ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ENHANCING PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE ECOWAS TRADE LIBERALISATION SCHEME AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract
This study assessed the effectiveness of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) communication strategies in enhancing public awareness of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Anambra State, Nigeria. Although the ETLS has operated since 1979 as ECOWAS's oldest trade policy instrument, offering duty-free access to fifteen member states, it remains chronically underutilised by Nigerian SMEs owing to a persistent gap in grassroots awareness. Anchored in the Communication for Development (C4D) framework and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory, the study adopted a survey research design, administering structured questionnaire to 370 SME operators across Onitsha, Nnewi, and Awka, of which 346 were valid for analysis (93.5% response rate), selected through proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of independence. Findings revealed that ETLS awareness among Anambra SMEs is critically low, at 19.5%, and that ECOWAS communication strategies are predominantly formal and top-down, failing to reach the largely informal SME population that dominates business activity in the state. The channels SMEs actually rely on, namely peer networks (47.0%), WhatsApp (24.1%), and community radio (11.9%), are largely unengaged by ECOWAS, producing a fundamental channel mismatch. Chi-square tests confirmed statistically significant relationships between communication strategy exposure and ETLS awareness ($\chi^2 = 47.813$, $p < 0.05$), between business registration status and awareness ($\chi^2 = 61.247$, $p < 0.05$), and between ECOWAS-preferred and SME-preferred channels ($\chi^2 = 83.416$, $p < 0.05$). The study recommends a grassroots-oriented, multi-channel communication approach incorporating community radio in Igbo and Pidgin English, trade association WhatsApp networks, peer educator programmes using ETLS champions, and a structured follow-through mechanism to convert awareness into participation.
Keywords: *ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme, Communication Strategies, SME Awareness, Anambra State, Regional Trade Integration.*

1. Introduction
The imperative of regional economic integration has remained a central pillar of development discourse across the African continent, most especially in West Africa, where the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 to foster collective prosperity through trade, cooperation, and political cohesion among its fifteen member states. One of the most consequential instruments forged within the ECOWAS framework to actualise the goal of intra-regional trade is the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), a protocol-based mechanism designed to facilitate the free movement of goods originating from member states by eliminating tariffs, customs duties, and other non-tariff barriers that hinder cross-border commerce. In principle, the ETLS creates a level playing field for producers and traders across the region and holds transformative potential for the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that constitute the overwhelming majority of businesses in West Africa and, specifically, in Nigeria.

Despite the considerable promise embedded in the ETLS, empirical evidence and stakeholder reports consistently indicate that the scheme has not achieved its intended reach, particularly among the SME community in Nigeria. A recurring explanation for this underperformance is the persistent gap in public awareness, a gap largely attributable to the inadequacy of communication strategies deployed by ECOWAS and its national intermediaries. Communication, in this context, transcends the mere broadcasting of information; it encompasses the deliberate, coordinated, and sustained effort to ensure that policy-relevant knowledge reaches its intended beneficiaries in a

form that is comprehensible, credible, and actionable. When such communication fails or proves insufficient, even the most well-crafted trade policies remain inaccessible to those they are designed to serve.
This study is situated at the intersection of communication policy, regional trade governance, and enterprise development. It interrogates the extent to which ECOWAS communication strategies have succeeded in penetrating the awareness of SMEs in Anambra State, a state renowned for its entrepreneurial culture and its critical role in Nigeria's commercial landscape. The ETLS has existed for over four decades; yet as recently as October 2025, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs found it necessary to organise a dedicated sensitisation workshop in Enugu State targeted specifically at South-East entrepreneurs, because the scheme continues to be unknown to the majority of the people it is designed to benefit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). This paradox, a 46-year-old trade instrument that remains a mystery to its primary beneficiaries, is a failure of communication as much as it is a failure of policy implementation.

The problem is particularly acute in Anambra State, where the commercial and entrepreneurial density of SMEs in Onitsha, Nnewi, and Awka makes the awareness gap both more significant and more consequential. Anambra SMEs that manufacture goods meeting ETLS eligibility criteria, particularly those with at least 60% local value content, could be exporting duty-free to fourteen other West African countries, yet the absence of this knowledge means they compete at a disadvantage within a scheme designed to advantage them. Existing scholarship, while acknowledging the ETLS awareness problem at the macro level, has not produced adequate empirical evidence on the specific communication dynamics operating at the sub-national SME level, leaving no empirical baseline against which to measure the effectiveness of ECOWAS communication strategies in Anambra State.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite over four decades of institutional existence and the deployment of multiple formal communication strategies by ECOWAS and its Nigerian partners, awareness of the ETLS among SME operators in Anambra State remains critically and persistently low. The problem is dual in nature: it is, first, a problem of awareness, as most eligible SMEs in Anambra State do not know the ETLS exists or how to access it; and second, a problem of communication strategy, as the institutional mechanisms deployed to generate that awareness are failing, either because they are reaching the wrong channels, using inaccessible formats, or bypassing the informal majority of the SME population altogether. Anambra SMEs operate predominantly in the informal economy, rely on peer-based information networks, and receive business-relevant information most reliably through community radio, trade association platforms, and mobile messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Okeke & Nwosu, 2021). This channel mismatch means that even well-intentioned and well-resourced communication campaigns may systematically fail to reach the very actors they target.

The objectives of this study are to:
1. Identify the communication strategies employed by ECOWAS and its Nigerian institutional partners to promote awareness of the ETLS among SMEs in Anambra State.
2. Ascertain the level of awareness of the ETLS among SME operators in Anambra State.
3. Determine the communication channels through which SME operators in Anambra State are most likely to receive business-relevant information.
4. Identify the structural and communicative barriers that inhibit effective dissemination of ETLS information to SMEs in Anambra State.
5. Assess the degree to which existing ECOWAS communication strategies align with the information-seeking behaviour and communication environment of SMEs in Anambra State.

Correspondingly, the study tested the following null hypotheses: H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between ECOWAS communication strategies and the level of ETLS awareness among SMEs in Anambra State. H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between the formal registration status of SMEs and their level of awareness of the ETLS. H_{03}: There is no significant difference between the communication channels employed by ECOWAS for ETLS promotion and the channels most frequently used by SMEs in Anambra State for business information.

Literature Review

Communication strategies are systematic, purposeful plans that guide the selection of messages, channels, audiences, and timelines through which an organisation transmits information to achieve specific objectives (Berger, 2007). ECOWAS employs a range of communication approaches to disseminate information about the ETLS, including the publication of official documents and regulatory guidelines through its institutional website and printed materials, radio and television broadcasts through national broadcasting corporations, sensitisation workshops and trade fairs, and increasingly, digital communication tools including social media platforms and mobile-based information systems. In Nigeria, these activities are coordinated in part through the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC), and designated national agencies, with sensitisation cascaded through bodies such as the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) and the Nigerian Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (NASME). However, studies show that these efforts remain largely confined to urban centres, formal business associations, and educated elites, leaving a vast proportion of SME operators, especially those in semi-urban and rural areas, without adequate exposure to critical trade information (Afolabi & Okafor, 2019).

Public awareness, the dependent construct of this study, denotes the extent to which members of a target population possess knowledge, understanding, and consciousness of a particular issue, policy, or programme. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) conceptualised awareness in the context of social marketing as the foundational stage of behavioural change, arguing that individuals cannot participate in or benefit from a programme of which they are unaware. Research in trade policy communication has consistently demonstrated that awareness is a necessary though not sufficient precondition for participation in trade liberalisation schemes (Ackah & Morrissey, 2005); where awareness is low, utilisation rates are correspondingly poor, and the developmental dividends of such schemes remain unrealised.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies inform the present research, though the specific intersection of ETLS communication and Anambra State SMEs had not previously been investigated at this depth. Madueke, Chukwuka, Ozoh, Akolisa, and Imoagwu (2022), studying informal SMEs in Anambra State during the COVID-19 period, found that most SMEs in Awka, Onitsha, and Nnewi were unaware of government support schemes even when such schemes were actively promoted through official channels, attributing this to a mismatch between formal publicity channels and the informal networks through which Anambra SMEs actually receive business intelligence. Okeke and Nwosu (2021), examining information asymmetry and SME policy adoption in South-East Nigeria, found that the quality and accessibility of information provided by government agencies significantly predicted SME uptake of government programmes, identifying trade associations and informal networks as more effective transmission channels than official government channels.

At the continental level, Mold and Mukwaya (2016), studying trade facilitation instruments in East Africa, found that awareness campaigns conducted through business associations and peer networks produced adoption rates significantly higher than those achieved through government-led public information campaigns. Nwangwu, Ononogbu, and Okeke-Uzodike (2019) found that ECOWAS's regional integration agenda suffers from a significant implementation-reality gap, with the institution prioritising inter-governmental dialogue over public-facing outreach. Similarly, research by DHL Nigeria (2024) on challenges facing Nigerian B2B SMEs found that regulatory awareness is among the most significant knowledge gaps confronting the sector, with information access identified as a greater constraint than financial access for a significant proportion of respondents. Collectively, these studies converge on the finding that formal, top-down communication channels systematically under-reach informal SME populations, a pattern this study tests directly in the specific context of ETLS communication in Anambra State.

Institutionally proximate research further situates the present study within an emerging body of Nnamdi Azikiwe University-linked trade scholarship. Egbuna, Kalu, and Ekwugha (2026), writing from the Prof. Ngozi Eunice Egbuna International Centre for Regional Integration and Trade Research alongside the Departments of Economics and Mass Communication at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, examined how artificial intelligence, e-commerce, and digital trade are reshaping cross-border commerce in Africa, arguing that Nigeria's capacity to benefit from digital trade integration is constrained less by the absence of policy instruments than by uneven digital adoption, weak infrastructure, and outdated regulatory frameworks. Their interdisciplinary framing, bringing trade economics and communication scholarship into direct conversation within the same research centre that hosts the present study, exemplifies the analytical approach this study adopts in treating ETLS underutilisation as fundamentally a communication rather than a purely economic or regulatory problem. In an earlier, methodologically distinct study also linked to the university, Oguanobi, Akamobi, Aniebo, and Mgbemena (2014), publishing through the Department of Public Administration at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, examined Nigeria's intra-ECOWAS trade volumes between 1996 and 2008 and found that trade with fellow member states remained insignificant across the period, attributing this underperformance to institutional and regulatory barriers, including cumbersome customs procedures, a complex and costly certificate-of-origin process, unharmonised tariffs, and excessive roadblocks, rather than to any deficiency in the scheme's design. Their macro-level, trade-flow-based diagnosis corroborates the present study's premise that the ETLS is a structurally sound but persistently underutilised instrument; however, where their analysis centres on aggregate customs data and cross-border regulatory friction, the present study extends the diagnosis to the enterprise level, showing that limited SME awareness, itself a product of ECOWAS's communication strategy choices, constitutes an additional and previously undocumented barrier operating upstream of the procedural and tariff obstacles they identify.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Communication for Development (C4D) framework and Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory. Communication for Development positions communication as an active instrument of social and economic transformation rather than a neutral conduit for information transmission (UNICEF, 2013), drawing on Freire's (1970) distinction between 'banking' education, which transmits information to passive recipients, and 'dialogic' education, which engages communities as active co-creators of knowledge. C4D distinguishes between a transmission model, in which information flows one-directionally from an institution to a passive public, and a participatory model, in which communities co-create messages and co-design solutions. The sensitisation-workshop model that ECOWAS predominantly employs is characteristic of the transmission approach, and C4D theory predicts that this approach will underperform participatory alternatives such as community-based campaigns, peer-to-peer trade association education, and locally produced radio programming, because it fails to engage the target community in the communication process itself.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory posits that new ideas, practices, or technologies spread through social systems via a process of communication over time, with different categories of adopters, innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, absorbing innovations at different rates depending on the innovation's relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Applied to the ETLS, the scheme qualifies as an institutional innovation that has, after more than four decades, failed to diffuse beyond the innovator and early-adopter categories, largely large manufacturers and formally organised businesses, into the early majority, late majority, and laggard categories that encompass most Anambra SMEs. The scheme scores poorly on complexity (a multi-step, multi-agency, annually renewed application process), trialability (there is no low-stakes way to test the scheme before committing to the full formal process), and observability (few visible peer success stories exist given the low adoption rate), even though its relative advantage, duty-free access to fourteen additional markets, is theoretically high. Together, these two frameworks provide the analytical lens through which the study's findings on channel mismatch, the registration barrier, and the facilitation gap are interpreted.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design, appropriate for the systematic collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of a defined population and for the hypothesis-testing dimension of the research, which required statistical analysis of the relationships between communication strategy variables and awareness outcomes (Babbie, 2016). The study was conducted in three commercial centres of Anambra State: Onitsha, dominated by general trading and hosting the Onitsha Main Market; Nnewi, Nigeria's foremost hub for automobile spare-parts manufacturing; and Awka, the state capital, which combines administrative activity with a growing base of trading and service enterprises. These centres were purposively selected because, together, they capture the dominant sectoral profile of Anambra's SME economy and its geographic spread across the state's three senatorial zones.

The target population consisted of SME operators engaged in manufacturing, trading, and agro-processing across the three centres. Given the primarily informal nature of SME registration in the state, the study drew on the Onitsha Main Market Association, the Nnewi Spare Parts Dealers Association, and the Awka Traders Association membership registers as a framework for population approximation, yielding an accessible population of approximately 5,000 active enterprises. Applying the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, with a 5% margin of error, a minimum sample size of 370 was determined and distributed proportionally across locations and sectors using stratified random sampling. Of the 370-questionnaire administered between August and October 2025, 346 were returned complete and usable, a response rate of 93.5%.

The instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising four sections covering demographic information, ETLS awareness (five-point Likert-type items), communication channel usage, and perceived barriers to participation. Face and content validity were established through review by departmental faculty and a trade-policy expert, and the instrument was pilot-tested on 30 SME operators outside the main study sites. Internal consistency reliability, assessed via Cronbach's Alpha, returned coefficients of 0.841 for the awareness section, 0.789 for the communication-channels section, 0.812 for the barriers section, and 0.823 overall, all exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978) for social science instruments. Data were coded and analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.0, using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) to address the research questions, and chi-square tests of independence ($\alpha = 0.05$) to test the three null hypotheses.

Results

A total of 346 valid questionnaires were analysed. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 346)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	241	65.1
	Female	129	34.9
Age Range	18–25 years	52	14.1
	26–35 years	138	37.3
	36–45 years	106	28.6
	46–55 years	58	15.7
	56 and above	16	4.3
Business Sector	Manufacturing	112	30.3
	Trading	164	44.3
	Agro-processing	62	16.8
	Services	32	8.6
CAC Registration Status	Formally Registered	118	31.9
	Not Registered	252	68.1
Location	Onitsha	162	43.8
	Nnewi	119	32.2
	Awka	89	24.1

Source: Field survey data, August–October 2025.

The sample is predominantly male (65.1%) and relatively young, with the modal age bracket falling within 26–35 years (37.3%). The most consequential demographic finding is that only 31.9% of respondents (n = 118) operate formally registered businesses, meaning 68.1% (n = 252) are ineligible for ETLS application not because their products fail to qualify, but because they lack the formal registration the scheme requires as a prerequisite.

Table 2: Level of Awareness of the ETLS among SME Operators (n = 346)

Awareness Indicator	Aware (n)	Unaware (n)	Aware (%)
Have you heard of the ETLS?	72	298	19.5
Can you name at least one ETLS benefit?	51	319	13.8
Aware of 60% local content rule?	38	332	10.3
Know the ETLS application procedure?	19	351	5.1
Know that approval must be revalidated annually?	14	356	3.8
Know Certificate of Origin is product-specific?	12	358	3.2

Source: Field survey data, August–October 2025.

Only 19.5% of respondents (n = 72) had ever heard of the ETLS, and awareness depth deteriorated sharply across more specific indicators: only 13.8% could name a benefit, 10.3% knew the eligibility criteria, and 5.1% had any knowledge of the application procedure, confirming that the awareness that does exist is shallow and largely non-actionable.

Table 3: Communication Channels Used by SMEs for Business Information (n = 346)

Information Channel	Rank 1 (%)	Ever Used (%)	ETLS Source (%)
Peer networks / fellow traders	47.0	93.2	52.8
WhatsApp / social media messaging	24.1	81.4	16.7
Community radio	11.9	67.3	6.9
Trade association meetings	7.8	54.6	12.5
Television	4.9	58.4	4.2
Newspapers / print media	2.4	42.2	4.2
Government workshops (ECOWAS/NEPC)	1.4	18.6	12.5
Government websites / official publications	0.5	9.7	2.8

Source: Field survey data, August–October 2025. 'Rank 1' = cited as primary channel; 'ETLS Source' = among ETLS-aware respondents (n = 72) who named this channel as their source of ETLS information.

Peer networks constitute the primary information channel for 47.0% of respondents and are used in some capacity by 93.2%, while WhatsApp (24.1% primary) and community radio (11.9% primary) rank second and third. By contrast, government workshops, ECOWAS's primary ETLS promotion channel, were the primary channel for only 1.4% of respondents, and government websites, its secondary channel, for just 0.5%. Among the 72 ETLS-aware respondents, 52.8% first learned of the scheme through peer networks, confirming that informal social channels, not ECOWAS's formal communication infrastructure, are responsible for most of the ETLS awareness that exists in the SME community.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test Results for Hypotheses One to Three

Hypothesis	Test Parameter	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
H_{01}	ECOWAS communication exposure vs. ETLS awareness	47.813	4	0.000	Rejected
H_{02}	CAC registration status vs. ETLS awareness	61.247	4	0.000	Rejected
H_{03}	ECOWAS-preferred vs. SME-preferred channels	83.416	6	0.000	Rejected

Source: Field survey data, August–October 2025. Significance level, α = 0.05.

All three null hypotheses were rejected at $p < 0.05$. Exposure to ECOWAS communication strategies was significantly associated with ETLS awareness ($\chi^2 = 47.813$), confirming that ECOWAS communication does produce awareness where it reaches its target audience, though it reaches only a small fraction of that audience. Formal CAC registration status was significantly associated with awareness ($\chi^2 = 61.247$), with registered SMEs demonstrating markedly higher awareness than unregistered SMEs, underscoring the structural exclusion of the informal majority from the current communication pipeline. The strongest result, for Hypothesis Three ($\chi^2 = 83.416$), confirms a fundamental and statistically robust divergence between ECOWAS's formal channel emphasis and the informal channels SMEs actually rely on.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study present a consistent and coherent narrative: ECOWAS communication strategies for the ETLS are structurally misaligned with the communication environment of Anambra State's SME population, and this misalignment is the primary driver of the chronic awareness deficit that has characterised the scheme's uptake in the state. The finding that only 19.5% of respondents had ever heard of the ETLS, and that meaningful procedural knowledge was rarer still, confirms what government officials themselves acknowledged at the 2025 Enugu workshop, that the ETLS remains underutilised due to limited awareness among SMEs, traders, and government agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). The discovery that informal peer networks and WhatsApp dominate SME information channels is consistent with Diffusion of Innovations theory's emphasis on interpersonal channels within social systems as the primary vector of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003), and with prior evidence from informal Nigerian SME contexts (Madueke et al., 2022; Okeke & Nwosu, 2021).

The strong relationship between formal registration status and ETLS awareness reveals a structural irony at the heart of ECOWAS's communication strategy: the scheme is explicitly designed to benefit SMEs, including small and micro enterprises, yet the communication infrastructure that promotes it is embedded in the formal institutional ecosystem, trade associations, chambers of commerce, and government ministries, that predominantly reaches already-registered, already-organised businesses. This pattern is consistent with the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), which predicts that actors with greater institutional connectivity acquire new information faster than those with less, meaning ECOWAS's current communication approach not only fails to close the awareness gap but actively widens it.

The complexity of the ETLS process further emerges as a second-order barrier: among the small minority of aware respondents who had attended sensitisation workshops, 80.5% reported encountering procedural barriers that discouraged them from applying after gaining awareness. This is consistent with McGuire's (1989) communication-persuasion matrix, which holds that awareness is only the first step in a chain of cognitive and practical processes that must occur before it converts into action. Taken together, the findings diagnose the ETLS awareness crisis in Anambra State as the product of three interacting failures, a channel mismatch, a registration barrier, and a facilitation gap, each of which is amenable to specific, evidence-based communication solutions.

Conclusion

The evidence assembled in this study leads to an unambiguous conclusion: ECOWAS communication strategies for the ETLS are not effective in reaching or informing SMEs in Anambra State. This is not primarily a failure of intent, the ongoing institutional collaboration between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ECOWAS, and NEPC demonstrates genuine commitment to promoting the scheme, but a failure of design. The strategies are designed for the formal sector and delivered through formal channels to formal audiences, while the majority of Anambra's SMEs are informal, access information informally, and make decisions through informal social networks. The channel mismatch documented in this study is not a minor administrative inefficiency; it is a strategic error that has persisted for decades and has produced sustained ETLS underutilisation in one of Nigeria's most commercially dynamic states. Because the ETLS is structurally foundational to Nigeria's participation in the African Continental

Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), closing this communication gap carries significance well beyond Anambra State's borders.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, ECOWAS and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should establish a dedicated grassroots outreach mechanism for community-level ETLS communication in South-East Nigeria, with defined key performance indicators such as SMEs reached per quarter and awareness-to-application conversion rates. ETLS communication materials should be developed in Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin English, in formats accessible to audiences with varied levels of formal education, including radio jingles, simplified one-page visual guides for market notice boards, and WhatsApp-compatible voice-note summaries distributed through trade association group chats. A multi-channel strategy should systematically incorporate community radio, trade-association WhatsApp networks, and peer-to-peer dissemination, repositioning formal workshops as supplements to, rather than substitutes for, informal-channel communication.

The Anambra State government should integrate ETLS awareness into existing SME development programmes and collaborate with the Corporate Affairs Commission to facilitate subsidised registration drives, given that 68.1% of SMEs in the sample remain unregistered and therefore categorically ineligible for the scheme. Trade associations should incorporate ETLS information into routine member communications and identify and train ETLS Champions, established adopters who can serve as peer educators for prospective applicants, consistent with the opinion-leader function identified in Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory. Finally, a post-sensitisation follow-up mechanism, such as a toll-free helpline or structured mentorship pairing, should accompany SMEs through the application process, since the evidence shows that awareness without follow-through does not reliably convert into participation.

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