

## *Original Paper*

# Understanding the African Continental Free Trade Area: Beyond “Single Market” to “Africa’s Rejuvenation” Analysis

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### **Abstract**

*While global trends continue to move from integration towards heightened protectionism, and retaliatory trade measures, African countries improved their intra-regional trade levels and deepened their regional integration by launching the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The AfCFTA seeks to deepen Africa’s market integration at regional and continental levels; smash down tariff barriers within Africa; boost intra-Africa trade; promote regional and continental value chains; and hopefully deliver Africa’s rejuvenation. However, Africa as a continent is facing many challenges, especially its notions and concepts of development, plus the complications caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, questions are being aroused on whether African policy makers are prepared enough to overcome the AfCFTA related challenges. This article examines the mechanisms needed to fully implement the recently signed continental free trade area deal, its impact on Africa’s Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and what’s in it for Africa’s major economic partners. In this article, the author will also point out existing daunting challenges and give a series of policy recommendations.*

### **Keywords**

*African continental free trade area, regional economic communities, Intra-African trade, single market, Africa’s rejuvenation*

## 1. Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's biggest free trade area, which was endorsed by 54 out of 55 African Union (AU) member countries, leaving Eritrea the only African nation that hasn't signed the agreement. The AfCFTA's objective is to create a single market for goods, services and free movement of African people and capital within the African continent and help deepen the continent's economic integration (Note 1). According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the AfCFTA will gradually eliminate tariffs on 90% of the goods produced in Africa. The AfCFTA was initiated in June 2015, entered into force on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, but will fully enter into action from July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Ghana, one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, was designated to host the Secretariat of the AfCFTA. The AfCFTA aspires to create a tariff-free continent that aims to grow African local businesses, and pave the way for a new custom union. The initiative is also slated to boost intra-African trade through better harmonization of trade liberalization, while enhancing industrialization to create more jobs opportunities for African citizens. However, while the AfCFTA agreement entered into force in 2019, commerce due to have started on July 1<sup>st</sup> has been delayed as the COVID-19 pandemic set back negotiations to lay the foundation for trade in goods, including tariff concessions. While the window to implement the deal is very narrow, African heads of state want it to move as quickly as possible once conditions allow.

The launch of the AfCFTA is a significant milestone for African countries, for African citizens and for the African Union itself and will be governed by five operational instruments: the rules of origin; the online negotiating forum; the monitoring and elimination of non-tariff barriers; a digital payment system and the African trade observatory (Note 2). Each of these operational instruments are being successively launched and fully supported by different African high personalities and Heads of States.

2018 estimates from Brookings Institution indicate that with the actual operationalization of the AfCFTA, the African continent is likely to become a US\$ 3.5 trillion economic trade zone. In addition, when fully operational, the AfCFTA could be the world's biggest free-trade zone by area, with a potential market of 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of US\$ 3.5 trillion (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). However, even though the continental free trade deal has been launched, African countries have a long way to go and should learn from their counterparts, especially the European Union (EU), or even the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) on how to put aside differences and aim to grow internal trade volume and trade interdependence. At present, Africa ranks behind other regions in terms of its overall level of regional trade volume. Despite African countries' cultural affinity and geographic proximity, it is unfortunate that between 2015 to 2017, only 17% of trade was conducted among African countries, largely due to Africa's intra-trade barriers, Africa's fragmented market, poor transport and telecommunication connectivity, etc. Furthermore, African countries remain keen on sheltering their internal markets from external influence, while Asia intra-continental trade, especially within the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is estimated up to 59%, North America

by 37%, Latin America by 20%, and European Union by 69% (Note 3). Nevertheless, it is also important to notice that many African countries have made significant progress in their economic performances in the last ten years. Countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Ghana, to name just few, are attracting large amounts of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) globally. In addition, according to the African Union open data, Africa has the largest number of active consumers; its population is projected to hit 2.5 billion by 2050; comprising around 26% of the world's working age population; and an economy estimated to grow twice as rapidly as that of the developed world (Note 4).

However, despite rapid economic development of some African countries, products and goods traded within African countries are mainly raw materials and traditional commodities with little or no value added. This should not have been the case if there were no trade barriers within African States. Although, the actual operation and implementation of the AfCFTA agreement as a whole has a long way to go to overcome all the existing daunting challenges, but the impact of the Continental Trade deal area agreement on boosting investment in Africa should not be ignored. The launch of the AfCFTA will speed up the complete elimination of trade barriers, enhance Africa's global competitiveness at the enterprise and industry level, and hopefully, it will be easier for African businesses to trade within the continent, and benefit from the growing African market.

The objective of this article is to give insights from an African perspective of what the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement will bring to the African continent and to its major economic partners. In this article, the author will only take China and the USA as case study. Africa has a large number of countries, many Regional Economic Communities (RECs), vast disparities in their economies, a growing and competitive work force, among others. It is just about time Africa begins to do things for herself, especially in an era featuring uncertainties and fluctuations. The launch of the AfCFTA comes at the opportune time; especially when African country leaders are embracing integration and push forward their own development programs through the "Africa Agenda 2063". Based on its basic goals, the AfCFTA deal is set to reduce heavy tariffs that have been slowing the intra-Africa trade speed and unlock many opportunities on the continent, redesign the architectural framework of Africa's economic systems and hopefully anchor the modern Africa that African citizens want. Nevertheless, the success of the implementation of the AfCFTA agreement depends not only on documents signed in a conference room but rather on the functions of elements beyond African countries borders such as transparency and clear rules of play. How Africa as a continent can take advantage of the huge market opportunities and Africa's demographic dividend to boost intra-Africa trade remain the big question needed to be answered.

A key takeaway from this article is: African countries have more integration barriers to beat in their markets than in signed agreements. The lack of adequate transportation and telecommunications infrastructure in the continent and over reliance on Western foreign exchange currency in the arena of trade, provide incentives for the maintenance of the current status quo. In addition, substandard

infrastructure and Africa's current poor trade logistics sit alongside tariffs as barriers that need to be solved. The author of this article argues that it will take more than a reduction in tariffs to achieve the success of the continental free trade area deal. In this article, the author will point out existing challenges and give a series of policy recommendations, hopefully that might help in the successful implementation of the AfCFTA.

## 2. Literature Review

On a broader scale, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, African countries have worked together in seeking their development opportunities. In fact, within the last two decades, Africa's intra-regional trade has been growing. With the launch of the Continental Free Trade Area deal, it is expected to foster inclusive trade among African countries and lower dependence on extractive local products and inherent fluctuations of commodity prices (Wang, 2019). Until today, not many Scholars have done research about the AfCFTA deal, but existing researches and policy reviews show a strong confidence in the success of the implementation of the deal. For instance, global economy expert Landry Signe estimates that a successfully implemented AfCFTA could generate US\$ 6.7 trillion in consumer and business spending across Africa by 2030, while the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNCA) has predicted that a fully implemented AfCFTA can raise intra-African trade between 15% and 20% (US\$ 50 billion to US\$ 70 billion) by 2040. A number of experts hold strong belief that the Continental Free Trade Area deal could change the fate of Africa. For instance, Asmita Parshotam in her article "Can the African Continental Free Trade Area offer a new beginning for trade in Africa", provides a snapshot of the negotiations that preceded the signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement and examines the benefits that should flow from a successfully implemented continental trade deal, pointing out some of the difficulties that may hinder or slow down its implementation (Note 5). Zezhong Zhang, a Chinese Scholar from Jiangxi Normal University in his article "African Economic Integration Strategy Under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement", reviewed the efforts made by African leaders to pull together the Continental Free Trade Area agreement and analyzed what benefits the Continental Free Trade Area deal will bring to Chinese companies investing in Africa, besides additional opportunities for the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) implementation in the continent (Note 6). Dr. Q. Chihombori Arikana, an African Union Ambassador to the United States in his statement to the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) believes that the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement has the potential to catapult the continent into a foremost position into global trade and development (Note 7). However, he emphasized that to fully enjoy the results that the Continental Free Trade Area agreement will bring, African countries need to strengthen their bilateral relations and push forward their economic and political integration. With economic integration, countries can implement a single market, and as the economic atmosphere grows, there appears the need for political integration; something that has remained elusive in the African

continent.

Since the gain of independence in the 1960's, African countries tend to trade more with Europe and Asia than with neighboring markets. In fact, less than a fifth of African countries' exports are headed to other neighboring countries on the continent. The existing intra-continental trade shortcomings on the continent underscore the extent of lost revenue and development opportunities for African countries (Abrego, 2020). Without African countries integration, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the African continent to negotiate individually with its strong and major economic partners such as the USA, China, Russia, Japan and the EU (Monyae, 2019). Scholar Daniel N. Mlambo in his article: "Unearthing the challenges and prospects of Regional Integration in Souther Africa", emphasizes the importance of regional integration. In his article, Daniel categorizes regional integration as a significant initiative with regard to stimulating economic growth amongst member states and enhancing intra-regional trade, security initiatives, and bilateral and multilateral agreements (Note 8). Unfortunately, African countries' regional integration has done little to stimulate growth on the continent. In fact, sluggish implementation of regional trade liberalization and spatial integration policies still remain among African countries (Pretorius, Drewes, & Van Aswegen, 2017). In addition, Africa's regional integration, which involves the removal of existing trade barriers to the free movement people, goods and services, and harmonization of its economic policies, remain patchy and uneven (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, Anyanwu, & Conceicao, 2014).

Since the creation of the African Union (AU) back in 1963, African country leaders hoped for a time when the continent would enjoy more intra-African ties and interdependence. Some 57 years later, African countries have yet again come together to foster their regional integration by implementing the AfCFTA agreement. The operational phase of the trade agreement has since been launched. The AfCFTA is Africa's momentum achievement as it takes place in a new era in which regional integration schemes are disintegrating as seen from Brexit; riots related to racism in the USA; xenophobia and anti-immigrant climate in South-Africa; quarrels between Burundi and Rwanda; as well as unending crisis between Sudan and South-Sudan.

While regional integration plays a key role in ensuring the successful implementation of the AfCFTA deal, the goals of Africa's regional integration have not been fully studied. Scholars Naym Charaf-Eddine and Ilan Strauss in their article "The ten commandments of applied regional integration", argue that Africa's regional integration study analysis has been misunderstood and poorly constructed. In their article, they offer ten policy recommendations to fully achieve at least a minimal form of regional integration, analyze what is stopping Africa's full integration (Note 9). Since the AfCFTA agreement is newly signed, African countries have a lot to learn from other regions or countries that have succeeded in implementing a single market or need the support and guidance from its economic partners. Lily Sommer and David Luke in their article "Canada's progressive trade agenda" reviewed Canada's contribution to Africa's economy and Canada's opportunities in Africa. In their article, the

two Scholars provided insights on how Canada could engage with Africa and what Canada can do to support the implementation of the AfCFTA agreement (Note 10).

Given few Scholars thoughts and research results on the regional integration current situation on the African continent, they all send a strong message: The need of Africa's unity. From an African perspective, the AfCFTA agreement presents compelling potentials benefits for good businesses on the continent and have the potential to boost trade and FDI, generate necessary conditions for inclusive growth in Africa. The core problem is that African policy makers have tried and attempted many times to increase intra-regional trade on the continent. Different Africa's Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have signed many trade agreements, and yet the required willingness for cooperation in Africa's RECs is still questionable. However, the author of this article strongly believes that the recently signed Continental Free Trade Area deal will significantly boost trade and economic growth within African countries, and have the potential to spur development. However, there is so much more to be done to fully drive across the agenda in the continent; calling greater willingness of the African people to actualize the dream, especially now that the continent is facing a new challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3. Steps toward Africa's "Single Market"**

#### *3.1 Status of Regional Integration in Africa*

Regional integration is the process by which at least two or more countries agree to co-operate, either economically or politically and work together to achieve common peace, security and share wealth (Cormick, 1999). Regional integration involves written agreements between signatories that describe areas of cooperation. What is the status of regional integration in Africa? Regional integration on the African continent has been stable as many Regional Economic Communities (RECs) kept burgeoning. The African continent has 15 Regional Economic Communities but only eight of them are recognized by the African Union; five of which have customs unions. They are: The East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). The aim of these Regional Economic Communities is to provide building blocks for African countries integration. In addition, these RECs have a huge impact in creating jobs opportunities for African citizens and each one of the RECs is in pursuit of economic welfare, which is assumed to be pursued by African countries, especially the ones considering or evaluating their regional integration arrangement membership (Seck, 2019).

In October 2008, the EAC, COMESA and SADC launched their tripartite cooperation arrangement that aimed at synchronizing, harmonizing and coordinating the market integration, infrastructure and industrial development of the three economic blocs (Erasmus, 2013). In 2013, the three blocs successively launched their Tripartite Capacity Building Program (TCBP) that provides technical

assistance to the three RECs, and was backed by the Board of Directors of the African Development Bank (AfDB), who invested over US\$ 7.5 million. The rationale of the TCBP was to establish a single market and increase intra-tripartite trade growth by boosting the economic welfare of 27 combined member countries, with over 700 million consumers, and a GDP above US\$ 1.4 trillion. The TCBP is also pushing through the removal of barriers to free movement of people, goods and services; and development of regional value chains and poverty alleviation. A review of the program reveals that it has helped in enhancing the EAC-COMESA-SADC tripartite negotiation process, helped develop trade facilitations instruments among them.

Back in 2015, the TCBP also established the EAC-COMESA-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA). The TFTA was launched with several objectives, key among them, to address the challenges of many Africa's RECs with many overlapping memberships in the eastern half of the continent (Note 11). The TFTA was built on three major pillars: industrial development, infrastructure development and market integration (Note 12), and there is an ongoing parallel agreement on free movement of people. The establishment of the TFTA between Africa's three RECs is a significant step toward enhancing and consolidating Africa's intra-regional trade, strengthening existing regional integration, as a step towards full implementation of the AfCFTA. Through TFTA establishment, Africa's regional integration will grow stronger, maybe not immediately, but surely will in the future. However, the TFTA negotiations among the three economic blocs are still ongoing, which raises questions on future coordination between the AfCFTA and the TFTA.

### *3.2 What to Expect from African Regional Integration?*

Regional Integration is the removal of barriers to trade between countries. It indicates the growing economic interaction between signatory countries. Allowing the free movement of goods, services and people have been the common goal of all African Regional Economic Communities. Free movement of goods and services is ongoing in several Africa's RECs, gradual progress is being made towards the free movement of people. For instance, the common electronic biometric African passport has been approved by the AU protocol on free movement of persons; right of residence and right of establishment has been activated since January 2018; Nigeria opened its doors for all African citizens, and is considering visa-free for all African origins; monetary union continues to be actively pursued by five of the eight recognized RECs, etc. However, for Africa, monetary union on a continental scale is for the time being not feasible. It will require some surrender of sovereignty, which many African countries are not ready for at the moment (Ekekwe, 2009). With the news about west African countries plan to introduce a new regional currency, the "ECO", is a reminder that the idea behind it is just a means to get rid of the actual CFA currency imposed by France back in 1945 for its ancient colonies (Note 13). A monetary union at a continental scale requires robust institutions, like the ECB for the European Union, which African countries don't have at the moment.

Historically speaking, regional integration has the potential to promote long-term economic growth,

politically stable development and self-determination of African countries (Kleis, 2016). In fact, regional integration has been idolized as the key to promoting regional growth and development through the adoption and implementation of policies that will yield mutual benefits for all parties involved (Note 14). In other words, regional integration is key to sustain economic growth and leverage new opportunities for concerned parties (Adende, 2007). African countries through RECs have managed to deepen their intra-trade interdependence. With complete integration among African RECs, intra-Africa trade volume could grow from currently 17% up to 60% in 2022. In addition, complete regional integration in Africa could be a major break-through for business across the continent.

By regional integration, it is important to note that “Economic Integration” and “Political Integration” are both important, especially in this opportune time when all African countries are willing to create a single continental market. And by creating a single continental market, all African countries have to put aside their differences and aim at boosting their internal market. Economic and political integration are intertwined, one cannot go without the other. As seen from the practice within existing economic blocs like EAC, SADC, and ECOWAS, member states of each REC agreed to remove trade barriers (tariffs, quotas, border restrictions, etc.) between them. This should not be surprising. After all, many intergovernmental institutions established in Africa have aimed at developing economic arrangements to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade (Jalloh & Abass, 2014). However, all the promises seem to have been left on paper. For instance, because of inadequate technical assistance and capacity building, products from Burundi such as tea or coffee still face tariffs while entering Tanzanian market or any other market in the EAC; Kenya’s avocados are hardly sold in its neighboring country Uganda because of high tariffs as well. Considering the existing customs unions in each African REC, each economic bloc needs to revise its trade facilitation mechanisms to ease trade and integration between its member countries. Despite the fact that African RECs have all succeeded in strengthening their economic integration, and implementation of custom unions, they all have failed to draw attention on their political integration. Careful consideration must be paid to the need for political integration, otherwise African countries will fail to create a single continental market, let alone a monetary union as envisaged.

A lesson from the European Union (EU) political integration tells us why the Treaty on European Union, commonly called “Maastricht Treaty”, was a turning point in the process of the European integration (Note 15). In November 1993, after the treaty was signed, for the first time, the ambition of political union was formalized all over Europe, moving on from the initial objective of economic integration as an instrument for political reconciliation. If no attention is taken into forging political integration, no one can predict that there won’t be a time when a single African country wouldn’t want to be part of the African Union. In fact, the domino effect of Brexit may not trigger exit referendum among African Union member states, but it may have intensified agitations for referendum on self-determination (Aniche, 2020). The same goes for African countries. Without bold actions into

strengthening their political and economic integration, the success of a common market, or even the pursuit of a monetary union, is far from guaranteed or yet another pipe dream.

#### **4. What's in it for Africa's Major Economic Partners?**

The signing of the AfCFTA has made solid progress in strengthening Africa's regional integration. The successful launch of the AfCFTA will be an epoch-making event and a big step in promoting multilateralism on the African continent. However, there is a rise of protectionism, self-reliance tendencies among global powers. Despite the rise of protectionism and unilateralism, why are African countries choosing to increase interconnectivity between them? With Africa's fragmented markets and a large number of countries, the best option to guarantee Africa's rejuvenation would be strengthening their integration rather than promoting protectionism or unilateralism. Given the rising sentiment of anti-globalization, protectionism and unilateralism around the world, the AfCFTA aims to boost global trade facilitation and liberalization, and inject new impetus to promoting open world economy.

In the last couple of decades, African countries have signed many trade agreements with western developed countries as well as developing countries. Despite all the promises that lies behind the AfCFTA, what's in it for Africa's major economic partners? The author of this article believes that the AfCFTA agreement will help forge closer economic ties between Africa and its economic partners. In fact, the AfCFTA will improve the relations between Africa and its external trade partners, so as to guarantee a Win-Win situation, by creating a bigger market for itself and for its trade partners. On one hand, the AfCFTA will effectively reduce the costs of imports, especially those from Europe and Asia. On the other hand, the Continental Free Trade deal will create a huge market for foreign investors, improve the business environment, attract more FDI, reduce barriers to foreign investment, and lay a solid foundation for foreign enterprises to invest in African countries.

For China, the AfCFTA will inject new vitality into upgrading China-Africa bilateral trade cooperation. China has been Africa's biggest trading partner for more than a decade, with an accumulated investment for over US\$ 200 billion by 2019. With China's proposed "Belt and Road Initiative", which refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, designed to build trade and infrastructure network that connects Asia with Europe, Africa and beyond (Jones & Zeng, 2019). President Xi Jinping in his congratulatory message to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly of African Heads of States and Governments pointed out that under the guidance of the African Union, African countries have actively explored development paths suited to their own conditions and realities, congratulated African countries for their collective efforts that they made in the pursuit of their unity and self-improvement. President Xi also noted that the China-Africa relationship is currently at its best history, adding the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) led to a new wave in developing the China-Africa friendship, with the implementation of its results injecting new vigor into their practical cooperation in various fields, notably the "eight major initiatives" (八大

行动-Ba Da Xingdong) plus the “ten China-Africa cooperation plans” (中非十大合作计划-Zhong Fei Shi Da Hezuo Jihua), both backed by US\$ 60 billions of financial support (Note 16).

For the USA, it will be a chance for Washington to renew its engagements in Africa, and re-address the post-AGOA agenda as a single entity. With the launch of the AfCFTA, Washington will have access to a larger and integrated market, and have the opportunity to work with emerging economies like China, Brazil, India, Russia, which are already active on the African continent. It will also be a way for the US to work closely with the African Union in tackling terrorism in Africa. With the AfCFTA, the potential of the African market will be further realized, which will deepen and intensify USA-Africa cooperation in industrial and trade capacities. The improvement of business environment in Africa will raise its appeal to American investors. Recently, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s five-day trip to Sub-Saharan countries proved Washington’s willingness to strengthen ties with the continent. During his trip to Senegal, Angola and Ethiopia, Secretary Mike Pompeo announced many American firms and companies’ willingness to invest in Africa’s infrastructure. For instance, the US engineering firm Betchel and Senegal local authorities signed agreements to build a road from Dakar to Saint Louis; in Angola, US oil firm Chevron promised to explore Angola’s offshore natural gas fields, bringing jobs and economic growth for both Angola and the USA; in Ethiopia, beverage maker Coca-Cola pledged a new US\$ 300 million investment, etc.

## **5. Daunting Challenges**

### *5.1 Internal Challenges*

It has been known that a major challenge in Africa is not a lack of good policies or strategies, but a lack of their effective implementation. Crucial to implementation is an understanding of the political economy underpinning the economic integration of the continent. Africa is facing many challenges to fully get its share behind its continental free trade area agreement. Challenges such as xenophobia, poor transport and telecommunication infrastructure, and insecurity are among daunting challenges that Africa as a continent have to resolve not only to be more prosperous, but also to see its “Africa Agenda 2063” and the AfCFTA succeed. Regarding the issue of xenophobia, history has shown that getting across the border to the next African country isn’t where true integration lies, rather, it lies in becoming part of the new community one is joining. Many African countries today see their national interests in xenophobia. Hundreds of violent incidents of anti-immigrant hate crimes have been recorded in South-Africa over the past two decades (Gordon, 2020). In 2019, Malawians, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, even other citizens from other African countries residing in South Africa were attacked, kicked out of the country and their businesses were destroyed. Some even died from their injuries (Kerr, Durrheim, & Dixon, 2019).

In the ECOWAS bloc, countries like Nigeria and Ghana, which should be leading other members of the community by setting good leadership examples, have ended up doing just the opposite. For instance,

there was a complaint by the Nigerian Union of Traders Association based in Ghana that the Ghanaian Government asked them to raise their capital up to US\$ 1 million or leave Ghana just to make room for investments of indigenous Ghanaian (Note 17). The same scenario is being observed in the EAC, where Burundi and Rwanda used to be good neighbors and political allies, but with the 2015 Burundian political crisis, Burundi accused Rwanda of supporting a militia that attacks Burundi. Rwanda has denied those accusations, and with the tension between the two countries has rose ever since. Rwandan Citizens that are living in Burundi are afraid of being attacked or kicked out of Burundi, as much as Burundian citizens that reside in Rwanda. As a result, Burundi is considering closing its borders with Rwanda, and even ditching the EAC bloc for SADC.

Another critical challenge that Africa is facing is poor infrastructure. The success of the AfCFTA depends on infrastructure development. There is Chinese adage that goes: “If you want development, you need to mend a road” (要发展，先修路-Yao Fazhan, Xian XiuLu). African poor transport, and telecommunications facilities besides high trading costs, make it difficult for African countries to reap the potential benefits of regional trade arrangements (Yang & Gupta, 2008). For instance, telecommunication in Africa or intra-Africa telecommunication is the most expensive in the world. Telecommunication companies across Africa, especially those of African origin are yet to reach compromise that will enable affordable communication or augment their infrastructure to facilitate good quality communication networks. In addition, there is a need to increase connectivity across the continent. For instance, flying from Abuja-Nigeria to Bamako-Mali should take at least one and half hour but it takes an estimated fourteen to thirty hours by transferring through France or any other country in Europe to finally reach the final destination and it is probably only Ethiopian Airlines or Asky Airlines that would fly to those destinations. The problem is, many African countries are not ready or are not willing to liberalize the aviation industry as envisaged by the “Open Sky” policy because they do not have reliable local carriers. So, basically, African countries without local carriers want to have the capacity to compete with other external airlines before allowing other competitors access to their markets. And this position hinders progress as it has been overtaken by globalization and trade advancement. However, in the last couple years, Africa’s airspace is going borderless, especially with significant progress on the AU Single African Air Transport Market Initiative that was launched in 2018. In conclusion, a vast range of projects are under way to upgrade Africa’s infrastructure, but for now, infrastructure deficits are holding back the continent’s development and the expansion of intra-regional trade will need to be addressed for the AfCFTA to reach its full potential.

The last but not the least of internal challenge is insecurity. There is no sustainable development without peace and stability! In many African countries, civil unrest, terrorism, militia and ethnic violence are the norm. Countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mali, South-Sudan, Libya and Democratic Republic of Congo are recording scores of deaths on daily or periodical basis. Terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, ISWAP and ISIS are very active on the continent. However, At

the 33rd African Union Summit that was held at the Headquarters of the AU from February 9 to 10th 2019, African policy makers agreed to “Silencing the Guns” in Africa by 2020 and to put an end to all internal wars, which continue to wreak havoc on the resource-rich, yet less-stable continent (Note 18). As African policy makers and country leaders vowed to end all wars across the continent by 2020, millions of conflict-affected African citizens are still stuck in many war camps, while African illegal immigrants are being captured in Italian waters, with scores others dying in the waves. The core question is how to succeed in silencing the guns in a continent grappling with significant phenomena such as terrorism, pre and post electoral crises, inter-community conflicts? At the current rate and conditions, it will take tremendous efforts of all African leaders if not miracles to silence the guns by 2020. Drastic and serious reforms must be undertaken to make the conditions possible. Although, progress has been made in reducing state-driven conflicts across Africa, the only thing that remain is a political will that ensure the preservation of Africa’s supra-national unity.

### *5.2 External Challenges*

While all African countries have signed the implementation of the AfCFTA, Africa still face many challenges. Despite some of the internal challenges cited above, there are also many external challenges. The AfCFTA agreement commits African countries to remove tariffs to the tune of 90% of goods produced locally and to liberalize services. However, there is a risk of trade loopholes behind the agreement. For instance, African countries have signed agreements with their Western or Asian counterparts, which if not well monitored, could become a problem in the future. For instance, the European Union has a pact with Morocco and the two have signed cooperation agreements, some allowing European companies the right to produce, manufacture and sell products in Morocco. With the implementation of the AfCFTA, which promotes free movement of goods and services between African countries, European companies operating in Morocco could manufacture their goods in the country and flood their products in many African country markets, especially in the ECOWAS member countries, free of tariffs, and it is doubtful if local African companies have the capacity or the ability to compete with European ones present in many African countries. This may result in a massive economic dislocation as many job opportunities could be lost along the way. In addition, existing trade arrangements between the European Union and many African countries are not based on free trade agreements, but rather subjected to tariffs under the WTO. If the AfCFTA is not well monitored, it could unintentionally offer the European Union free trade opportunities via the backdoor. The same goes with China or the USA’s signed agreements with many African countries. For instance, Washington announced on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that it intended to start trade negotiations with Kenya. Many critics have faulted the USA-Kenya trade talks, some questioning if it is not a way for Washington to leverage its opportunities over Chinese in Kenya or the eastern part of Africa; or whether it is not a way for the USA to undermine existing continent-wide commerce pact and limit Africa’s power to negotiate with the US (Note 19).

If the AfCFTA is not well monitored, the African manufacturing sector will suffer severe consequences, mainly because it doesn't have the adequate infrastructure in place to compete with imported products that come in duty free. It is already difficult for many African local manufacturers to compete with imported products at the current tariff situation, let alone when the AfCFTA will be launched by July 2020. Creating a duty-free corridor will make it exceedingly difficult if not impossible for African local manufacturers to compete with products imported from China or the USA. Africa must be aware that similar motives are already in play, as many Chinese companies are producing goods in many African countries and take rigorous actions that may prevent them falling in the trap. Another external challenge worth mentioning is the rise of protectionism on the African continent (Note 20). African countries should not rush into implementing any trade agreement or rush into protectionism and unilateralism without full considerations of what they might lose. For instance, in October 2019, Nigeria, the biggest economy in Africa, decided to close its border after its Customs Services claimed it would generate more revenue from seaports as a result of the closure. However, the decision of the Nigerian Government to shut its borders has come against ECOWAS rules of integration and the free movement of goods and services within the region. A couple months before closing its borders, Nigeria signed the AfCFTA agreement. The integration and free trade agreement have been jeopardized by the border closure policy, and it has also instigated retaliatory responses from Nigeria's neighboring countries like Niger Republic, threatening to shut her doors against Nigerian products or goods. Rwanda and Uganda in the eastern part of Africa are also dancing to the same tune by closing their borders to each other. Prior convergence of regional integration must happen before the continental level integration. If Africa doesn't have such a strategy, the continent will be open for trade shocks, which would result in substantial welfare losses.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

### *6.1 Reduction of Tariffs and Non-Tariff Barriers among African Countries*

Tariffs are taxes imposed on imports and exports between countries or regions with the aim of generating Government revenues while protecting domestic companies or industries from external market products. In Africa, tariffs between countries are higher than anywhere else in the world. In 2017, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reported that among developed countries, tariffs on tradable goods and services are at 1.2% more or less, which are very low compared to the average tariffs on tradable goods and services among African countries which stand at around 9%. Let alone high tariffs, African countries use Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) among them as part of their political or economic strategy. Unfortunately, existing high tariffs in Africa help some African countries to trade more with Europe and the United States at the expense of each other. Over 60 to 70% of total African trade is with countries that are thousands of miles away from the continent. Compared to the rest of the world, this is unfortunate to say the least.

Compared with other continents, Africa has lower proportion of intra-regional trade, due to high tariffs and a highly fragmented market. In this context, African countries can only overcome their structural weakness of small economic size and market through joint efforts and economic integration by reducing tariffs on tradable goods and services, so as to pool their strength and cope with external economic impact and challenges of globalization by means of expanding and strengthening their markets (He, 2019). However, a recent United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) report indicates that if tariffs and NTBs are significantly reduced, or if possible totally eliminated, intra-Africa trade would increase to more than 50% of total trade on the continent (Note 21). Decreasing the NTBs could help sustain economic expansion on the continent, despite a number of international economic shocks. Nevertheless, the reduction in tariffs between African countries will also result in reduction in African Governments' revenues. However, the reduction in tariffs and NTBs would actually curtail African Governments' ability to provide public goods and services to its general population. In addition, with the reduction of tariffs, there could be an increase in income tax and value added tax.

Recently, an article published in *Foresight Africa 2019* by the Brookings Institution argued that if African countries could trade more between themselves, they would exchange more manufactured and processed goods, would have more knowledge transfer and would create more value. With the coming into effect of the AfCFTA, which aim to create a single domestic market for goods and services of over 1 billion people, this is the opportune time for Africa to review and discuss the reduction, if not the elimination of tariffs and NTBs on the continent. A less fragmented and more coordinated Africa could result in much higher intra-trade, especially by tackling tariffs and NTBs while having greater access to more open markets could have various positive and encouraging spillovers. It could boost export bottleneck of many African countries, integrate them into regional and global value chains, help them build resilience to commodity price downswings, boost small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), enhance productivity and foster innovation (Note 22). However, it is important to emphasize that the immense potential of the AfCFTA will only be realized if tariffs and NTBs are significantly reduced or totally eliminated. The reduction or elimination of tariffs and NTBs should be a priority at the very start of the implementation phase in July 2020. However, as with all signed free trade agreements, tariffs are phased-out over a specified period. Due to the diversities among African Regional Economic Communities and to different domestic contexts of African countries, different timelines will be pursued under the AfCFTA. Around 97% tariff-free trade under the continental free trade agreement will only be realized after a period of 15 to 20 years.

### *6.2 Establish a Blockchain Technology*

The benefits of the AfCFTA are enormous to Africa. Economists believe that tariff-free or reduction of NTBs to a huge and unified market like the one envisaged in the AfCFTA agreement will encourage local manufactures and service providers to increase production. With a market of 1.3 billion people, an

increase in demand will instigate an increase in production, which in turn will lower unit costs. This will lead to consumers paying less for local goods and services, thereby helping to improve the fragile economies of several African countries. But, in order for all that to happen, African countries introduced 5 majors instruments among which, the rules of origin. The rules of origin states that only goods manufactured with local inputs in member countries can be exported to other countries that belong to the same market and enjoy tariff-free status. Unfortunately, with the exemption of South Africa, Algeria, and Morocco, most African countries do not have strong industrial base to produce most goods citizens can consume without importing from Western or Eastern markets. This is one of the reasons why many African countries have economic partnership agreements skewed against their favor because industrialists from Europe, America, or even China when they sign partnerships with African countries, it is possible for them to produce goods in their markets, ship them to African countries they have trade relations with and have them packaged as locally manufactured products, and they can easily enter the African market and enjoy the tariff-free status as well. So, it is important for the AfCFTA Secretariat to revise the rules of origins before engaging in full implementation of the agreement.

The rules of origin need to be revised for the AfCFTA to open up new markets for local African owned companies. As envisaged in the agreement, the AfCFTA will allow African owned companies to expand their customer base and lead to new products and services. This in return not only will help Africa local companies to grow; it will also make investing in innovation viable. In addition, it will also help grow local manufacturing sector and increase the percentage of GDP. Presently, Africa's local manufacturing represents only about 10% of total GDP on the continent, considerably low comparing to other developing regions. For all of this to work, there is an urgent need of strengthening Africa's blockchain technology. The African Customs union and African Manufacturers Associations need to establish a single digital distributed secure database which will contain information of all locally produced or manufactured products in compliance with the laws of each signatory country and monitor their logistics and supply chain up to their exports across the borders. This will help customs of every signatory country to have real time data of each product from neighboring or distant countries entering their markets.

With the establishment of the blockchain technology, it will ensure that no African or local industrialist or manufacturer colludes with European countries, America or China to breach the rules of origin by bringing or import finished products from Western or Asian markets and package them as indigenous manufactured leading to the creation of dumping grounds for smuggled products. The AfCFTA Secretariat, which is already operational in Ghana, needs to consider the adoption or set up the blockchain technology before the full implementation of the Pan-African Economic market in July 2020 to prevent inter-Africa illegal trade practices that could result in litigation, or even worse, the withdraw of membership by some members.

### *6.3 Political Good-will*

The recently signed African Continental Free Trade Area agreement is the first flagship project of the African Union's "Africa Agenda 2063", and a major key initiative in the industrialization and economic development of the African continent. It has the potential to boost intra-African trade, stimulate investment and innovation, attract more FDI, foster structural transformation, improve food security, enhance economic growth and export diversification, and rationalize the overlapping trade regimes of the main Africa's Regional Economic Communities. However, it is important for African policy makers to deliver what they signed for and promised African citizens. African policy makers have a bad reputation when it comes to implementing any agreement. And implementation is the elephant in the room and much of the continental free trade deal success rests on African policy makers' ability and willingness to implement it domestically and support the AU institutions to monitor its implementations mechanisms.

The signing of the AfCFTA area doesn't guarantee the success of its implementation without firm political will, determination and collective efforts of all African political leaders (Cofelice, 2018). Like many trade agreements that have been signed among African countries, capacity challenges will arise. Challenges such as inefficient customs controls, poor border coordination, supply constraints, or even misinterpretations of the AfCFTA agreement will happen and there is a possibility for some African countries to withdraw from the agreement or likely to fail in fulfilling their obligations, owing to national interests or rising levels of protectionism. This is the time for African policy makers to change Africa's destiny. It is the time for African policy makers to prove to the world that Africa's rejuvenation is possible. The fact that many challenges will rise along the way, this should not discourage African policy makers. Challenges should not be the reason not to further pursue the gains and promises that lies behind the AfCFTA.

The success of the AfCFTA implementation depends on political good-will and on the harmonization of national policies, such as clarity and transparency, and most of all, get rid of corruption or corrupt bureaucrats. No African country should be left behind in implementing the continental free trade area deal. It will be a challenge for African policy makers to deliver all the required tools to succeed in their tasks. Every African country has to put in place suitable technical skills that respond to the successful implementation of the AfCFTA agreement.

## **7. Conclusion**

As the post-World War II institutions of global governance tear apart at the weight of anti-globalization forces across the world, African countries have realized the long-held aspiration of continental integration. It has taken African countries almost 30 years since the signing of the Abuja Treaty in 1991 to sign the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement. African countries cannot afford to wait another 30 years to implement the Continental Free Trade Area deal and the potential it holds. In this

article, the author reviewed existing few research results that relate to the AfCFTA and to the African integration and what integration mean to the African continent. In this article, the author argued that while global trends tend to move from integration towards protectionism and unilateralism, African countries tend to improve intra-regional trade levels and deepen their regional integration. As positive as this massive change is anticipated to be, there are also still challenges to overcome. In this article, the author elaborated some challenges and gave a series of policy recommendations. Qualitative analysis was used in this article.

The main findings in this article were the need of a more understanding of what the AfCFTA means for Africa, despite criticism and negative perceptions on African countries' inability to deliver sustainable development to its citizens. Beyond greater physical connectivity through infrastructure construction, one of the most noteworthy recent development is that African countries have prioritized the need to trade more with one another. Africa's RECs have done a tremendous job to increase the level of integration on the continent, despite the current low intra-regional trade. The AfCFTA agreement looks up to current low intra-regional trade of the African continent, largely by reducing key barriers to trade. This is a critical time for African countries to reconsider or discuss how to reduce or if possible, completely eliminate tariffs and NTBs on the continent. The potential of the AfCFTA will only be realized if tariffs and NTBs are reduced or totally eliminated. At this juncture, the average tariffs on tradable goods and services between African countries are very high compared to tariffs on tradable goods and services between developed countries. The world is taking interest in Africa's growth and transformation potential. Many developed countries like the USA, Japan, Germany, and the UK, or developing countries like China, India, Brazil, Russia, and even Turkey, are turning their interests on the African continent. They have held Economic Cooperation Forums and invited African country leaders and policy makers to take part in their forums, and bilateral trade agreements have been signed. In May 2019, African countries created the world's largest free trade area, and African countries opened their business environments and built industrial zones and infrastructure to attract investment. Africa is now well positioned for economic and industrial expansion by its strategic location and growing population (Note 23). According to the author of this article, Africa's rejuvenation is no longer another pipe dream but a reality. A united Africa is also possible, not only behind the African Union support, but also by a collective effort of all African Regional Economic Communities. With the launch of the AfCFTA, it is possible for Africa to cooperate among its nations on primary objectives that promote economic integration. The alarming problem will be a "Politically United Africa" and the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a lot of work is still needed to be done to ensure that the benefits brought by promoting the Continental Free Trade Area deal are equitable. There is an African adage that goes: "When you chase a specific goal with the right motives that matches up with your activities, the results become compelling and satisfying". A strong conviction plus political good-will will increase Africa's chances to fully implement the necessary tools and mechanisms required to launch the

continental free trade area.

The author of this article believes that African countries will benefit from the AfCFTA agreement. The agreement will boost the continent's economic levels, help push forward Africa's Agenda 2063 implementation, and will help many African countries achieve, if not reach, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The AfCFTA agreement will also provide the much-needed unity of purpose between African countries, which will give Africa a better negotiating chip and offers Africa the unique opportunity to leverage its relations with external powers.

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## Notes

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