

Balancing Sovereignty and National Interest amid Regional Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Malawi and Botswana's Engagement with the SADC Trade Protocols

Chisomo Magawa

University of Botswana

David Sebudubudu

University of Botswana

Stanley Osezua Ehiane

`ehianes@ub.ac.bw`

University of Botswana

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Abstract

Navigating the tension between state sovereignty and regional economic obligations presents a persistent challenge for Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) member states, yet existing scholarship overlooks how state sovereignty concerns, institutional capacity and domestic political and economic priorities shape the on-ground implementation of trade commitments. To address this empirical gap, a qualitative comparative case study grounded in the political economy model of regional integration model analysed Malawi and Botswana using content analysis of documents and semi-structured interviews conducted with officials from SADC, Malawi, Botswana and Development partners that promote SADC integration. The findings indicate that while economic drivers like export promotion and diversification motivate participation, actual policy implementation is mediated by domestic considerations. Malawi's engagement is constrained by institutional weaknesses, economic vulnerabilities and protectionism measures. Botswana utilizes stronger administrative capacity and digital infrastructure to align trade protocols with its national development goals. As a result, both Malawi and Botswana adopt a pragmatic state-led approach to regional integration, prioritizing national policy autonomy and domestic interest over supranational governance. The study concludes that regional integration in Southern Africa operates as a continuous, negotiated process where states selectively fulfil commitments based on domestic political-economic trade-offs.

1.0 Introduction

Regional integration in the global political economy has been a driver for economic growth, structural development, and global trade engagement (Moyo & Nshimbi, 2019). Around the world, regional integration arrangements have varied significantly in their institutional design, operating along a spectrum between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. In supranational structures, member states voluntarily surrender designated aspects of state sovereignty to centralized regional bodies which are capable of enacting binding laws, and this is most exemplified by the European Union (EU). On the other hand, regional integration processes across the Global South, especially in Africa, have overwhelmingly adopted intergovernmental models (Nyirabu, 2004). The movement towards regional integration, regionalism, trade agreements and trade arrangements has turned out to be an important instrument for the advancement of globalization and to deal with its effects. This is the reason why the regions around the globe are arranging and rearranging into regional bodies and trade integration arrangements (Moyo & Nshimbi, 2019).

The process of regional integration and its associated arrangements have stood out as drivers for development and economic growth across Africa since independence from colonial rule. The goal of regional integration in Africa has dominated important debates in both political and academic circles. For a long time, there have been efforts aiming at strengthening African cohesion, which have triggered and sustained these debates in areas over the nature of their institutional design, economic viability, and political consequences. Regional integration and the strengthening of unity within the African continent have been the central issues of focus and controversy, and these have attracted divergent viewpoints

from various scholars and policymakers within Africa and beyond (Vhumbunu, 2019). Many people, stakeholders, policymakers, academics and observers seem to reach a consensus that regional economic integration in Africa remains a significant way to unlock the African development potential, given the forces of globalization (Vhumbunu, 2019). Meanwhile, the success of such integration arrangements is shaped by the diverse economic sizes, levels of development, and historical patterns of regional interaction (Nyirabu, 2004; Duma, 2018). The diversity results in different national responses and levels of engagement with regional integration agreements and protocols, raising complex challenges for African nations in balancing national sovereignty and interests with the demands of regional integration. This tension has become an integral part of all eight Regional Economic Communities (RECS) which were established by the African Union (AU) to accelerate the African Economic Community (AEC). The structural framework of the AEC was formally established by the Abuja Treaty of 1991 (Organisation of African Unity, 1991).

The success of any regional integration and trade agreements requires participating states to facilitate the movement of people and goods, harmonise policies, and cooperate on some legal and institutional frameworks. As such, ceding the control of customs enforcement and tariff policies to a regional integration body or authority can be seen as a compromise on state sovereignty. It should be emphasized that sovereignty control by individual African states is not only a matter of identity and security, but also an assurance of economic and political self-reliance. The SADC, as one of the eight RECS in Africa, is encountering challenges in its implementation of the protocols on trade, as members within the SADC are navigating the interplay between maintaining control of their sovereign interests and embracing the regional economic integration protocols. This study offers a comparative analysis of Botswana and Malawi's engagement with the SADC trade protocols, exploring how these two countries balance national interests and sovereignty in regional integration.

2.0 Literature review

The literature on regional integration in Southern Africa demonstrates a persistent tension between pursuing regional integration and protecting national sovereignty. This tension is important within SADC because member states have committed themselves to regional integration while simultaneously retaining considerable discretion over the implementation of regional decisions. Scholars examining sovereignty within SADC have therefore questioned the extent to which member states are willing to pool or constrain aspects of their sovereignty in pursuit of collective regional objectives. Shumba (2022), for example, examines the relationship between state sovereignty and human rights protection within the SADC and African Union (AU) frameworks. The study highlights the importance of state consent and political will in determining the effectiveness of regional human rights regimes. Rather than treating sovereignty simply as a legal status, Shumba demonstrates that the willingness of states to accept regional obligations is shaped by their preferences regarding the preservation of national decision-making authority.

The protection of national sovereignty has also been associated with the institutional limitations of SADC. Naldi and Magliveras (2016), in examining the SADC Tribunal, demonstrate how concerns about sovereignty contributed to resistance against a regional institution that had acquired the capacity to adjudicate disputes involving member states. Their analysis suggests that regional institutions can face significant limitations when member states perceive them as intruding into areas traditionally regarded as matters of domestic authority. The experience of the SADC Tribunal therefore provides an important institutional illustration of the broader sovereignty dilemma within the regional organisation. Moyo (2020) similarly argues that SADC has historically placed greater emphasis on interstate cooperation than deeper regional integration, especially in areas such as border control. This orientation gives member states considerable space to protect domestic interests even when such practices may constrain regional integration.

Taken together, these studies challenge the assumption that membership in a regional organisation necessarily produces a uniform willingness to transfer or share sovereignty. Instead, they suggest that SADC integration is negotiated continuously between collective regional commitments and nationally defined interests. Saurombe (2009) traces this problem partly to the historical orientation of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), which prioritised interstate cooperation rather than the deeper integration of member states. Although SADCC was transformed into SADC with a broader integration mandate, elements of the earlier cooperation-oriented approach have remained influential. National priorities consequently continue to compete with efforts to strengthen regional institutions and develop a stronger regional community. Dzinesa et al. (2018) similarly observe that this has contributed to a gradual and sometimes ineffective process of regional integration. The significance of this literature for this study is that it shifts attention from whether SADC has integration objectives to how individual member states reconcile those objectives with their own national interests.

These sovereignty concerns are visible in the area of trade integration. The SADC Trade Protocol was intended to provide a framework for substantial liberalisation of intra-regional trade. However, the existence of a regional trade agreement has not automatically translated into the removal of all trade barriers. Baker and Deleplancque (2015) identify persistent tariffs on products of interest to member states as well as a range of non-tariff barriers, including cumbersome customs procedures, inefficient transport and infrastructure systems, and the discriminatory or inappropriate application of standards and regulations. These barriers demonstrate that regional trade integration is influenced not only by formal commitments but also by the domestic institutions and policy practices through which those commitments are implemented.

The persistence of trade barriers also illustrates the tension between collective regional objectives and domestic economic interests. Chawarika et al. (2024) note that some SADC member states have justified the protection of certain products based on tariff revenue considerations. Such practices create a tension between domestic fiscal and economic priorities and the liberalisation commitments embodied in the SADC Trade Protocols, which sought substantial liberalisation of product lines. The issue is therefore not simply whether states support regional trade integration in principle, but whether

the expected domestic costs of liberalisation are considered compatible with national economic interests.

The structure of intra-regional trade further complicates the implementation of the trade protocols. Baker and Deleplancque (2015) observe that many SADC countries continue to source a substantial share of their imports from outside the region, while exports remain concentrated in primary and commodity products and traditional external markets. As a result, the reduction of tariffs within SADC has not necessarily generated the depth of intra-regional economic exchange anticipated by regional integration frameworks. Stringent rules of origin have also limited the benefits that might otherwise result from tariff liberalisation. The proposed Tripartite Free Trade Area involving COMESA, the EAC and SADC illustrates the recognition that overlapping regional arrangements and differences in trade regimes can themselves create additional barriers to integration. Baker and Deleplancque (2015) therefore emphasise the importance of coordination among regional organisations to prevent the emergence of increasingly complex trade arrangements.

The existing literature points out an important distinction between formal regional commitments and actual state behaviour. SADC member states may accept common regional rules while retaining significant discretion in interpreting, sequencing, or implementing those commitments domestically. The uneven implementation of the SADC trade protocols can therefore be understood not simply as a technical problem of institutional capacity but as an outcome of the interaction between political interests, economic priorities, sovereignty concerns and institutional capabilities. In this respect, the literature on sovereignty and the literature on trade integration are closely connected. The former explains why states may resist deeper regional authority, while the latter demonstrates how such resistance can manifest itself through trade policy.

The study therefore contributes to the literature by connecting three bodies of scholarship that have often been examined separately: sovereignty and regional authority, political economy and national interests, and the implementation of SADC trade commitments. Rather than viewing uneven implementation simply as evidence of institutional weakness or insufficient political will, the study conceptualises it as a negotiated process in which governments balance the benefits of regional integration against domestic political and economic considerations. This perspective provides a basis for understanding why countries operating under the same SADC trade framework may adopt different approaches to regional integration and why formal commitments to liberalisation do not necessarily result in uniform domestic implementation.

3.0 Political Economy Model for Regional Integration

This study is anchored on the political-economy model for regional integration, which is a theory that explains the decision-making calculations of office-seeking political leaders who usually find themselves under intense pressure from various groups and actors in society who are interested in the promotion or hindering of regional integration efforts (Schneider, 2017). The pressures are then channelled and

propelled by domestic institutions, which aim to provide vital ground for making policies in relation to the choice to enter or not to abide by regional integration and its related arrangements.

The model considers the institutional and structural characteristics of different countries and regions to appreciate the varying interactions between political and economic factors (Andreas et al, 2021). The political economy model for regional integration assumes that efforts for regional integration are widely advanced by economic factors such as improvement in the balance of trade, expansion of markets, diversification of the economy and attraction of foreign investors (Mattli, 1999; Haas, 1970). The central key which this model advocates is the relationship between political processes of governance, institutional frameworks, policy making and economic activities, which include consumption, production and distribution. The main purpose of the political economy model is to assess how wealth and power are distributed among different groups and people in a society. The political economy model also explores the responsibility and roles of various actors within the private sector, government and civil society in forming economic policies and outcomes (Schneider, 2017).

The assumption of this model in this study has helped to explain how Malawi and Botswana's domestic economic and political decisions affect their engagement with the SADC trade protocols. The theory has provided an ideal framework for this study as it represents the compounded interplay between economic, political and institutional factors that affect regional integration (Schneider, 2017). Looking at Malawi, the theory has helped the study to explore how it has an uneven engagement with the SADC trade protocols by pointing to its weak institutions and protectionism. These challenges affect Malawi's ability to fully benefit from SADC regional integration. On the other hand, Botswana's dependence on exports in diamonds, stronger institutional capacity, and proactive policies in trade align with the incentives outlined in the political economy theory, leading to more meaningful engagement with the SADC trade protocols.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Case study design

A comparative case study design was employed as the study focused on Malawi and Botswana. Case study design is arguably one of the most used and accepted designs in many qualitative research studies in the field of social and behavioural sciences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Coombs, 2022). The core focus of this design is to have an in-depth exploration of people, processes, and events (Taherdoost, 2022). The design is mostly used in research in situations where *why*, *what*, *how*, and *when* questions are being asked in the study by a researcher (Yin, 2018). The case study design fitted this study as it helped to understand how Malawi and Botswana engage themselves with the SADC trade protocols, what are the political and economic factors that are affecting each state's engagement with the trade protocols, and how they are balancing sovereignty and national interests amidst regional integration. The case study design also provided detailed knowledge of how social, economic, political,

and institutional factors have influenced Malawi and Botswana's interaction with the SADC trade protocols.

4.2 Case selection

Malawi and Botswana were purposively selected for the study because they provide a theoretically relevant comparison of how SADC member states balance national interests and sovereignty with regional integration commitments. Both countries are SADC members and are subject to the SADC Trade Protocol, thus providing a common regional institutional framework. However, they differ in their domestic political-economic structures, trade-policy environments and regional institutional arrangements. Malawi has membership in both SADC and COMESA; on the other hand, Botswana participates in SADC and SACU, creating different contexts for implementing regional trade commitments. Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius and Seychelles' island economic context make them less comparable to Malawi. South Africa

economic size and regional influence make it an analytically distinctive case rather than an appropriate comparator for Malawi. On the same note, Eswatini, Lesotho and Namibia have membership in SACU, but Botswana is selected because it provides the strongest substantive institutional contrast with Malawi. Despite Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe

being legitimate alternative cases, they were excluded because Botswana provides greater institutional contrast through SACU membership. The differences between Malawi and Botswana have offered a good comparative lens on the political, economic and institutional structures that affect regional integration in Southern Africa. Lessons which have been drawn from Malawi can inform strategies for other low-income member states within SADC and to make sure that regional integration benefits are enjoyed by all member states. Likewise, Botswana's perceived successful institutional experience informs how to build strong institutions which are capable of maintaining the survival of regional agreements and protocols. This study aimed to look at state-level differences, thereby contributing to an increased understanding of integration in the SADC region. The literature has primarily focused on the challenges, theoretical models, and economic benefits of regional integration, but there was a limited focus on how factors like institutional behaviour, policy engagement, and state sovereignty concerns can affect the implementation of regional commitments.

4.3 Data collection ethics and analysis

Data collection acts as a foundation for generating contemporary evidence and drawing meaningful conclusions. Therefore, it is important to allocate enough time to collect data because if data is not sufficient and accurate, it can lead to doubts on the accuracy of the research findings (Kabir, 2016). To get insight on how Malawi and Botswana balance sovereignty and regional integration in engaging with SADC trade protocols, the study collected data primarily using semi-structured interviews with political and economic experts, trade policy analysts, the SADC secretariat, officials of the ministries of trade and foreign affairs, customs and SADC GIZ officials. Data from the interviews was collected between April and June 2026. This method was flexible in examining respondents' views while making sure that the

main thematic areas are integrated and addressed (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the study used secondary data from credible sources on existing reports, policies, studies, and government reports from both countries and SADC. This allowed for comprehensive and in-depth findings.

The study obtained ethical clearance from the institution's body of research at the University of Botswana before data collection. During the data collection, the study participants were given or assisted in going through an informed consent form which was approved by the Committee for Ethics at the University of Botswana. Those who took part in the research were informed of what was expected of them during the investigation, how their information was to be utilised during and after the study and what consequences there might be as consequences, including potential risks and benefits for taking part in the study. In addition, the respondents were made aware that their answers would be treated with strict secrecy and anonymity and that they should be free to express themselves in answering the questions during the key informant interviews. This study employed a qualitative analysis of data, which involved content analysis of the key informant interviews and the policy documents. Content analysis consists of analysing the contents of materials and documents such as verbal material and books that can be produced in print form or in audio format (Kothari, 2004). It is also a good way to analyse open-ended questions from the key informant interviews (Taherdoost, 2022).

5.0 Findings and Discussion

Despite Malawi and Botswana having formally aligned their national trade policies with the objectives of the SADC Trade Protocol, the extent to which these commitments are translated into practice varies considerably. The findings show a constant gap between policy alignment and policy implementation, suggesting that legal and policy commitments alone are not sufficient to ensure effective regional integration. Rather, implementation is shaped by domestic political priorities, economic considerations, and institutional realities.

5.1 Political and Economic factors influencing Malawi and Botswana's engagement with SADC Trade Protocols

The first major political factor that shapes Malawi's approach to SADC trade protocol is the quest to protect national sovereignty. As observed by one of the key informants

"Our sovereignty gets compromised because other countries take advantage and get a lot out of us, whether we like it or not" (Participant 4)

Another participant added:

As far as Malawi wants to maintain its sovereignty. But they, as I said, there's also a well-known word that you do not cut off a hand that feeds you. So, this makes Malawi stretch itself to some extent, so that the issue of sovereignty somehow is jeopardized in a sense. And this also takes us back to the political leadership or political landscape in Malawi (Participant 2)

As other members of SADC, Malawi is cautious about giving away too much decision-making authority to SADC institutions. SADC, as a regional body, operates largely through cooperation of its members rather than supranational governance as it is the case with the European Union (EU). This finding is consistent with Saurombe (2012), who argued that member states within the SADC prioritise their state sovereignty and policy independence over regional efforts. Malawi, as a member, also seeks to maintain control over its people and maintain legitimacy and political trust, and in doing that the country seeks to ensure that the national economic policies, particularly in sensitive sectors such as agriculture, food security, and industrial development, serve the interests of the nation first before looking at what it is obliged to do at the regional level. This was well captured by some of the respondents in the study who said that:

"In my opinion, mostly it's the national interest that comes first... national interest comes first. This I have seen not only for us as a country, but for other countries as well." (Participant 7).

Another respondent had this to say:

So, it's irrespective of where you are, irrespective of who is your sponsor. Irrespective of who's who. National interest comes first. Because if you do not put national interest first, it means our sovereignty is jeopardised, as I've already said. It means we are putting our sovereignty at risk (Participant 2).

On the same note, the main political interests shaping Botswana's approach to SADC trade protocol are the desire to protect the country's national sovereignty and independence of its state policies. Botswana is a good example of a member state that supports regional integration and the SADC trade protocols, but the country prefers decision-making to be done at the intergovernmental level rather than by supranational authority. This was highlighted by some of the respondents who said that:

"SADC regional integration has to be led; it has to be a state-led process that really recognises the voices of everyone" (Participant 11).

Another participant noted that

"So as a country, as Botswana, we try to say, I will protect my national interests in terms of economic benefits, I will try my best to protect my national interests, as long as in that regional integration agenda, those interests are going to be protected." (Participant 12).

The history of SADC shows that it built itself around respect for state sovereignty, building consensus, and liberation-era solidarity; this has continued to influence the organisation's institutional structure (Muntschick,, 2020). Botswana has therefore supported regional trade integration through the SADC trade protocol only where it does not significantly weaken the government's authority over domestic economic, national development agenda and trade policies.

Another major interest which Botswana has is the desire to diversify the economy and national development. This was well highlighted by some of the respondents who said that.

“Our primary drive right now is economic diversification. And this can be achieved through our economic engagements, particularly among the neighbours, inter-regional or regional trade. (Participant 13)

Participant 2's views are further supported by another participant who states that:

“So, the major economic priorities that the country now wants to advance are that we adapt and diversify our economy and actually produce goods for exporting market access” (Participant 12).

The country's economy has historically depended heavily on exports of minerals, especially diamonds, and the emergence of artificial diamonds, which are competing with natural diamonds on the global markets, has made diversification an important government priority to redeem the economy from economic shocks. Regional trade integration through SADC has been viewed as an opportunity for Botswana to expand the market for its exports, improve industrialisation, and attract foreign direct investment. This is consistent with Cipollina's (2022) argument that regional trade agreements provide smaller opportunities to increase trade access and reduce dependence on narrow export sectors. Botswana has therefore supported the SADC trade protocol because it aligns with its national economic transformation goals.

Domestic economic considerations have also shaped Botswana's trade integration policies. Despite the country enjoying substantial political stability, the government is still sensitive to concerns from domestic businesses and local workers regarding regional competition. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Botswana have at times had concerns about administrative barriers, unequal competition, and implementation challenges within regional trade systems (Thomas and Marandu, 2017). Political leaders have therefore balanced support for trade liberalisation under SADC with measures which are aimed at protecting local industries and employment opportunities for citizens. Officials from Botswana explained that after the COVID-19 pandemic, the country became more aware of the risks of overdependence on imports. Some respondents stated

“What COVID did was just to expose the risk of over-reliance on imports for us as a country... Botswana actually said, “you know what, we need to develop our own industry.” (Participant 11).

“You have to substitute the imports by actually stimulating goods and services or having goods and services produced locally so that you can actually create industries for your country.” (Participant 12)

As is the case of Botswana, the study also established that the desire to protect domestic industries and vulnerable economic sectors is one of the factors that shape Malawi's engagement with the SADC trade protocol. The country is listed as one of the least industrialised and undeveloped economies within the SADC region. It also relies on agriculture for employment, main exports and economic survival. Political leaders often have a feeling that rapid trade liberalisation within Malawi through the SADC trade protocol could expose the weak local industries and farmers to competition from stronger and industrialised regional economies within the SADC. This assertion is in agreement with what Krapohl and Fink (2013) proposed: weaker economies within regional blocs tend to support regional integration with caution

because they are afraid of experiencing unequal benefits and being dominated by stronger economic states. Consequently, Malawi has at several times adopted protectionist measures to protect local producers and to maintain domestic economic stability.

For instance, in 2025 the country introduced a temporary ban on some imported goods, especially products that could be produced locally; the ban was to be sustained until 2027 but was scrapped in April 2026, and most of the goods which were banned were agricultural goods. This measure was adopted mainly to protect forex, support local industries, and minimise the country's dependence on imports. This ban affected products such as maize flour, rice, fruits like bananas and vegetables, fresh milk, peanut butter, honey, bottled water, toothpicks, and other locally available goods. During the study, the respondents admitted that the measure was introduced for domestic reasons but later created regional tensions because it was not fully aligned with SADC procedures. Some respondents suggested that:

The ministry here in Malawi just listed several goods and services that cannot be imported. And so those countries that felt impacted, especially Tanzania, reacted. It had nothing to do. In fact, their reaction was to say that it was not in the spirit of regional integration (Participant 1)

Another participant quipped that:

The SADC protocol is very clear. If we need to implement or to put a ban or restrict those products, we need to follow the procedure before putting. But we did not follow the procedure. So, when you go to those meetings, or when you have those meetings with the trading partners, we need to justify. Which is a very big challenge. Especially for the technical people, for us to justify why we have to put. So, as a country, we really have a good motive for implementing those things. But if it's not in line with the protocol itself, it becomes a very, very big challenge. Of course, it's not only for Malawi. We have also seen it for other countries doing that for us as well. But it becomes a challenge (Participant 7)

The government of Malawi justified the measure on economic grounds, arguing that the country has been facing a severe shortage of foreign currency, which was making it difficult for businesses and the government to pay for essential imports such as fuel, fertiliser, and industrial inputs. This restriction on the selected imported goods was assumed to reduce pressure on the limited forex reserves which the country has. Malawi government also argued that domestic industries were struggling to compete against cheaper imported products from neighbouring countries. Therefore, the policy came into place as a way of stimulating domestic production, creating jobs, and encouraging import substitution industrialization.

However, the ban on imports by Malawi escalated controversial discussions and retaliations from within Malawi and the SADC region. Those who were against the move argued that the ban was in contradiction with Malawi's commitments and obligations under the SADC Trade Protocol; the protocol encourages member states within SADC to promote free regional trade and remove non-tariff barriers. The Protocol also discourages member countries from imposing new restrictions or non-tariff barriers on imports

from fellow member states except under special conditions like protecting infant industries, food security issues and safeguards against economic shocks.

The restriction also resulted in diplomatic and trade tensions with neighbouring countries, especially Tanzania. This was echoed by some of the respondents who said that.

I remember we had a slight spot with Tanzania, I think, in 2024, where we said, we shall not import these goods. You know. There were quite a few; Tanzania was not amused, and they retaliated. I had to travel to Tanzania for a discussion for them to open the border for us. (Participant 1)

This was supported by another respondent who stated that:

There are other issues. Of course, the protection for the locals becomes a lame excuse. Because if every country decides to do that, what will happen to our products wherever we want to export? So, that is exactly what happened to us. We used to get a lot of bananas from Tanzania (Participant 6)

Most of the banned imports, such as rice, ginger, bananas, and maize flour, were Agricultural commodities from Tanzania. In reaction to the restriction, Tanzania banned some agricultural imports from Malawi and also suspended fertiliser exports to Malawi. This tension raised concerns about regional integration and intra-regional trade cooperation within SADC because both states are members of SADC and are expected to facilitate regional trade in SADC rather than impose barriers to trade. The two countries managed to do negotiations and agreed to ease some of the restrictions on each other.

From a political economy perspective, the import ban decision showed the tension between the desire to protect national economic goals and regional economic integration. On the one hand, Malawi was protecting its domestic industries, conserving scarce foreign currency, and stabilising the economy. On the other hand, the import policy risked undermining regional trade agreements within SADC and the broader goals of SADC integration, which emphasis on reduction of trade barriers and the promotion of free movement of goods and services within the region.

Malawi did not fully implement the trade protocol when it came into place, as it did not remove some of the non-tariff barriers, as it was protecting its domestic politics. This was echoed by one of the respondents who said that:

Okay we negotiated we got differentiated offer with SADC when we were joining the trade protocol as at that time when the protocol was being put in place they took into consideration that some countries are developing some are least developed yes some are developed within the same grouping yes so South Africa was the only like developing country most of the countries were least developed countries so it was seen that if we the measures that are put in place the tariffs and everything the space down or removal of the tariffs if we just put a blanket uh measure that every country should reduce the tariffs by such a date some countries will be negatively impacted and it will affect uh their development at national level yeah as being able to fix we are vulnerable to many shocks and we needed to push on some allowance. (Participant 5)

The political leaders and policy makers were aware of the pressure which would have come from local businesses, farmers, labour groups, infant industries and consumers who would have faced the negative effects of increased regional competition if Malawi fully implemented the SADC trade protocol on the onset. The government felt that the complete liberalisation could have led to reduced government revenue, job losses, increased imports, and reduced competitiveness for local firms and products, and this could lead to political dissatisfaction. So the Malawian government adopted this approach to the SADC trade protocol to protect politically influential groups and maintain electoral support (Matlosa, 2006).

5.2 Sovereignty concerns shaping Malawi and Botswana's engagement with the SADC trade protocols.

Sovereignty concerns in Malawi's engagement with SADC regional integration efforts are also seen in the weak enforcement mechanisms within the SADC organisation itself, which operates as an intergovernmental organisation rather than a supranational organisation, and this makes member states like Malawi prioritise their sovereign interests, as highlighted by some of the respondents who said that:

"You need to protect a sovereign image of your country. So, irrespective of where you are, irrespective of who is your sponsor. Irrespective of who's who. National interest comes first". (Participant 2)

"Sovereignty means that we are supposed to have policy space... we should be able to do things without the interference of others." (Participant 5)

However, the respondent also acknowledged that sovereignty becomes complicated when national measures affect other countries:

"If it does affect trade or investment or other issues then the issues of sovereignty... cannot hold; it means you have overstepped on the policy space that you have." (Participant 5)

This point is vital because it shows that sovereignty is not absolute under SADC regional integration. Member states retain policy space, but that space is sometimes constrained when their actions undermine agreed regional commitments. This is in line with Hartzenberg (2011), who argued that deeper African regional integration raises concerns about state sovereignty, loss of policy space, and national policy autonomy.

A critical feature of Botswana's sovereignty concern was that the country has been selective in its implementation of the trade liberalisation commitments under the SADC trade protocol. Despite the country being a signatory to the Protocol, it has been implementing the trade liberalisation strategies with caution, especially in sectors which seem to be sensitive for Botswana's industrial development and fiscal stability. This was highlighted by one of the respondents who said that:

When you now sign a trade agreement like the SADC trade agreement in a certain field, you are saying, I'm giving away my power in that field now to say it's being governed elsewhere and you don't have that

much control now of what will be as a country. You can't reverse it and say; I still have to protect that kind of market when it's a public market. So, I would say, countries are usually hesitant to try to implement, especially those that take away their sovereignty or that conform to a certain field. And it has been the same with the SADC trade agreement. And from what has been said, the major issue that has been said is that sometimes you surrender your sovereignty, but you don't see the fruits on the ground. You don't see the results of that intention. Botswana has signed up to a certain industrialization protocol. But still, there are still challenges to industrialization. You still can't industrialize. Now that's a major thing. Any treaty that comes, you ask yourself, or any agreement that comes, you ask yourself, if I surrender my sovereignty on that issue, on that agreement, what are the benefits? From previous agreements that I have signed, I haven't seen any benefits in terms of income generation or employment. I think countries are aware of that, including Botswana. Sovereignty, yes, you want to say, I can only surrender my sovereignty on an agreement or on an issue that brings in benefit. (Participant 12)

This is also consistent with what scholars have argued: SADC member states often prioritise their domestic economic resilience over full compliance with regional trade integration if they see little benefit in that integration (Duma, 2024).

5.3 Malawi and Botswana's institutional capacity in implementing the SADC trade protocols

Institutional capacities play a crucial role in shaping how Malawi and Botswana implement the SADC Trade Protocols. In the area of regional integration, institutional capacity means the capacity of government customs authorities, ministries, legal institutions, border agencies, and trade-related institutions to coordinate, monitor, formulate and enforce regional trade agreements. Both countries' implementation of the SADC trade protocols has been significantly shaped by their strengths and weaknesses in institutions, especially in areas of coordinating policies, administration of customs, facilitation of trade, management of infrastructure, and enforcement of regulatory frameworks.

The institutional capacity in Malawi is more visible and frequently mentioned by the study participants. The respondents identified weak technical expertise, lack of trade negotiators, poor coordination, limited data, and weak implementation as major problems. Some respondents strongly stated that:

"One of the challenges that we have is lack of competent personnel... This is not specific to a ministry but the government as a whole." (Participant 6)

"We don't have those people... those maybe trade specialists... those people that can negotiate and know what's best for our country." (Participant 7)

I remember when I was dealing with the NTBs, you write an email to Malawi, and then you are told that this person passed away three years ago. But the email is still there on the website. And it is listed as focal person (Participant 9)

On the one hand, limited technical and administrative capacity within Malawi's institutions is one of the major institutional factors that have affected the implementation of the SADC trade protocols. Effective and efficient implementation of SADC trade protocols needs a highly coordinated institution which has the capacity to harmonise domestic trade laws with SADC regional obligations, monitor compliance, and facilitate cross-border trade. Meanwhile, Malawi has at times had challenges with limited human resources, insufficient technical expertise, and inadequate financial capability within its ministries and institutions such as the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA). These institutional constraints slow down the operationalization and domesticization of SADC integration agreements and limit the country's ability to fully engage with regional trade commitments (Duma, 2024). This implies that to deal with this institutional weakness in Malawi, it is not only about having ministries, but about having the right technical personnel, trade lawyers, negotiators, economists, and data systems to implement SADC regional commitments effectively.

Botswana has institutional strengths, and one of the major institutional strengths that influences Botswana in implementing the SADC trade protocols is the country's effective governance and administrative capacity. Botswana appears to have a more structured institutional process. The respondents in Botswana described a clear consultation chain involving technical experts, private sector, legal vetting, inter-ministerial consultation, SACU coordination, and customs authorities. Some of the respondents explained it as follows:

"We start off with a national process where we consolidate a national position... Once that has been decided, the next step now is to consolidate a SACU position." (Participant 11).

Botswana is a member of SACU, so it deals with the country. If you are to impose any restrictions on any products that you are supposed to, you are supposed to inform countries like South Africa or members of SACU." (Participant 10).

This shows that Botswana's institutional framework is more formalized. The country is widely recognized for having low levels of corruption, stable public institutions, and a professional civil service. These attributes combined positively support the country's compliance with regional trade agreements. These characteristics in its institutions have enabled the country to operationalize and adopt trade liberalization measures more efficiently than other SADC member states (Malefane & Odhiambo, 2016). The country's strong institutional structures have facilitated the harmonization of domestic trade policies with SADC trade policies and thereby improved Botswana's ability to participate in SADC regional economic integration initiatives.

4.4 Comparative analysis of Malawi and Botswana's engagement with the SADC trade protocols

One key similarity which the study has established between Malawi and Botswana in terms of their interests is the protection of their national sovereignty and autonomy in policy. Both countries remain cautious about giving away powers to make decisions to regional integration institutions and prefer

SADC's intergovernmental model, where member states still have control over their domestic policies. Malawi aims to maintain authority over its sensitive sectors such as food security, agriculture and industrial development, thereby ensuring that national interests remain central to policy decisions. Likewise, Botswana is still supporting regional integration within SADC while claiming that domestic economic and trade policies should be under national control. This shows a broader perception that member states within SADC put priority on their sovereignty and national policy autonomy over governance in supranational arrangements (Saurombe, 2012; Muntschick, 2020). The slight difference in this similarity is that Malawi's sovereignty concerns are driven primarily by the vulnerability of its economy and the survival of political actors, while Botswana's concerns are mainly linked to maintaining strategic independence and achieving long-term national development priorities.

Another important comparison is in relation to the protection of domestic economic interests and vulnerable sectors. The political leadership in Malawi engages with the SADC trade protocols with caution because of concerns that SADC regional competition could undermine industries at the local level, small-scale farmers, and infant manufacturing sectors. Malawi is among the least industrialised countries within the SADC, and the country fears unequal benefits from SADC regional integration and possible domination by stronger economies within the region. This anxiety explains why Malawi has at times adopted protectionist policies, which include a ban on some exports and non-tariff measures to safeguard production at the domestic level and the stability of the economy. The temporary import ban on selected goods in 2025 showed Malawi's willingness to prioritise domestic economic protection despite regional obligations within the SADC.

Trade facilitation and Infrastructure development comprise another major area of convergence between these two countries. As landlocked countries, Malawi and Botswana rely heavily on regional transport corridors and cross-border infrastructure for trade. Malawi has benefited from schemes such as the Nacala Corridor, modernization mechanisms at the borders, and access to ports in neighbouring countries of Tanzania and Mozambique. Botswana likewise depends on regional transportation which connects it to ports in South Africa, Mozambique, and Namibia. As a result, the two countries support the SADC initiatives which aim at infrastructure development in transport, harmonisation of customs, and reduction of transaction costs. As argued by Zerihun and Maduku (2025), infrastructure connectivity significantly strengthens intra-SADC performance on trade by improving market accessibility and lowering the costs of trade. Despite that, Malawi's infrastructure priorities seem to be more directly related to economic survival and overcoming geographical limitations, whilst Botswana's interests in SADC infrastructure are primarily linked to maintaining competitiveness in exports and facilitating industrial expansion.

Another common factor is the influence of SADC's institutional design on state behaviour. Malawi and Botswana operate within an intergovernmental regional framework which is characterised by consensus-based decision-making rather than a supranational framework as it is in the EU, and there are weak enforcement mechanisms for obligations. As Saurombe (2012) argued, SADC does not have a supranational authority which is capable of compelling strict compliance of member states; this allows

member states to have considerable discretion in implementation of regional obligations. Malawi has been utilising this flexibility to prioritise its domestic political and economic considerations when regional engagements seem to be costly, whilst Botswana's long-standing foreign policy tradition has been aligning closely with a sovereignty-preserving institutional structure at SADC. As a result, both countries have been benefiting from SADC's intergovernmental setup, which enables them to maintain national sovereignty while formally participating in SADC integration engagements.

Despite having these similarities, significant differences exist in relation to economic vulnerability and considerations on resilience. Malawi's engagement with the SADC trade protocols indicates a stronger focus on economic resilience and food security; this is the case because of repeated climate-related shocks and agricultural vulnerabilities. Regional integration within SADC therefore provides the country with access to ways that can stabilise domestic food availability and affordability during crises and to regional food markets, while Botswana's economic engagement with the SADC trade protocols does not focus on food security to the same extent. Instead, Botswana's priorities are more strongly on generating employment and development of the private sector as tools for dealing with unemployment challenges, especially among the youth.

However, major differences are there in terms of institutional strength and administrative capacity. Malawi's implementation of SADC Trade Protocols is mainly limited by institutional weaknesses which are associated with limited technical expertise, inadequate finances, insufficient human capacity, and weak administrative systems. Institutions which are responsible for governance in trade, which includes customs administration and ministries of trade, often face resource limitations in resources that delay harmonisation of policies and domestic implementation of SADC regional obligations. Weak institutional autonomy and dependence on donor aid further affect the sustainability of reforms, thereby making implementation vulnerable to domestic economic pressures and political transitions. These findings are consistent with the literature that argues that less industrialised economies within SADC often struggle to fully operationalise liberalisation of trade commitments because of institutional limitations and administrative constraints (Duma, 2024).

By contrast, Botswana benefits from stronger foundations of its institutions, which are characterised by governance systems which are effective, professional public administration, lower corruption levels, and greater efficiencies in administration. The strong institutions have enabled Botswana to harmonise domestic policies with SADC commitments more effectively and operationalise facilitation of trade reforms more efficiently. Botswana's investments in modernisation of customs, electronic trade systems, and digital governance infrastructure have strengthened the implementation capacity and facilitated smoother cross-border procedures on trade. These institutional advantages position Botswana among the more effective SADC member states in implementing regional trade commitments.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to broader debates on regional integration by demonstrating that the implementation of the SADC Trade Protocol is shaped by the continuous negotiation between regional commitments and domestic political economy realities. While Malawi and Botswana have formally embraced regional integration and aligned their trade policies with SADC objectives, the study reveals that implementation outcomes are influenced by the extent to which regional obligations correspond with national interests, sovereignty concerns and domestic institutional capabilities. The evidence suggests that regional integration in Southern Africa is not a linear process towards deeper economic integration but rather a negotiated process in which states selectively engage with regional commitments based on perceived political and economic benefits. The findings provide strong support for the Political Economy Model of Regional Integration, which argues that states participate in regional cooperation when the expected benefits outweigh the costs associated with limiting policy autonomy. The experiences of Malawi and Botswana demonstrate that governments do not approach regional agreements as neutral technical commitments, but as political and economic decisions shaped by domestic priorities. The study therefore challenges assumptions that membership in regional organisations automatically results in policy convergence and uniform implementation. Although Malawi and Botswana operate within the same SADC institutional framework and are subject to similar regional obligations, their implementation outcomes differ significantly. This variation demonstrates that regional agreements are filtered through domestic political and institutional environments. The findings reinforce arguments within regional integration scholarship that national governments remain the central actors in shaping the depth and effectiveness of regional cooperation, particularly in regions where supranational authority remains limited.

This study is a demonstration that sovereignty continues to play a central role in shaping regional integration outcomes in Southern Africa. Existing debates often present sovereignty as an obstacle to integration, suggesting that states must surrender aspects of national autonomy to achieve deeper cooperation. However, the findings from Malawi and Botswana suggest a more complex relationship between sovereignty and integration. Rather than rejecting regional cooperation, states seek to preserve sovereignty while participating in arrangements that provide economic and strategic benefits. Sovereignty therefore operates not as a complete barrier to integration but as a condition influencing the form and extent of state participation.

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