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## Integrative Added Value and Its Expressions in MERCOSUR and other Regional Organizations

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** While doing research on European Union activities a phenomenon of creation European Added Value was discovered. It is worth examining whether a similar phenomenon appears in other regional organizations/Free Trade Areas, such as: MERCOSUR, EFTA, NAFTA and ASEAN.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** In the article, apart from statistical information, reports of the European Commission and different Free Trade Areas (FTAs) were examined. The study analyzes different statistics as well as reviews literature on the MERCOSUR and other FTAs. Document analysis and comparative methods, were employed.

**Findings:** The analysis shows that in all the surveyed groupings similar joint activities were carried out like in the European Union. However, they did not concern agriculture, defense policy and internal security. Joint budget generally determines joint ventures that create added value in the groupings in question. Activities that in the FTA are jointly managed generate integrative added value in the economic, social and environmental spheres.

**Practical Implications:** The results of the research shall be of interest for scientists, students, politicians and decision makers.

**Originality/Value:** This is a new approach. Besides the trade creation and trade diversion effects as described in theories of economic integration one can find the third “integrative added value effect”

**Keywords:** MERCOSUR countries, European Union, EFTA, NAFTA, ASEAN, added value.

**JEL Codes:** A10, E00, F10.

**Paper type:** Research article.

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## **1. Introduction**

The most mature form of regional integration is the European Union. Using the example of the European Union as a model, it is possible to trace what processes take place in other integration agreements. Are there similar joint activities in other integration groups as those of the EU countries and what are their effects? MERCOSUR, EFTA, NAFTA, and ASEAN served as an example.

It should be determined whether added value, in its economic and social aspect, appears not only at a high stage of integration, which is the economic union. We can assume, based on the experience of the European Union, that integrative added value can arise in the following areas of joint activity that strengthen mutual relations between countries (Collignon, 2011):

- Agricultural policy
- border control;
- defence policy;
- internal security;
- transport policy;
- regulations concerning the common market;
- trade and competition policy;
- environment, combating climate change, energy policy;
- research and development and education policy.

We do not mention foreign policy ("one embassy") in the list, as it requires typically political agreements.

If there are joint activities, we can expect certain benefits. And if such situations occur, we shall try to trace them.

The aim of this paper is to indicate joint actions of the above mentioned organizations (including early stages of European Economic Community) and to point out the created added value.

## **2. MERCOSUR**

MERCOSUR (Spanish: Mercado Común del Sur – Common Market of the South) is an international economic organization established in 1991 by the Treaty of Asunción. The Member States are: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay. Venezuela was admitted to the organization in 2012 but suspended its membership in 2016.

Bolivia, being an associated country, like Chile, Peru, Ecuador (they use the free trade area, but do not participate in the customs union) became a member of the grouping in mid-2024.

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MERCOSUR functions as a customs union (according to the treaty provisions since 1995) and a free trade area. The party has ambitions to become a common market modelled on the European Union. However, more than 30 years after its founding, the group is still striving to achieve this goal. Despite this, MERCOSUR remains an economic and political force in the region, connecting the two largest economies in South America.

## **2.1 Is MERCOSUR Really a Free Trade Area, or Is it already a Customs Union?**

Argentina and Brazil began to partially open their markets to the world in the 1990s. Under the MERCOSUR customs union system, Argentina and Brazil apply the same standard tariff to imports from third countries. In general, MERCOSUR's tariff rates on agri-food imports were high.

For example, in 2022 they were for olive oil – 10%, malt – 14%, wine – up to 35%, beverages (other than wine) – up to 35%, chocolate - 20%, whiskey and other spirits: 20-35%, pastries, waffles and biscuits - 18%, canned peaches -55% (EU - MERCOSUR, 2024).

However, these countries' efforts to liberalize beyond their Latin American trading partners have stalled since 1995. In addition, Argentina has started announcing further anti-dumping investigations into imports of fabrics from Brazil.

It is worth noting that Brazil has not opened any comparable investigation into Argentina. In later years, Brazil launched a major anti-dumping investigation into imports from China – this time for steel products. Argentina did not join the proceedings.

These facts point to a lack of coordination of trade policy (MERCOSUR 2016). Looking more closely at the situation in Argentina and Brazil, it can be pointed out that (Bown 2015):

- Argentina frequently applies anti-dumping measures to imports from Brazil, Brazil rarely applies such measures against Argentina;
- Argentina and Brazil apply anti-dumping measures to imports from different non-MERCOSUR countries in different sectors and timeframes.

Since 1990, there have been dozens of cases (MERCOSUR 2016) that Brazil, unlike Argentina, applies anti-dumping measures against countries outside the zone (example steel imports from China). The lack of coordination in the trade policy applied to third countries calls into question the idea of a customs union introduced by the two largest Latin American countries. With regard to the MERCOSUR free trade area, Argentina and Brazil apply a zero tariff in their trade in accordance with the rules.

However, since 1990, there have been many cases, such as those concerning fabrics, where Argentina imposes separate anti-dumping duties on imports from Brazil. Is this how the free trade area is supposed to work?

## **2.2 Joint Actions within MERCOSUR**

While it is difficult to talk about significant successes in trade policy, achievements in other joint activities can be noted. In 2004, the Member States set up the MERCOSUR Structural Convergence Fund (FOCEM). The fund is designed to finance investments in regional infrastructure projects, with the aim of better integration between MERCOSUR member states.

These investments also aim to promote less developed regions and improve the competitiveness of businesses and social development in the MERCOSUR countries. However, the main goal is to strengthen the union itself. FOCEM is funded by contributions from member states, with Brazil providing almost 70 percent of the capital.

The fund is based on a system of contributions and resource distribution in an inverse way, which means that the bloc's countries with greater relative economic development contribute more. At the same time, countries with less relative economic development receive the largest funds to finance their projects. Initially, the total sum of contributions was USD 100 million per year, and since 2013, after entering the zone of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the total value of the funds has increased to USD 127 million per year.

The funds are distributed as a non-refundable donation. The FOCEM program was supposed to run until 2015, but the project was extended until 2025. Since the fund is intended to even out development disparities, the budget for recent years has allocated 46 percent of the funds to Paraguay, 31 percent to Uruguay and 11 percent each to Argentina and Brazil.

Of the 52 projects approved so far, 13 have been completed and are in the closing stage, 11 have been completed and closed, and 25 are under construction. These include sanitation, drinking water supply, communications, laying electrical networks and high-voltage station installations, improvement and expansion of school facilities, modernization of railways, etc., (Explainer, 2024).

MERCOSUR member countries also developed a Strategic Social Action Plan (MERCOSUR, 2011) in 2011. It contains 10 priorities modelled on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, promoted by the United Nations. Of the 10 priorities, two deserve special attention when it comes to the implementation of joint actions: universal access to education and the promotion of a sustainable environment. Education is covered by the Joint Action Plan and the issue of common

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environmental protection results from the MERCOSUR Framework Agreement on the Environment, signed in Asuncion in 2001.

### **3. EFTA**

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) was established on 3 May 1960. It was aimed at creating a free trade area between member states. The founding members were: Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Over time, some countries withdrew from the association, choosing to become members of the EEC. Finland was also a member of the organization (Soporek, 2004).

The free trade area between the EFTA countries was established in 1968. In 1977, the EEC and EFTA countries created a common free trade area for industrial goods. In 1992, the EEC and the EFTA agreed to create a common free trade area for all goods. The agreement on this matter, which did not include Switzerland, entered into force on 1 January 1994, creating the European Economic Area (Agreement, 1994).

Under the Porto Agreement, citizens of all EEA countries are free to move, settle and acquire real estate within the Area. In return, EFTA supports the EU's Cohesion Fund. The EFTA countries have adopted a large part of the specific Community provisions into their legislation (however, this does not apply to, for i.a., agricultural or monetary policy). An important feature of the EEA is that it operates at the level of the first and third stages of integration, i.e. the free trade area and the Common Market, excluding the second stage, the customs union

Due to its membership in the Area, and its numerous links with the European Union, EFTA's situation is different from that of other integration agreements.

EFTA's activities were more limited than those of the EEC, even in its early days. Unlike the EEC, the EFTA Agreement did not contain provisions on a common economic policy, free movement of capital, or labor. All the provisions of the agreement were limited to foreign trade (Łopatka, 1971) The situation changed after the creation of the EEA, in which the four freedoms of the EU common market apply. Nevertheless, unlike the EEC and later the European Union, the ties between the member states of the EFTA are loose and not of an institutional nature.

However, can we find common activities in this grouping that bring common benefits? Undoubtedly, yes. The EEA Agreement provides for the participation of three EEA-EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) in 15 Community programmes. At the same time, the EFTA countries contribute financially to the EU in two ways. Firstly, they contribute to the overall objectives of the EU's regional policy by providing grants to certain EU Member States to 'reduce social and economic disparities in the EEA' (Report, 2008).

The three EFTA countries provide funding through EEA Funds. Norway itself provides the so-called "Norwegian funds".

EEA countries contribute to the costs of EU programmes in which they participate under the EEA Agreement in proportion to their share in GDP. EEA countries have also committed to seconding national experts to the Commission as an in-kind contribution to these programmes.

#### **4. NAFTA**

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is an agreement between the United States of America, Canada, and Mexico, forming a free trade area between these countries. Unlike the European Union, NAFTA does not create supra-state government bodies, and its law does not take precedence over national law. NAFTA countries have abolished tariffs on mutual trade, but retain autonomous tariffs on trade with third countries.

NAFTA was signed on December 17, 1992 and entered into force on January 1, 1994. The United States, Mexico, and Canada renegotiated NAFTA on September 30, 2018. The new agreement is called the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (North 2018).

If by added value we mean a new quantitative or qualitative effect that cannot be achieved by individual elements on their own, then it is also manifested in this grouping. For example, as a result of the agreement, the prices of oil and some foodstuffs (vegetables, fruits, chocolate, and beef) have decreased.

Due to the agreement, modernization and consolidation of the North American automotive industry took place. Parts for American cars come from three NAFTA countries. This is therefore an example of the integrative added value, as there not only export-import dependencies occur. U.S. foreign direct investment in Canada and Mexico increased, as well as of both countries in the U.S. however to a lesser extent.

These processes would not have happened without NAFTA. As a success of NAFTA and added value, it can be noted that there will be more competition for companies from all three countries to bid for government contracts and ultimately savings in these expenses.

NAFTA's joint activities in the field of labor market and environmental protection should also be noted. In 1993, the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC) and the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC) were signed as side agreements to NAFTA.

NAALC's main goal was to improve working conditions and living standards in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The NAAEC consists of a declaration of principles and objectives for environmental protection, as well as sets out concrete measures for further cooperation between the three countries.

## 5. ASEAN

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a political and economic organization, created as a continuation of the *Association of South-East Asia* created by Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in 1961. The headquarters of the organization is Jakarta. Members are (in order of accession): the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand (founding countries), Brunei (since 1984), Vietnam (since 1995), Laos and Myanmar (since 1997), Cambodia (since 1999).

In 1993, the *ASEAN Free Trade Area* (AFTA) was established, which enabled consumers in the countries of the zone to buy more diverse goods at relatively low prices. AFTA has raised the level of competition between suppliers and manufacturers in the region, which benefits consumers. New jobs have also been created in the zone (Economic 2026).

Plans to create a single market began in 2007 when ASEAN leaders adopted the *ASEAN Economic Community* (AEC) plan to allow the free movement of investment and capital in a region of more than 600 million people (Plummer, 2015).

ASEAN joint activities occur in many spheres:

### *Higher Education:*

The *ASEAN University Network* (AUN) was established, an agreement between more than thirty universities in ten ASEAN countries, enabling the joint registration of students. Higher education is recognized as one of the catalysts for accelerating ASEAN's economic, political, and socio-cultural development agenda (ASEAN, 2026).

### *Mutual recognition of educational and technical qualifications:*

This action aims to facilitate the free movement of labor in the ASEAN region.

### *Environmental protection:*

Establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity is an example of the regional initiative. Creation of this center and many joint projects is particularly important due to the specificity of the region. ASEAN countries cover i.a. the Coral Triangle, an area of six million square kilometers of tropical waters, which is home to six of the world's seven species of sea turtles and more than 2,000 species of fish. The region is home to 15% of the world's fish production, 33% of seagrass meadows, 34% of coral reef cover, and 35% of the world's mangrove acreage.

As an example of a project implemented by the Centre, "The *ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHP)*" can be indicated (ASEAN 2026). The program sustainably protects the rich biodiversity of the region for its inhabitants. As of 2025, the AHP program covered 62 ASEAN Heritage Parks in 10 ASEAN member states.

*Disaster Relief:*

In 2011, the *ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance* was established (ASEAN Coordinating, 2026).

*Improving connectivity together:*

The BIMP-EAGA communication project is a joint venture between government corporations of four Asean members and a private corporation from the Philippines. A submarine cable was laid between the countries of the region. The project has reduced the cost of telecommunications services in the region (Santos 2017).

*Creating an enabling environment for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises:*

Work is underway to standardize the registration of business activity in the region.

The joint activities of the member states of the integration agreements discussed above are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Joint actions in some integration agreements*

<b>Scope</b>	<b>EFTA</b>	<b>NAFTA</b>	<b>MERCOSUR</b>	<b>ASEAN</b>
Border control				
Defence policy				
Homeland Security				
Transport policy			+	+
Regulations concerning the common market			+	+
Trade and competition policy		+	+	+
Environment, Climate Change, Energy Policy	+	+	+	+
R&D and education policy	+		+	+

*Source:* Own study based on data on individual groupings.

An analysis of the joint activities of several integration groups leads to the conclusion that the condition for their existence and generation of added value is the existence of a common budget. Will this hypothesis be confirmed? Was there a common budget for common purposes in the early days of the EEC?

## 6. The Common Budget as a Benchmark for Joint Action

*EEC budget 1958-1968:*

The European Economic Community was established on 1 January 1958 as a free trade area. In 1968, the EGW free trade area was replaced by a customs union of six

countries. The provisions on the customs union were included in the provisions of the EEC Treaty, but the actual activity of the customs union took place 10 years after the entry into force of this treaty (Grycuk and Russell, 2017).

In further considerations, we are interested in this ten-year period, when the EEC was still a free trade area. Have joint ventures developed during this period? The effectiveness of the Community's action depends to a large extent on the financial possibilities of implementing these activities, hence it is necessary to dwell on the Community budgets of 1958-1968.

Initially, each of the Communities had separate budgets, so by 1967 there were as many as five of them (Cybulski, 2006):

- the administrative budget of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC);
- the operational budget of the ECSC;
- the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC's) administrative budget;
- EAEC's research and investment budget;
- EEC budget.

The entry into force of the Treaty establishing a single Council and a single Commission of the European Communities in 1967<sup>2</sup> led to the merger of the Community's administrative budgets in 1968.

According to another taxonomy of budgets maintained by DG Budget (Europa 2008), there were also five budgets. In addition to the ECSC and Euratom budgets, the budgets of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Development Fund (EDF) should be mentioned. All three funds were created under the Treaty of Rome, although EAGGF practically started operating in 1964, and EDF from 1959 (Eur-lex 2026).

Numerical statements from the report concerning the period of our interest are included in Table 2.

What were the amounts in the third column (EEC/general budget) spent on? In the initial period (1958-1964), the funds were allocated mainly to the creation of the Community administration. The first expenditures from the EAGGF fund can be

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<sup>2</sup>Treaty establishing a One Council and a One Commission of the European Communities (the so-called " Merger Treaty") – concluded on 8 April 1965 in Brussels, the treaty merged the institutions of the three Communities: a single Commission of the European Communities was created (from the High Authority of the ECSC, the EEC Commission and the Euratom Commission) and one Council of Ministers for all three European Communities [<https://www.cvce.eu/2018>].

recorded from 1965, then they increase rapidly (guarantee section), from 8.5 to 77.4% in 1968 (EU Budget, 2007).

These funds were used for the common organization of agricultural markets, including market intervention and the export subsidy scheme (OECD 2008). Export subsidies supported exports, and thus strengthened the effect of trade creation. Thanks to the intervention system, farmers could earn higher incomes than if the system had not existed. There is an effect of creating added value here (The European, 2013).

The activities of the ECSC and EAEC brought benefits as well. The ECSC, Europe's first inclusive grouping<sup>3</sup>, had the following objectives, as stipulated in the Treaty of Paris signed in 1951<sup>4</sup>: economic development, employment growth and higher living standards in the member states.

Among the many indicators illustrating the effects of the ECSC, two can be identified. According to Mathieu (1970), steel production in the community increased significantly from 42 million tons in 1952 to 107.3 million tons in 1969, while GDP in Germany increased by 40 percent between 1955 and 1964, according to Staab (2008). So there are benefits, but they can be attributed more to the "trade creation" effect.

EAEC, already in its initial period of activity, i.e. after the establishment of the Treaties of Rome, created added value. The tasks of EAEC were i.a.: conducting research, promoting knowledge, acting as a regulator for nuclear fuels.

**Table 2.** *Structure of EC funds<sup>5</sup> in the years 1958-1967 by type of funds (annual averages in the given periods)*

Period (a)	Symbol and number of countries	Percentage of expenses			
		EEC/general budget	EAEC (b)	ECSC (c)	EDF( d)
1958-1959	EWG-6	23,2	11,0	65,8	-
1960-1964	EWG-6	28,2	25,8	22,0	24,0
1965-1967	EWG-6	39,4	28,5	7,8	24,3

<sup>3</sup>The ECSC was not included in the Balassa taxonomy, as it dealt primarily with agreements of a commercial nature, but it is not consistent, as the final levels of its scheme concern economic integration. However, Balassa was mainly concerned with exemplifying the effects of trade creation and the trade diversion effect.

<sup>4</sup>Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community. [www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu).

<sup>5</sup>EC – European Communities. It is a term is still in operation, often interchangeably with the term EU, although of the original three European Communities, only the European Union – the successor to the EEC – has governing bodies. The EAEC and ECSC bodies (which ceased operations in 2002) were already incorporated into the EEC bodies in 1967. <https://www.cvce.eu/2018>.

*Note:* <sup>(a)</sup> 5-year periods were adopted. They are shorter, if the 5-year period would cover the years both before and after the next enlargement, as well as the years of operation of the various funds; <sup>(b)</sup> the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC); <sup>(c)</sup> the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC); <sup>(d)</sup> European Development Fund (EDF).

*Source:* Own calculations based on data provided in the EU Budget 2007 Financial Report, European Communities 2008, Annex 2.

Therefore, it can be argued that at the stage of creating the European Communities and the operation of the free trade areas, funds were spent on common goals and there was an integrative – additional added value.

## 7. A Common Budget in Other Integration Groupings

EFTA's common budget is very modest. It amounts to 23.7 million Swiss francs (www.efta 2025). The contribution of the EEA EFTA to EU programs is completely disproportionate. For example EEA EFTA commitment to the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 amounts to approximately EUR 3.22 billion (www.efta 2026). Before establishment of the EEA, it is difficult to talk about significant joint EFTA activities. The situation changed radically after the creation of the EEA (1994). In this case, the hypothesis that if the FTA countries do not have a common budget, there are no joint actions is confirmed.

In NAFTA countries, the Commission on Ecological Cooperation (CEC) has a common budget. Added value is found in joint projects related to environmental protection. In this grouping, another interesting phenomenon appears. Foreign direct investment between the countries of the agreement increased, creating inclusive added value. Probably the multiplier mechanism worked here.

In MERCOSUR, as already mentioned, the FOCEM Structural Convergence Fund is in operation. It has its own budget, functions in many areas (Table 1) and creates the integrative added value. In ASEAN countries, there is a combination of different forms of financing joint projects, ranging from a common budget to project financing by individual countries.

The above analysis shows that the joint budget generally determines joint ventures that create added value in the groupings in question. However, common resources are not always a prerequisite for the creation of new value. This is shown by the example of foreign investments under NAFTA, or higher education activities in ASEAN countries, which are financed by the Thai government (Beerkens, 2004).

## 8. Conclusions

Examples from the economic reality show that there may be a free trade zone (example NAFTA), in which joint economic, social, environmental, scientific activities, etc., are not undertaken, or they are undertaken to a very limited extent,

and FTA in which such activities are undertaken. A similar division may apply to the customs union.

The analysis shows that in all the surveyed groupings similar joint activities were carried out like in the European Union. However, they did not concern agriculture, defense policy and internal security. It should be noted that these groups (NAFTA does not plan to move to the next stage of economic integration) have not yet fully transformed into either a customs union or a common market, despite attempts. These are still just free trade areas. Nevertheless, some activities in the FTA are jointly managed and generate integrative added value in the economic, social and environmental spheres.

Therefore, it is likely that the FTA in which there are no joint activities, is a purely theoretical creation, and in practice it can only exist just after the creation of the zone. Achieving joint effects is facilitated by a common budget, although it can be replaced by a multiplier mechanism or a synergy effect.

At the beginning of the paper, the question was also posed whether there are similar joint activities in other integration groups as in the EU countries and what are their effects? At what stage of integration does added value appear?

The research and considerations undertaken show that the category of integrative added value is generated at the early stages of joint activities of the countries concerned.

Added value is not directly related to international trade in goods, hence it is difficult to inscribe it into the effects of trade creation or trade diversion effect

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