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African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (Afcfta) And the Challenges of Regional Integration in Africa

Olileanya Amuche Ezugwu[1], Moses, M. Duruji[2]
Covenant University Ota, Nigeria[1,2]
olileanya.ezugwupgs@stu.cu.edu.ng[1], mosesduruji@covenantuniversity.edu.ng[2]

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ABSTRACT

The African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) represents a significant milestone in Africa's pursuit of regional integration and economic development. Envisioned as a pan-African initiative, the AfCFTA aims to establish a single market for goods and services, promote intra-African trade, and foster economic growth across the continent. This paper examines the challenges of regional integration in Africa and explores the potential benefits of the AfCFTA Agreement in addressing these challenges. This study uses qualitative research methods, with secondary data from scholarly publications, journal articles, reports from international organisations, and literature studies that were thematically analysed. The study results show that disparities in economic development and industrial capacities among African nations, persistent trade barriers, non-tariff obstacles, weak institutional frameworks, the paradox of sovereignty, and inadequate infrastructure primarily drive the challenges of African integration. The study also reveals that adopting the AfCFTA Agreement in 2019 has brought more African nations involved in addressing these economic integration challenges and fostering deep cooperation within the continent. This paper concludes that the AfCFTA Agreement has the potential to be a transformative force in advancing regional integration and economic prosperity in Africa. However, a pragmatic approach is continually needed to address these integration challenges. This paper thus recommends fostering inclusive growth and economic diversification through targeted policies that can address economic disparities among African nations. Also, it emphasises the inclusion of marginalised sectors, such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and informal traders, which is essential for maximising the AfCFTA's potential benefits and fostering sustainable economic growth.

INTRODUCTION

Analysing the relationship between regional integration and development, Schiff, and Winters (2003) argue that the integration process encompasses various levels, with shallow integration being the surface layer and deep integration representing a more profound kind of regional collaboration (Grossman, 2022; Nyirabu, 2004). They recognised that regional integration is a pervasive phenomenon across all countries in the international system, and they argued that its advantages are extensive, especially for less developed nations. According to Brou and Ruta (2011), regional integration in contemporary international relations and even before had always been tied to economic integration, which subsequently flows to include political integration and relations. These two cannot be separated, as the failure of one would

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substantially lead to the downfall of the other. Kenton (2022) defined economic integration as an agreement of cooperation among nation-states to economically relate the significant purpose of reducing or eliminating trade barriers.

However, there has yet to be a rapid progression as expected in Africa's economic integration framework. As noted by Olaniyan (2008), some underlying challenges within the continent have been preventing the effective operation and efficiency of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (Jiboku, 2015; Mapuva, 2014). Political instability and poor integration vectors, neocolonialism and its offshoot on dependency, weak infrastructure, weak government, activities of non-state actors, weak implementation of protocols, and multiplicity of REC have contributed significantly to the slow integrative process in Africa.

Even so, the conception of the Flagship Projects of Agenda 2063, which was adopted by the African Union Heads of State and Government, was tailored to address the challenges of integration faced by the continent (Aris & Wenger, 2013). The project identified vital programs and initiatives strongly believed to be keys to the economic acceleration of growth and development in Africa and further promotion of integration through common identity and celebration of African history and culture (Union, 2017). The critical aspect of the Flagship Projects is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement, which also included infrastructural development, education, technological and scientific advancement, arts, culture, and peace and security initiatives for the continent (Gavrilova & Kostelyanets, 2022; Jato et al., 2023). The African States adopted AfCFTA to boost intra-African trade, promoting socio-economic growth and development, thereby accelerating Africans' economic and trading position in the international community by strengthening Africa's common and comparative advantage in global trade negotiations (African Union Commission, 2019).

An essential aspect of the immediate post-colonial period was the desire of African leaders to industrialise and integrate the continent, which served as the impetus for the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA: 1980-2000), spearheaded by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), enthusiastically backed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and endorsed by Heads of State in April 1980. The 1991 Abuja Accord increased African integration by stressing unity, freedom, and endogenous development through industrialisation, employing Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as "building blocks" toward the ultimate continental trade bloc (Kituyi, 2016). The 2012 Khartoum Declaration reaffirmed its support for the Plan for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) and other continental integration strategies. This thought that regional unification would create a unified African economy (Amuhaya & Degterev, 2022; Gómez-García et al., 2022).

According to the 2011 World Bank Report, Sub-Saharan Africa, although one of the regions with a strong growth rate, has weak and imbalanced development. The integration plan's theoretical inconsistencies include the OAU Charter, Article II (1) - which guarantees African states' geographical integrity, and member states' pledge to not intervene in each other's domestic affairs, subject to sovereignty. In 2015, AU member states adopted Agenda 2063 flagship projects to accelerate Africa's economic development and integration. In 2019, they adopted the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement to boost trade between African nations and their global status. It also aims to use trade more effectively as an engine of growth and sustainable development (Aniche, 2020; Onwuka & Udegbunam, 2019; Opeoluwa et al., n.d.). Being a continental economic integration agreement, among other objectives and vision, the AfCFTA Agreement aims to create a single market of 1.27 billion consumers within and outside the continent, with an aggregate GDP of $2.1 - $3.4 trillion by 2030 and a growing middle class from 350 million to 600 million by 2030, thereby highly raising many citizens from poverty (Gekonge, 2013; Muchanga & Hogan, 2020; Salam, 2015).

While the AfCFTA Agreement has been signed and ratified by many African countries, there is a need for research on the challenges faced during its implementation (Ali, 2017). This includes issues related to infrastructure development, weak government, customs procedures, trade facilitation, and harmonisation of regulations. Africa is a diverse continent with significant regional disparities in development, infrastructure, and trade capacities. The objectives of this paper are to identify and assess the challenges hindering effective economic integration in Africa, with a focus on economic disparities, trade barriers, non-tariff obstacles, weak institutional frameworks, and infrastructure deficiencies, and to examine how the Agreement addresses these challenges, in promoting regional integration in the continent (Adetula, 2004; Bala, 2017; Byiers & Dièye, 2022; Knebel, 2020).

METHODS

This study utilises the qualitative method of research, which relied on secondary data to examine the challenges of regional integration in Africa, as well as analyse how the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA), which has been signed and ratified by all African countries in 2019 addresses the challenges of economic integration in the continent. A qualitative research method was employed to comprehensively address the research objectives, enabling a detailed exploration of contemporary integration challenges in Africa and the impact of the AfCFTA Agreement in addressing the highlighted challenges. According to Creswell (Sobari, 2019), the qualitative method is used to examine, investigate, interpret, and explore the AfCFTA Agreement in addressing the challenges of African integration. Relevant academic documents, reports, literature, and media articles were analysed to gain insights into the research topic and objectives.

The collected data were thematically analysed by highlighting the challenges and complexities of integration in the continent and how the AfCFTA Agreement addresses these challenges since all 54 African countries ratified it.

RESULTS

Challenges to Regional Integration in Africa

Over the years, the African Union's Regional Economic Community (REC) has established and maintained amicable relationships among African countries, with political heads of states gathering to discuss matters that will advance the continent's economy. Despite economic and political commitment, Africa has yet to evolve as promised. Hence, scholars have examined and explained the framework of their institutions, the opportunities and challenges in their operating environment, and the economic collaboration between them.

According to Olaniyan (2008), the integration process and operation in Africa are hindered by the historical misfortunes of colonialism and slavery, as well as deficiencies in states' economic, political, administrative, and social institutions, overdependence on Western countries, and underdevelopment in almost all African states. This research will examine these difficulties and how the AfCFTA Agreement addresses African economic integration.

Following the challenging factor of political integration and instability, Africa was emancipated by uprisings and diplomacy after more than a century of slavery and colonialism. Regrettably, despite independence, liberty, and democracy, the continent's states are nevertheless plagued by instability, hatred, disputes, crises, conflicts, and wars. Africa's political instability hinders economic integration. How can a nation achieve peace and growth with other nations if it cannot sustain peace within itself? According to Ndokang and Tsambou (2015), political instability is a state's political system tension and disorder, including civil disturbance and crisis. In addition, corruption, bad governance, and economic underdevelopment can cause political instability in African countries, as evident in the number of wars and conflicts witnessed in Africa (Tangri & Mwenda, 2013). 2010-2020, Africa had 40 coups and coup attempts, while intra-state and inter-state conflicts and ceasefires from 1989 to 2019 totalled 926. This undoubtedly hindered and slowed business relations among its members (Palik et al., 2020).

Presently, the region of West Africa is contending with the scourge of terrorism and internal security dilemmas arising from the actions of Boko Haram in the northwestern region of Nigeria, Niger, and along the borders of Cameroon, as well as the operations of bandits and armed ranchers. Similarly, as stated by Shodunke (2021), the Horn of Africa is renowned for its wide array of conflicts, including intra-communal conflicts, such as cattle rustling and conflicts arising from competition for natural resources like water, pasture, and land. The relationships between member nations, such as Ethiopia-Eritrea and Uganda-Sudan, are characterised by inter-state violent crises and conflicts. In addition to those above, states are experiencing failed or collapsed governments, as exemplified by Somalia (Olu & Dauda, 2015).

The paradox of sovereignty and nationalism: Sovereignty in international relations requires non-interference in other states' domestic affairs. Sovereignty allows States to engage in economic, political, and diplomatic relations with other States while preserving their essential values and foreign policy (Starblanket et al., 2019). Scholars have debated sovereignty and its indirect effects on the economic integration of states. Due to globalisation and state integration, nation-states relinquish some of their sovereignty by agreeing to share goals and benefits through these institutional and organisational agreements. Several states still tightly safeguard their sovereignty and minimise outsider interference in their affairs, indirectly reducing their integration and collaboration with other states, making integration and economic relations difficult and ineffective (Starblanket et al., 2019).

Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone abstained from signing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) until 2019. However, they remain subject to the single external tariff established by ECOWAS. The member States of the Community still need to meet the macroeconomic convergence standards established by the organisation. The issue above poses a significant obstacle to establishing a unified currency throughout the West African region (PUNCH, 2021).

Non-state actors in the international system and integration are another significant challenge for African integration. Correspondingly, as the structuralist and the realist see the state as the significant and supreme actor in the international system, that notion in contemporary international relations still exists, undermining the role of individuals, institutions, organisations, and all other non-state actors. It is true that the significant actors in regional integration - economic or political, are states that are in direct control of establishing institutions and implementing regulations for development in their countries. However, states by themselves are no entity. The African continent, unfortunately, has non-state actors who could be more robust in the issue of development and integration. Aside from being cast out by the state, these non-state actors have no power in foreign policy-making or international relations, as they are institutionally and operationally weak (Heydemann, 2020; Olaniyan & ARDT, 2008).

Despite having abundant mineral and natural resources, Africa has the lowest productivity in the world, according to the World Bank, due to its weak infrastructure. Inadequate infrastructure in many African countries reduces business productivity by 40% and national economic growth by 2%. (Mayaki, 2014). Less than 30% of Africans have a good internet connection, 38% have stable power and energy, and 25% have paved roads. Inadequate road, rail, and infrastructure raise commodity prices across African states by 30%–40%, hurting the private sector’s growth and international direct investment (Mayaki, 2014). Although international investors can fund African infrastructure projects, 80% fail at the feasibility and business planning stage. This is called "Africa's infrastructure dilemma," which happens when infrastructure projects are underfunded despite significant demand, a sufficient supply of money and investors, and many potential projects (Jato et al., 2023; Lakmeeharan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, more robust implementation of protocols hinders integration in the continent. Since independence, how many economic protocols have African states created for commercial and political relations? Numerous. West African Sub-region and African Union protocols for the free movement of people and products include the Right of Residence, Right of Establishment, and others. The protocols these countries signed need to be better implemented despite their existence. Regional economic integration, especially in Africa, with its distinct culture, language, religion, and history, requires the approval and implementation of protocols and treaties. According to Olaniyan (2008), member states' lengthy legislative approval processes impede protocol implementation. Protocol flaws usually delay legislative approval. The need for specific organisations to articulate and disseminate information, procedures, and protocol-related measures to all organisation members, including commercial sectors and civic society, may further delay things (Olaniyan & ARDT, 2008).

According to the Economic Commission for Africa (2010), insufficient infrastructure within Africa would pose significant challenges and severe limitations to intra-African commerce, investment, and private-sector development. It is imperative to persuade the member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) that the implementation of initiatives aimed at fostering the development of transport and communication networks, energy resources, and information technology will significantly expedite the advancement of trade and ultimately facilitate the transformation of Africa into an attractive destination for investment (Dires et al., 2019). Several member nations of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) need more infrastructure, hampering intra-regional trade and economic expansion. This is mainly attributed to the substantial transaction costs of elevated transportation and communication expenses.

The AfCFTA Agreement Addressing Challenges to Regional Integration in Africa

In July 2020, the World Bank reported that absolute implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement will lift about 100 million people out of poverty. They also stressed that the Agreement will establish the world's largest free trade zone - with a GDP of $3.4 trillion, it connects 1.3 billion people in 54 African countries, which could save 30 million people from extreme poverty. However, government reforms and trade promotion are needed to maximise its potential.

On political stability, a stable government and administration are necessary for a healthy economy, as stated in this paper. Africa's economic integration and growth are hindered by political instability. During civil wars or other political disturbances, regional efforts are focused on ending the conflict and preventing it from spreading (Olaniyan & ARDT, 2008). The AfCFTA Agreement, created and ratified by 54 African States, allows all member states to enhance democracy, good governance, transparency, human rights, and the rule of law - all essential to political stability (Lodge, 2016). The AfCFTA Agreement's focus on "Commercial Integrity" - legal, open, and fair international commercial transactions - could strengthen governance internationally and in Africa (Kende-Robb, 6 C.E.). African states would maintain peace and attract foreign investments and SMEs by cooperating and trading. Poverty reduction and political stability will eliminate intra-state disputes, wars, and crises caused by poverty and hunger (Skoet & Stamoulis, 2006).

The Agreement addresses the sovereignty challenge as regional economic integration requires market integration between states. First, national economic policies must be coordinated and harmonised to produce regional policies for integration, notably economic integration. So, to strengthen regional integration, this approach necessitates ceding national policy/sovereignty to supranational agencies (Olaniyan & ARDT, 2008). 54 African nations have ratified the AfCFTA Agreement, addressing the problem of sovereignty in encouraging integration, with each state aiming to elevate the regional economy to the top of global trade since all signed the pact. As agreed, these countries have opened their markets and borders for economic relations and collaboration with other governments, fostering intra-state and intra-continental commerce, which the World Bank estimates will improve Africa's income by $450 billion by 2035 (Kassa & Zeufack, 2020).

Promoting infrastrPromotingtrialisation is another positive impact of the Agreement, as lacklustre regional infrastructure will hinder regional economic integration. Since 80% of the region's firms are small and medium-sized, removing import duties and increasing industrialisation and infrastructure have opened regional markets to small businesses. Increased commerce allows smaller enterprises to supply inputs to larger ones (Olaniyan & ARDT, 2008). The AfCFTA Agreement is helping member states increase infrastructure spending and attract foreign direct investment. Regional economic integration requires labour, capital, and product mobility. The Agreement boosts infrastructure investment by encouraging competitive manufacturing. This trade proposal could boost Africa's manufacturing sector from $500 billion in 2015 to $1 trillion in 2025, creating 14 million jobs (Signé & Johnson, 2018).

Politically, economically, socially, and culturally, regional economic integration is a process, and governments must take an active role since they are the ruling bodies of member states through the incorporation of non-state actors (Rouis & Tabor, 2012). Although the RECs have started to involve the commercial sector, labour unions, academia, and civil society in some operations, the AfCFTA Agreement is needed to accelerate procedures. Through the implementation of the Agreement - as the promotion of economic growth and development is the ultimate objective of integration, non-state actors have become more involved in the formulation and execution of declarations, decisions, and protocols of international relations. In the process of national development, these people play significant roles, which is why most African leaders, while going on shuttle/cultural/economic diplomacy, would travel with intellectual bodies, academia, business tycoons, political analysts, and others.

Furthermore, on structure and enforcement of protocols, a simple majority vote must be present for a decision to be made by an AfCFTA institution. Key AfCFTA institutions include several of them - inspecting, advising, and interpreting the Agreement are done by the AU Assembly. The Assembly receives reports from the Council of Ministers, which the State parties choose. For matters involving the Agreement, the Council decides. The AfCFTA's provisions are developed under the guidance of the Committee of Senior Trade Officials, which also oversees their implementation. The Council determines the Secretariat's tasks and roles as an independent organisation (Lin, 2021).

Additionally, the Agreement contributes to the continent's sustainable growth. AfCFTA supports several goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal 9 promotes industry, while Goal 8 promotes economic growth and excellent employment. AfCFTA, which reduces Africa's dependence on foreign aid and promotes independent finance and development, supports Goal 17 (Lin, 2021). The Pact would reduce extreme poverty across the continent, especially in countries with high poverty rates, according to the World Bank 2020 study. West Africa's extreme poverty rate would fall by 12 million (more than a third of Africa's total). Eastern Africa would lose 4.8 million, Southern Africa 3.9 million, and Central Africa 9.3 million. High starting ratios minimise poverty the most.

The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), piloted in six West African countries, was launched for commercial use on January 13, 2022. PAPSS, a joint project of the African Export-Import Bank (AEIB), the African Union (AU), and the AfCFTA Secretariat, is the latest step of AfCFTA operationalisation. PAPSS's core functions are instant payment, pre-funding, and net settlement. PAPSS coordinates African legal and regulatory environments to promote the AfCFTA's goal of expanding intra-African business (Usman & Csanadi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to examine the challenges of regional integration in Africa and analyse how the AfCFTA Agreement addresses these challenges to promote effective economic integration in the continent. The AfCFTA represents a monumental opportunity for Africa to create a unified and dynamic market of 1.3 billion people, fostering economic diversification, job creation, and poverty reduction. The agreement can unleash Africa's economic potential and drive inclusive development by eliminating tariffs on 90% of goods and facilitating the movement of goods, services, and investments. Some of the challenges identified include weak infrastructure, weak administration, political instability, the paradox of sovereignty experienced by African countries in relating and restraining the intervention of external actors in their national affairs, poor implementation of economic integration policies, and the structure and enforcement of signed integration protocols.

Despite specific successes, most African regional and economic blocs struggle as intra-African trade, multi-memberships, macroeconomic diversity, and conflicts have hindered Africa's goal of full integration. Notwithstanding the many obstacles that have impeded Africa's integration, regionalism and economic integration remain promising. Following African leaders' quick adoption of the Pan-African Parliament, the Consultative Act of AU, and NEPAD, they realised a unified Africa was necessary and beneficial. Niger, Chad, Benin, Sudan, Eritrea, Zambia, and - most importantly - Nigeria, the continent's economic powerhouse, must be prioritised politically. The primary impediments to admittance are compensation for nations whose "fragile" national finances depend on customs duties and the fear that tariff removal may threaten national productions.

This study recommends that the AfCFTA Agreement adopt cohesive policies and ad-hoc measures to meet the needs of varied states and national actors to be comprehensive and beneficial for all parties. These three bases could form these policies: the encouragement of capacity-building initiatives to ensure that all African nations and stakeholders are fully informed of the AfCFTA's goals, guidelines, and processes and can take advantage of its opportunities and prospects; a) the creation of adjustment and compensation fund for nations that may suffer as a result of the agreement's structural and regulatory adjustments; and b) systemic consultation with economic and non-secular stakeholders.

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