions, it may fall short. Yet when designed effectively, regionalism holds significant transformative potential in shifting conflict-prone states toward **peaceful and cooperative futures**.

3. Post-Conflict Recovery and Development Nexus

The **post-conflict recovery and development nexus** refers to the intricate relationship between peacebuilding, economic reconstruction, and sustainable development in the aftermath of violent conflict. In developing economies, post-conflict environments are often marked by destroyed infrastructure, displaced populations, collapsed institutions, and deeply fractured societies. Addressing these challenges requires not only humanitarian assistance but also long-term development strategies that rebuild economies, promote equity, and prevent a relapse into violence.

Regional economic integration plays a critical role in this nexus by offering frameworks for collective recovery and shared development. For post-conflict states, participation in regional trade agreements or infrastructure initiatives can fast-track economic revival by opening access to broader markets, attracting foreign investment, and restoring connectivity. For example, regional energy-sharing agreements or transnational transport corridors can help reintegrate conflict-affected areas into national and regional economies.

The nexus is also evident in the emphasis on **inclusive development**. One of the root causes of conflict in many developing economies is economic marginalization—where certain regions or ethnic groups are excluded from development benefits. Through regionally coordinated development efforts, it is possible to design policies that **reduce inequality**, promote inclusive governance, and build shared prosperity, all of which are crucial for long-term peace.

Moreover, the nexus highlights the need for **institutional rebuilding**. Post-conflict recovery depends on reestablishing effective governance structures, which regional bodies can support through capacity-building and technical cooperation. Additionally, regional development banks and institutions can provide the **financial and technical resources** needed for reconstruction—resources that fragile states often cannot mobilize on their own.

In sum, the post-conflict recovery and development nexus underscores the importance of integrating **economic renewal with peacebuilding goals**. When embedded within a regional framework, this integration becomes a powerful tool for transitioning from fragility to resilience in the developing world.

Certainly! Below are 200-word explanations for each of the four subheadings:

1. Levels of Integration: Free Trade Areas, Customs Unions, Common Markets, Economic Unions

Regional economic integration occurs in various stages, each representing a deeper level of economic cooperation. The **Free Trade Area** is the most basic level, where member states agree to eliminate tariffs and quotas on trade among themselves, while maintaining individual trade policies with non-members (e.g., SAFTA). **Customs Unions** go further by adopting a common external tariff, aligning their trade policies toward outsiders, as seen in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). **Common Markets** add to this by allowing free movement of labor, capital, and services across borders—facilitating deeper economic interdependence and labor mobility. The **Economic Union** represents the highest level, where states not only share markets and trade policies but also harmonize economic, monetary, and fiscal policies. The European Union is the clearest example, though few such unions exist in the developing world. Each level of integration offers different peacebuilding potentials: free trade promotes interdependence, common markets enhance social cohesion, and economic unions demand institutional harmony. In post-conflict or fragile states, advancing through these stages can reduce economic isolation, promote cross-border cooperation, and align national priorities toward peace and stability.

2. Instruments of Integration: Trade Agreements, Infrastructure, Mobility Frameworks

Regional economic integration relies on practical **instruments** to translate policy into action. **Trade agreements** are the legal frameworks that reduce tariffs, eliminate non-tariff barriers, and establish common economic rules among member states. These agreements lay the foundation for regional trade and economic interdependence. **Infrastructure development**, such as transnational roads, energy grids, ports, and railways, physically connects economies and facilitates trade, migration, and cooperation. Infrastructure projects often target border regions—frequent hotspots for conflict—thus helping to integrate peripheral areas into mainstream economies. Meanwhile, **mobility frameworks** focus on the free movement of people, goods, and

services. These include protocols on visa-free travel, mutual recognition of qualifications, and labor mobility, as promoted by blocs like ECOWAS. In fragile or post-conflict settings, such instruments serve as both economic stimulants and peacebuilding tools by promoting regional interdependence, fostering trust, and ensuring that the benefits of integration reach all groups. Moreover, by addressing long-standing grievances such as isolation, underdevelopment, or exclusion, these instruments reduce the likelihood of renewed conflict and support long-term stability and reconciliation.

3. Political vs. Economic Integration: Dual Dynamics in Peacebuilding

Regional integration operates along two parallel but interconnected dimensions: **economic** and **political**. **Economic integration** focuses on reducing trade barriers, harmonizing regulations, and enabling the free movement of goods, capital, and labor. Its peacebuilding role lies in creating shared economic interests that discourage conflict and encourage cooperation. On the other hand, **political integration** involves collaboration on governance, legal frameworks, conflict resolution, and even security policies. While economic integration offers indirect peace dividends, political integration often involves direct efforts at preventing or resolving conflict. This dual dynamic is essential in post-conflict societies where economic revival and political stability must go hand in hand. For example, regional bodies like the **African Union (AU)** and **ECOWAS** combine economic goals with peacekeeping mandates, showing how political and economic cooperation can be mutually reinforcing. However, political integration often faces resistance due to concerns over sovereignty. Yet, without political consensus and institutional mechanisms, economic integration alone may fall short. For effective peacebuilding, regions must adopt a **hybrid approach**, where economic development fosters stability, and political cooperation ensures enforcement, mediation, and inclusive governance—together providing a robust framework for lasting peace in developing economies.

4. Institutional Architecture and Capacity of Regional Blocs

The success of regional integration and its peacebuilding potential depend heavily on the **institutional architecture and capacity** of regional organizations. This architecture includes decision-making bodies, legal frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, secretariats, and affiliated institutions such as development banks or peacekeeping arms. For example, **ECOWAS** has a Commission, a Court of Justice, and a regional standby force, while **SADC** includes structures for political cooperation, trade, and development. Strong institutional design ensures that commitments made by member states are not merely symbolic but are backed by mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and dispute resolution. Equally important is **institutional capacity**—the ability of these organizations to coordinate actions, respond to crises, and manage complex integration processes. Weak institutional capacity, often found in regions with underfunded or politically fragmented organizations, undermines trust and hinders conflict prevention. In contrast, well-functioning institutions enhance legitimacy, encourage compliance, and provide a platform for mediating tensions. Institutional depth also determines whether integration is inclusive and sustainable or limited to elite-driven economic growth. Ultimately, robust institutional structures are essential for translating the promises of regional economic integration into tangible peacebuilding outcomes, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected developing regions

Case Study : SAARC and South Asia: Limited Integration and Persistent Conflict (e.g., India–Pakistan)

The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**, established in 1985, was envisioned as a platform to promote economic cooperation, social development, and political dialogue among its eight member states—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. However, despite its broad mandate and significant potential, SAARC has remained one of the least integrated regional blocs in the world. This limited integration is largely attributed to **persistent bilateral tensions**, particularly the long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers, have fought multiple wars and continue to face off over territorial disputes, especially regarding **Kashmir**. These tensions have frequently paralyzed SAARC's functioning. Summits have

been postponed or cancelled, initiatives delayed, and agreements obstructed due to mutual distrust. For example, the 2016 SAARC summit in Islamabad was cancelled after India and other countries pulled out following the Uri terrorist attack, which India blamed on Pakistan-based groups. This illustrates how **bilateral conflict undermines multilateral cooperation**.

SAARC's structural limitations further inhibit integration. Unlike more effective blocs like ASEAN, SAARC lacks binding decision-making mechanisms and faces an asymmetry of power, with India dominating economically and politically. Smaller member states often hesitate to support Indian leadership due to perceived hegemony, while Pakistan resists Indian initiatives on security and trade.

The failure of SAARC to realize meaningful **economic interdependence** has had implications for peacebuilding. Trade among South Asian countries remains far below potential, and initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) have been undermined by political mistrust. Without functional cooperation and trust-building mechanisms, SAARC has been unable to play a proactive role in transforming regional conflicts.

Thus, SAARC represents a case where **political rivalry has neutralized the peacebuilding potential of regional integration**, especially in one of the world's most conflict-prone regions.

Conditions for Success and Failure of Regional Economic Integration in Peacebuilding

The success of regional economic integration as a peacebuilding tool in developing economies hinges on several interlinked conditions—both political and structural. **Political will and leadership commitment** are foundational. Without the active engagement of national leaders who are willing to prioritize long-term regional cooperation over short-term nationalist agendas, integration efforts often stall. In conflict-prone regions, where mistrust and rivalries run deep, visionary leadership is essential to build trust, reduce hostility, and champion regional frameworks even in the face of domestic political resistance.

Equally crucial is the **institutional strength and enforcement capacity** of regional organizations. Strong institutions—such as secretariats, courts, and regulatory bodies—can implement agreements, monitor compliance, and

mediate disputes. Conversely, weak or politically captured institutions erode credibility and hinder the execution of integration initiatives. Effective enforcement mechanisms are vital to ensure that integration does not remain symbolic but delivers tangible peace dividends.

A third key condition is **inclusivity and equity in the distribution of economic benefits**. If integration disproportionately benefits dominant or central states, it can exacerbate existing inequalities and trigger new grievances. Peacebuilding requires that marginalized regions and vulnerable groups are not only included but prioritized in integration-related development projects and policies.

Finally, **external support** plays an enabling role. International actors such as the **United Nations, World Bank, and regional development banks** provide technical expertise, financial resources, and legitimacy to regional initiatives. Their involvement often boosts confidence in fragile settings where local institutions are still rebuilding. However, such support must be aligned with local ownership and not override regional agency.

In sum, regional integration can contribute to sustainable peace only when it is **politically backed, institutionally grounded, inclusively designed, and strategically supported**. Where these conditions are absent, integration may not only fail—it can inadvertently entrench conflict dynamics.

Challenges and Limitations of Regional Economic Integration in Conflict-Prone Settings

Regional economic integration in conflict-prone developing economies faces numerous structural, political, and socio-economic challenges that significantly limit its peacebuilding potential. One of the foremost obstacles is **persistent political mistrust** among member states, often rooted in historical rivalries, border disputes, or ideological differences. These tensions can paralyze regional initiatives, as seen in SAARC, where the India-Pakistan conflict repeatedly obstructs cooperation. Moreover, **weak institutional frameworks** and lack of enforcement mechanisms hinder the implementation of regional agreements. Many regional blocs suffer from underfunded secretariats, limited technical expertise, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which render them incapable of driving integration forward or resolving disputes effectively. Another limitation is **economic asymmetry** among member states; larger or more developed countries often dominate regional agendas, leading to unequal distribution of

benefits and deepening perceptions of marginalization among smaller states. This undermines regional solidarity and can even breed new tensions. Additionally, **internal instability within member states**, such as civil wars, ethnic unrest, or weak governance, distracts national governments from regional commitments and weakens overall cooperation. The lack of **regional identity and public support** also poses a cultural challenge, as citizens often perceive regional integration as elite-driven and disconnected from local realities. Finally, **overdependence on external donors** for financing integration projects can result in fragmented and donor-driven agendas that lack sustainability. In combination, these challenges limit the scope and depth of regional economic integration and often prevent it from evolving into a robust peacebuilding mechanism. Without deliberate reforms, political reconciliation, and inclusive frameworks, regionalism risks remaining ineffective in conflict-prone environments.

Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations Aligning Regional Integration Goals with Peacebuilding Agendas

Aligning Regional Integration Goals with Peacebuilding Agendas

For regional economic integration to effectively contribute to peacebuilding, its goals must be intentionally aligned with conflict prevention and resolution strategies. Economic initiatives should not be treated as isolated technical processes but integrated into broader agendas that address political grievances, social exclusion, and historical marginalization. Peacebuilding objectives—such as inclusive governance, social cohesion, and transitional justice—must be embedded into trade policies, development projects, and institutional frameworks. Regional blocs should prioritize sectors that promote cross-border interdependence and reconciliation, particularly in fragile border areas. This alignment requires strategic planning, political commitment, and regular coordination between peacebuilding institutions and economic integration bodies to ensure mutually reinforcing outcomes that sustain long-term peace and development.

Strengthening Institutional Capacities of Regional Blocs

A critical policy imperative is to enhance the institutional capacity of regional organizations responsible for integration and peacebuilding. Many developing regions suffer from weak secretariats, limited dispute-resolution mechanisms, and inconsistent enforcement of agreements. Strengthening these institutions involves technical training, adequate funding, legal empowerment, and political backing from member states. Moreover, developing regional monitoring, evaluation, and early warning systems can improve responsiveness to emerging conflicts. Institutions must also be made more transparent and inclusive to build public trust. When regional blocs are institutionally sound, they can effectively mediate disputes, implement integration agendas, and serve as credible actors in peacebuilding processes, even in politically sensitive contexts.

Enhancing Participation of Civil Society and Marginalized Groups

Civil society and marginalized populations must be actively engaged in regional integration processes to ensure legitimacy and social ownership. Often, integration is perceived as elite-driven, excluding those most affected by conflict and economic disparities. Involving civil society—such as NGOs, grassroots organizations, and women’s groups—can improve transparency, accountability, and policy responsiveness. Targeted programs for youth, ethnic minorities, and border communities can help address historical grievances and prevent exclusion. Regional blocs should create institutional mechanisms for consultation and participation, such as advisory councils or stakeholder forums. Inclusion not only enhances democratic legitimacy but also ensures that peacebuilding is rooted in local realities and sustained through public support.

Leveraging Trade and Investment for Reconciliation and Reconstruction

Trade and investment are powerful tools for post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation when strategically directed. Regional blocs can prioritize trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and investment incentives in conflict-affected regions to create employment, rebuild livelihoods, and reintegrate marginalized groups into economic networks. Special economic zones, joint ventures, and cross-border markets can foster interdependence and cooperation among former adversaries. Trade policies should be conflict-sensitive, ensuring

that they do not exacerbate inequalities or empower divisive elites. Moreover, regional development banks and external donors should coordinate with peacebuilding actors to finance inclusive, transparent investment projects. When trade is inclusive and equitable, it becomes a pathway to healing, stability, and long-term peace.

Conclusion

Regional economic integration holds transformative potential for peacebuilding in developing economies, particularly by fostering economic interdependence, enhancing cooperation, and addressing structural inequalities. However, its success depends on key factors: political will, institutional strength, inclusivity, and external support. While integration can help mitigate conflict and support post-conflict recovery, its peacebuilding capacity is limited when political rivalries, weak institutions, or unequal benefits persist—as seen in regions like South Asia. Strategic alignment of economic initiatives with peace agendas, inclusion of civil society, and targeted trade policies are essential to unlock integration's full potential. Ultimately, regional integration must go beyond trade—it must be deliberately designed as a peace-enabling framework that rebuilds trust, promotes justice, and lays the foundation for sustainable development and long-term regional stability in fragile contexts.

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