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AfCFTA:
A Beacon of Hope or a Failed Project?

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The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) initiative is a beacon of hope towards the establishment of the largest free trade area with a youthful population in the World. The AfCTA is significant step towards an African Economic Community whose vision was established in the Abuja Treaty of 1991. The quest to integrate 55 nation-states with over 1.3 billion people offers the opportunity for growth, economic diversification, and a combined GDP of USD$ 3.4 trillion. The AfCFTA is handicapped by distrust, less innovative and non-productive private sector, fragile regional economic blocs, and absence of combined demonstratable agency to navigate the dynamic geopolitical environment. The AfCFTA should learn from its pre-slavery trade and investment networks and domesticate strategies from regions that learnt from their dismal past to build a productive present and future.

CONTENTS

Introduction

The establishment of the AfCFTA is a major milestone in a six phased implementation plan of the of regional integration outlined in Article VI of the 1991 treaty in Abuja Nigeria that created steps towards an African Economic Community (O.A.U., 1991). The AfCFTA was launched on January 1, 2021, and by September 2022, 54 countries had signed the agreement while 43 countries had deposited ratification instruments. The implementation of the agreement is gradual to accommodate least developed country members. AfCTA aims to spur[1] industrialisation and prosperity in Africa through intra-Africa trade by eliminating 97% of tariff lines on goods and services (APRI, 2023). The quest for a unified continent dates to May 25, 1963, when Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie hosted independent nations at that time to establish the Organization of African Unity. The outfit's membership grew to the current 55 under the current African Union that took over from the Organization of African Unity in 2002 (A.U., 2002).

The AfCTA's Big Promise

The AfCFTA is a single continental market with over 1.3 billion people and a combined domestic product (GDP) estimated at USD$3.4 trillion (World Bank, 2020). Africa has the fastest growing and most youthful population in the World. It accounted for 19% of global youth population in 2019 and this is projected to rise to up to 42% by 2030 (UNDP, 2023). The AfCTA is expected to boost intra-African trade by 52.3% by 2025 (UNECA, 2019); a target that is slightly higher than North American Free Trade Agreement at 47% but lower compared to Asia at 61% and Europe at 67% (UNCTAD, 2019). The AfCFTA has made currency convertibility across Africa easier through the Pan-African Payments and Settlements System (PAPSS) to overcome currency convertibility constraints. PAPSS is a centralized payment and settlement system for intra-African trade in goods and services using local currencies to bypass the need for a third currency, such as the United States of America's Dollar or the Euro in a continent that currently has approximately 42 mosaic of currencies (Mkhonta, 2024).

AfCFTA`s building blocks drawn from 55 African countries are anchored on 8 major Regional Economic Blocs namely: the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA); Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); East African Community (EAC); Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Southern African Development Community (SADC). The resultant integrated market is projected to increase Africa's income by up to $450 billion by 2035 (World Bank; 2020), lift 50 million Africans out of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2022) and catapult the African economy to reach the $29 trillion mark by 2050 (Urama,2020). Further, it will increase Africa's exports by $560 billion, mostly in manufacturing (Takefman, 2023), a sector that contributes only 10% to Africa's GDP, compared to 20% in East Asia and the Pacific, and 15% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Manufacturing output could increase from the $500 billion currently to $1.7 trillion by 2030, potentially creating up to 14 million jobs (Bekele-Thomas, 2023).

The AfCFTA will spur larger wage gains for women (10.5%) than for men (9.9%) and boost wages for both skilled and unskilled workers – 10.3% for unskilled workers, and 9.8% for skilled workers (Tayo, 2023). On agriculture and agro-processing, intra-African trade in agriculture is expected to increase by 574% by 2030 if tariffs are eliminated under the AfCFTA.

The AfCFTA will help increase intra-African trade in pharmaceuticals, which is currently extremely low (only 3% of demand is met by intra-African trade), leading to more resilient health supply chains. On the side of transport and logistics, the AfCFTA is projected to increase intra-African trade demand by 28%, with demand for almost 2 million trucks, 100,000 rail wagons, 250 aircraft and more than 100 vessels by 2030 (WEF, 2023).

The Big Obstacles Facing ACFTA

1. The Challenge of Distrust in Africa

Trade routes and investments anchored on trust had for centuries played a critical role in promoting intra-Africa trade and growth of chiefdoms and empires on the continent. The onset of internationalized slave trade jolted the once thriving trade and market systems and planted the seed of the current different trust levels across Africa (Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011). The scramble for Africa by European colonial powers, weakened further indigenous economies and trading systems. African economies were subordinated to the interests of Europe during the colonial period through establishment of commodity-based trading system, cash crop Agriculture system and trade systems that served the interests of the colonists (Settles, J.D. 1996). The legacy of subordinated economy systems to external interests thrives to date. The environment of ubiquitous insecurity was reinforced by colonial systems and perpetuated during the big power competitions of the Cold War era that sowed seeds of disunity, conflict, coups, and war.
The modern-day Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria were for instance, once under the Wangara trading and investment network. The Wangara trading and investment network had a unique African brand of product distribution, arbitrage, financing, manufacturing, credit, mining, currency swaps, bartering and long-distance trade (Mcnamee & Pearson, 2011). The Swahili Indian Ocean Network connected central and Eastern Africa markets and products to the Indian Ocean coast. The Trans-Saharan network connected markets and products of West and North Africa with the modern-day Middle East and Europe. The Nile Valley network connected Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The Zambezi and Zimbabwe trade routes linked markets of Southern Africa, Central and Indian Ocean (Ochonu, 2015).

2. Non-Innovative African Private Sector

As African countries emerged from colonial status, indigenous private entrepreneurs turned to their[8] governments for what they regarded as indispensable assistance. African businessmen, hampered by strong expatriate competitors (in many cases dominating their sectors); foreign-owned banks unwilling to provide them with necessary credits; their own managerial weakness; and by other severe disabilities, concluded that the broad and generous patronage of the central government was essential to the realization of their aspirations for greater wealth and economic power (Esseks, 1971). Access to finance remains a major obstacle to Africa's private sector which largely comprises of Micro, Small and Medium Sized enterprises (MSMEs). It is estimated that 70% of 55 – 67 million such businesses are financially underserved with funding needs that range from USD$ 385 to USD$ 455 billion (AFDB, 2011). MSMEs account for 80-90% of all businesses in Africa and largely characterized by trader-merchant activities and rarely introduce innovations, new technology and new capabilities (IREN, 2019).

3. Overlapping Memberships

Overlapping membership across African Regional Economic Communities creates conflicts and contradictions stemming from the "spaghetti bowl effect (Macleod & David, 2013). Multiple memberships create inconsistencies and challenge the quest for integration. A country that belongs to multiple regional economic communities is burdened by multiple financial obligations, different meetings, policy decision challenges, procedures, and schedules (Afesorgbor, S.K. & Peter, A.G.B; 2014). The question of productive capacity and industrialization levels also comes into play. Countries that are better positioned to dominate trade under the AfCFTA include Mauritius, South Africa, Tunisia, and Egypt. While this domination is not negative, it ties back to the notion of the "winners" and "losers" created by free trade (Tayo, 2021).

4. Informality and Intra African Trade

Intra Africa trade estimated at 14.4% the lowest in comparison to other regions such as North America, Europe and Asia masks the reality of undocumented informal cross country trade volumes (Afreximbank; 2020). The true extent of intra Africa trade remains undocumented due to informal logistics and trade patterns. Formal data over the past 10 years, however, intra-Africa trade indicate slight growth from US$ 98 billion in 2013 to US$ 102 billion in 2022. Despite this performance, intra-Africa trade as a share of Africa's global trade has remained stagnant if not exhibiting a downward trend. After reaching a peak of 21% between 2015 and 2016, current estimates show intra-Africa trade at 14-15% of Africa's global trade (Tralac, 2023).
Non-tariff barriers such as corruption and bureaucratic red tape are slowing the smooth flow of AfCFTA. Most African countries produce similar products, largely raw commodities. Little or no value addition is done to the products produced. Scaling up these products is key (Tralac, 2023). Poor leadership has seen exports from Tunisia and Cameroon often finding their way to French warehouses before being redirected to each other's market shelves (Babalola, 2023). Corruption affects more than 60% of public procurement in Africa and increases the cost of contracts by 20 to 30%. In a world characterized by limited resources, this is an unfortunate cost for investments that are greatly needed. At least 1080 cases of transboundary corruption in Africa occurred between 1995 and 2014 (UNECA, 2016).

5. Inadequate infrastructure

Poor transportation networks and border facilities, which are critical to the implementation of a free trade zone, are a major drawback (Audu, 2023). There is need to improve the continent's infrastructure, which requires $130-170 billion annually. The continent is currently experiencing a $68-108 billion funding gap, resulting in only 34 per cent of the population having access to electricity and 40 per cent living more than 5km from the nearest all-season road. This accounts for up to 40 per cent of the cost of trading goods between African nations (Bekele-Thomas, 2023).

6. Over-reliance on External Partners

One of Africa's most difficult problems is its over-reliance on external partners. Investments are linked to the export of value systems. A balance must be found here, as investments such as China's Belt and Road Initiative play a crucial role in infrastructure development (Kaczmarek, 2020). The West supply a significant part of the financial and technical support for the AfCFTA due to low average incomes and constrained fiscal space in African countries. This support by the United Nations, the European Union, the German Development Agency (GIZ), the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Agency, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and a host of other governmental and non-governmental organizations presents issues related to sustainability and diverse geopolitical interests. The support is likely to wane with changing donor interests. The involvement of foreign expertise in the support of negotiation of instruments such as the Investment Protocol could introduce non-African agendas into the policy documents (APRI, 2023).

The global environment and geopolitics, such as external efforts towards establishing bilateral trade agreements with state parties, continue to intersect with the AfCFTA (Richardson, 2023). Changes in the global political economy can cause countries to withdraw from regional arrangements and look more inwards (Ahmed, 2020).

7. Labor Standards and Climate Change

African countries are highly vulnerable to climate change, in terms of both climate change mitigation and adaptation (Harary, 2018). Climate change can impact trade between African countries negatively, especially where agricultural products are concerned. It can make agricultural production more costly and escalate trade product costs due to delays caused by extreme weather patterns such as landslides and floods. Impact on climate is projected not only through emissions from trucks due to increased trade but also through the production component that generates waste, pollutes ecosystems, and destroys natural habitats (Geneva, 2014). Just because a mineral is labeled 'green' doesn't mean that the process of extraction, refinement, beneficiation, export, and consumption is also green (ECA, 2023).

Labour standards are not part of the AfCFTA as such, there are no specific provisions targeting child labour based on the ILO conventions, such as abolition of child labour. International Labor Organization Convention 138 relates to the minimum age of employment and 182 regards worst forms of child labor (Kasirye and Matshalanga, 2020). Trade and most of the African economy, remains biased in favour of men due to social inequalities and a disempowering patriarchal culture that subordinates women. As a result of these gender constraints, women are more likely than men to engage in informal trade. (Ngom, 2023).

8. Fragile Africa RECS

Fragility among the Regional Economic Communities in Africa is adversely affecting the AfCTFA initiative. The disruptions of trade flows due to military conflicts sometimes lead to changes in economic structures of countries, changes in trade policies and to the disruption of established trade patterns in regional and multilateral trade arrangements (Krpec and Hodulak, 2019).

The phrase, ‘Coalition of the Willing’, emerged in East Africa in 2013, when three East African Community (EAC) members (Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda) forged a Tripartite Initiative to fast-track the EAC regional integration. The resultant sidelining of Tanzania, and Burundi, for their perceived ‘aloofness’ to integration created tensions among the five countries, aggravating an already simmering conflict between Tanzania and Rwanda involving the expulsion of ‘illegal’ Rwandan migrants from Tanzania (Njuguna and Jjuuko, 2020).

Currently, the West African nations of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have declared their exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for allegedly being pressed to return to democratic rule. The leaders of the three Sahel nations claim that their "sovereign decision" to leave the ECOWAS "without delay," is informed by ECOWAS’ “inhumane” sanctions against their countries, "under the influence of foreign powers." ECOWAS suspended the trio following military coups that overthrew their democratically elected governments — in Niger last July, in Burkina Faso in 2022 and in Mali in 2020 and 2021 (VOA, 2024).

The Maghreb Arab Union (UMA), with five member states, is weakly integrated and suffers from the perennial Algeria and Morocco conflict and the 2011 implosion of the Libyan government. Its member states have sought membership in established RECs with little success. Morocco attempt to join ECOWAS in 2017 was thwarted when Nigeria, the bloc’s biggest member, was reluctant to give it a nod. Relations between the AU and RECs/RMs remain problematic, despite several attempts to achieve a strict division of labor.

Lessons from Germany

The AfCTA positions Regional Economic Blocs as the foundation on which to build the Africa Economic Community. Less emphasis is placed on African entrepreneurs, Micro, Small and Medium and Enterprises (MSMEs). Africa’s private sector requires an urgent and deliberate recalibration from the majority merchant-trader orientation (IREN; 2019) and poverty-survivalist driven MSMEs (Herr, Hansjörg; Nettekoven, Zeynep Mualla; 2018) to the German type MSME model that thrives on innovation and value addition to Global Supply and Value Chains. Focus only on financing MSMEs in Africa misses the additional critical German approach that encourages MSMEs to innovate and provide quality inputs and components to established supply and value chains. For instance, a car is an aggregation of various components such as wipers, tyres, lights, batteries, brakes, music systems among others that are produced by different companies. The AfCFTA should borrow this type of German mindset to tap into the African mosaic of natural resources, youthful skillset, cultures, and industries to activate productivity and markets in the region.

Germany’s emphasis on historical and cultural craftsmanship that invests in skills and precision engineering can be used to revive the mosaic of cultural craftsmanship that is dotted across Africa. Modernizing and building on existing indigenous African craftsmanship can accelerate domestication of quality and standards in Africa. German can offer its experience as a logistical hub in Europe to selected African hub centres to speed up movement of good in the AfCTA.

The German expert and technical support to the AfCFTA Secretariat and the AU Commission in the areas of AfCFTA negotiations and implementation should incorporate the reality of informal intra Africa trade. The AfCFTA still has great room for African and German actors to engage frequently on a peer to-peer basis based on mutual sharing of experiences in regional integration.

Germany should place the AfCFTA at the heart of its trade policy support activities and champion the harmonization of EU trade policies for Africa to align with rules of origin, tariff reduction schedules, and non-tariff barriers reduction commitments. The country should identify areas of mutual synergy with Africa such as green industrialization, skills development, innovation, and infrastructural gaps. Germany should learn to listen to Africans and Africans aspirations to grow a mutual and beneficial partnership.

Conclusion

The AfCFTA is indeed a beacon of hope in Africa as work in progress towards an African Economic Community. The challenge remains on how to activate and recalibrate the continent's private sector to contribute to productivity and social upgrading of the continent. Strategic prioritization to incentivise informal intra Africa trade is an additional key plank to the focus on regional economic blocs as a foundation for the AfCTA. Emphasis on free trade area protocols without investing in the innovation and value addition capabilities of the indigenous African MSMEs is likely to make the aspiration of AfCFTA a failed project meant to only benefit developed economies in Asia and the West. The AfCTA need to be agile enough to navigate the ever-changing geopolitical reality to situate dream of a continental economic community that connects to both old and the emerging global economic formations.

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