The AfCFTA and the Promise of Intra-Continental Trade in Africa

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Abstract

This article takes stock of the state of intra-continental trade in Africa by reviewing trends in the continent's five sub-regional trading blocs in terms of their strengths and shortcomings, in order to assess the continent's trade efficiency on an intra-regional level ahead of the rollout of a continent-wide free trade area. Thereafter, the article assesses trade indicators seen over the past decade to illustrate the amount of goods traded to prognosticate the future of intra-continental trade on the continent in the wake of discussing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Implications for youth are cast in the wider imperatives of the continent's developmental agenda and post-Covid-19 economic recovery.

Introduction

Africa is the second largest continent in the world after Asia, with a land mass of 30,37 million km² and a population of just over 1.2 billion and growing. Its economic output, however, is amongst the lowest in the world. Over the past few decades, the continent has in good faith been working towards rectifying its poor economic performance by developing five notable fully-functional sub-regional trading blocs, namely: Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), East African Community (EAC) and Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC). The rationale herein has been to increase African trade on an intra-regional level. However, though positive, this proliferation of exclusive trading blocs has not been efficient in creating meaningful trade gains for Africa as the continent registers the lowest intra-continental trade globally at 18%, behind the likes of Europe which registers at 70%, North America at 55%, Asia at 45%, and Latin America at 35%. Globally, the continent accounts 3% of total world trade. This under-performance can largely be attributed to the fragmented nature of the continent's trading system.

Nonetheless, the continent's trajectory towards a path of intra-continental trade is promising, as highlighted in the recently enacted (operational as of 1 January 2021) Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), projected to be the largest trade area in the world with significant economic potential once in effect.

This article seeks to synthesise the state of intra-continental trade in Africa by discussing the aforementioned five sub-regional trading blocs and their strengths and shortcomings, in an effort to assess the continent's trade efficiency on an intra-regional level to gauge the efficiency of the continent's intra-trade. Where possible, it will provide trade statistics to illustrate the amount of goods traded in monetary terms. Thereafter, it will discuss the future of intra-continental trade in Africa by discussing the AfCFTA and its implications on Africa's intra-continental trade and overall development agenda.

Strengths and Shortcomings of Intra-Regional Trade in Africa

SADC

SADC consists of 15 member states, namely: Angola, Botswana, Comoros the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), eSwatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The trading bloc has been driven by the need to enhance trade and economic development in Southern Africa. To this end, the intra-regional trading bloc has implemented several policies and programmes to advance its course. Among these is the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP), approved in 2003 and implemented in 2005, to run over a 15-year time period. The development plan has managed to develop a Free Trade Area (FTA) in the region with two of its 15 member states being exempt from the FTA, namely the DRC and Angola, which recently announced the decision to join the FTA by 2019 (Angola Press, 2018; UNECA, 2018). The main intra-trade items include agricultural products, energy, clothing, textiles, and petroleum. Among its shortcomings has been a failure to establish a Custom Union with blanket external tariffs by 2010, the establishment of a Common Market by 2015, and the creation of a Monetary Union by 2016, due to capacity constraints by the SADC Secretariat.

Additional constraints include the overlapping of intra-regional trading bloc memberships wherein states such as Zambia, Swaziland, Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, Malawi, DRC, Angola, and Zimbabwe have memberships in COMESA which makes it difficult for them to simultaneously meet their multiple intra-regional trading bloc commitments, subsequently curbing trade in SADC. Intra-regional trade in SADC is currently 10%, an insignificant figure as it shows that trade integration in the region has been gradual and far from impressive as 90% of its trade is external to the intra-regional trading bloc (Chidede, 2017). Contributing to this intra-regional gradual growth in trade is the presence of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) such as import and export quotas that restrict trade among member states which conflicts with SADC's Protocol on Trade that requires beneficiary states to put in place measures that eliminate NTBs and to desist from adding new ones (Protocol of Trade 1996, Article 3).

However, promising is the region's efforts to promote enhanced trade in Africa by signing the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA), a trade agreement launched in 2015 and set to amalgamate SADC, COMESA, and EAC into a singular trading bloc. Unfortunately, the TFTA has not yet come into effect due to the complexities of uniformly liberalising tariffs across three distinct intra-regional trade groups that are attempting to integrate themselves into a singular trading entity, as well as the difficultly of acquiring 14 ratifications to make the agreement enter into force. Currently, only three countries have ratified the agreement, namely: Kenya, which quite recently ratified the treaty in June 2018, Egypt, and Uganda. South Africa has stated that its parliament has approved the agreement for ratification, but that the actual ratification has not transpired as of yet (Oruko, 2018; DTI, 2018: 2). The gradual ratification of the aforementioned trade agreements signals both hesitation and an unwillingness by prospective beneficiaries to liberalise their borders for trade, contradicting their agenda to maximise trade intra-regionally. Nonetheless, the agreement is most likely to be replaced by the earlier mentioned AfCFTA as it shows much potential and has sparked the interest of a significant number of African states, as shall be discussed later in the article. Table 1 below illustrates contemporary intra-SADC trade variations.

Table 1: Intra-SADC trade 2011–2015

[N.B. It should be noted that the 2015 statistics exclude intra-trade data from DRC and Lesotho which are not available in the 2015 SADC Statistics Yearbook suggesting integration flaws within the trading bloc as such official intra-regional organs should be in possession of such statistics.]

Year	Exports (billions)	Growth Rate (%)	Imports (billions)	Growth Rate (%)	BoT (billions)
2011	$38.29	0	$38.23	0	$0.06
2012	$41.51	8	$39.72	4	$1.79
2013	$43.16	4	$41.74	5	$1.42
2014	$37.97	-12	$36.47	-13	$1.50
2015	$32.52	-14	$30.60	-16	$1.92
Aggregate	$193.45	N/A	$186.76	N/A	$6.69

(Source: Tralac & SADC)

> "Since its entry into force in 1994, COMESA has grown into a robust economic network of states unified in their goal of enhancing the trade of goods and services and facilitating investment. The intra-regional trading bloc consists of 19 member states, namely: Burundi, the Comoros, the DRC, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Sudan, Swaziland, Seychelles, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe."

Table 1 shows an upward export trend in intra-SADC trade. In 2012 and 2013, export growth in the region was 8% and 4% respectively, followed by a decline of 12% and 14% in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Conversely, import growth rates in the region followed suit with an upward trend: in 2012 and 2013, imports registered growths of 4% and 5% respectively, followed by a decline of 13% and 16% in 2014 and 2015 respectively. The balance of trade (BoT) throughout the time period of analysis reveals a trade surplus, implying a somewhat even trade playing field, as the SADC region boasts relatively good and even levels of development.

COMESA

Since its entry into force in 1994, COMESA has grown into a robust economic network of states unified in their goal of enhancing the trade of goods and services and facilitating investment. The intra-regional trading bloc consists of 19 member states, namely: Burundi, the Comoros, the DRC, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Sudan, Swaziland, Seychelles, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. It has managed to increase its internal trade output from $1.5 billion in 2000 to $20 billion in 2017 with researchers stating that with greater capacity and integration the trading bloc could more than quadruple its output in trade, identifying capacity constraints as a limiting factor of intra-regional trade enhancement in Africa, a trend that has also been identified under SADC (COMESA, 2017: 13). It has been proactive in its approach to solving NTBs having managed to eliminate 199 of 204 NTBs since 2008 facilitated by the Tripartite NTB Online Reporting Mechanism implemented in 2008 and the recent short messaging system used to report NTBs in the TFTA equating to a 98% NTB resolution success rate in COMESA (Tralac, 2018).

Additionally, COMESA has an intra-regional trade of 8%, meaning that some 92% of trade is external to the trading bloc, signalling a deficit in trade integration. Similar to SADC, COMESA has an FTA that grants a 0 to 10% tariff preference to members with 4 of 19 of its member states being exempt from the area, namely: eSwatini, which is highly unlikely to join due to its South African Customs Union membership; the DRC, a SADC member; Eritrea; and Ethiopia, notorious for its exorbitantly high customs duties, which range from 0 to 35% and average at 17%, which has vocalised its interest to become a full FTA member in COMESA in the future (Export.gov, 2017). This fragmentation in FTA membership hinders intra-trade growth within the trading bloc as members do not operate with a uniform trade agenda, hence its failure to create a holistically functional Custom Union and Common Market. The trade fluctuations presented in Table 2 below attest to the aforementioned.

Table 2: Intra-COMESA trade 2011–2015

Year	Exports (billions)	Growth Rate (%)	Imports (billions)	Growth Rate (%)	BoT (billions)
2011	$9.23	0	$14.82	0	-$5.59
2012	$9.75	6	$15.68	6	-$5.93
2013	$10.78	11	$18.14	16	-$7.36
2014	$7.72	-28	$17.48	-4	-$9.76
2015	$7.57	-2	$8.23	-53	-$0.66
Aggregate	$45.05	N/A	$74.35	N/A	-$29.30

(Source: ITC & COMSTAT Database)

Table 2 shows a positive upward trend in intra-COMESA exports, with export growth rates of 6% and 11% in 2012 and 2013 respectively, followed by a downward trend in subsequent years, with export growth declines of 28% and 2% in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Conversely, intra-COMESA imports also show a positive upward trend: in 2012 and 2013, import growth in the region rose 6% and 16% respectively, followed by a decline of 4 and 53% respectively in 2014 and 2015. The BoT throughout the time period of analysis reveals a trade deficit within the intra-regional trading bloc, implying an uneven trade playing field linked to the levels of development of member states, with better developed states such as Kenya and Egypt enjoying high levels of trade due to their availability of resources and less capacity constraints in contrast to their counterparts in the trading bloc.

ECOWAS

Similar to SADC, ECOWAS consists of 15 member states, namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. It was established with the purpose of creating a common trade market as well as to facilitate investment and industrialisation in the region to fast-track development. To this end, it adopted the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) as a framework to address the liberalised movement of goods under an FTA, in conjunction with the Customs and Connectivity programme, which seeks to facilitate the aforementioned movement of goods within the region (ETLS, n.d). Yet, despite these trade boosting mechanisms, intra-ECOWAS trade stands at 12%, a statistic that is highly insignificant and insinuates that a bulk of ECOWAS trade, 88%, transpires external of the trading bloc, meaning that it has not been fully successful in increasing trade within its membership.

Contributing to this low intra-trade output is the presence of tariffs and NTBs that presents financial burdens to members and increases customs clearing times and the dis-harmonization of customs practices (Ayamgha, 2016; Xu and Choi, 2015: 3–4). For example, many countries in the region generally impose seasonal import restrictions to protect local producers (mostly farmers) and industries conflicting with ECOWAS' custom external tariffs (CETs) and overall attempts to liberalise trade (Amadala, 2018). Other NTBs revolve around public health concerns such as bird flu, although they often remain in force long after the threat has been neutralised, suggesting trade protectionism within the region (Torres and Seters, 2016: 34). Bribes, unofficial customs practices and road harassments also characterise the nature of trade in ECOWAS and curb the movement of goods in the region resulting in costly delays and undocumented merchandise data curbing efforts to register up-to-date intra-regional trade statistics (Torres and Seters, 2016: 35–41).

Table 3 shows an 11% decline in intra-ECOWAS exports in 2012, followed by a 3% increase in 2013, and a downward trend in exports in 2014 and 2015, with export growth declines of 9% and 23% respectively. In 2016, exports within the region increase by 23%.

Table 3: Intra-ECOWAS trade exports 2011–2016

Year	Exports (billions)	Growth Rate (%)
2011	$15.35	0
2012	$13.62	-11
2013	$13.97	3
2014	$12.72	-9
2015	$9.81	-23
2016	$12.02	23
Aggregate	$77.49	N/A

(Source: Tralac, 2017)

EAC

EAC compromises of six member states, namely: Rwanda, Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Sudan that joined the trading bloc in 2016. The treaty that facilitated its establishment was ratified in 2000 with the purpose of deepening integration in the region by enhancing the Customs Union into a common market by liberalising intra-regional trade to boost trade and investment in the region in a mutually beneficially manner (EAC, n.d; Simukoko, 2017). To this end, the trading bloc has not found much success in its trade agenda as its overall trade has been relatively low with annual trade figures of less than $6 billion though some improvement has been identified over the past few years with trade increasing from $4.48 billion in 2011 to $5.80 billion in 2013, followed by continuous decline in subsequent years leading up to 2016 as illustrated by Table 3. Contributing to these fluctuations and overall poor trade output has been a failure by member states to reach a consensus on trade liberalisation and integration (a factor that has stalled the establishment of EAC's Monetary Union since 2012) resulting in the erosion of Custom Union and Common Market benefits (Simukoko, 2017). For example, Kenya and Tanzania have over the years been involved in trade disputes that have seen Kenya ban wheat flour and liquefied petroleum gas from Tanzania, while the latter has retaliated by banning cigarettes and dairy products from Kenya (Anyanzwa, 2017). The two trade partners only quite recently settled their long-running trade dispute in a bilateral meeting, though the ramifications of the dispute were felt far and wide as Tanzania is Kenya's second largest market and cost both parties much needed trade.

Such disputes are not unique to the aforementioned countries, but also among other member states that choose to operate independent of EAC's Customs Union Protocol by imposing NTBs and trade protectionist measures such as double taxation for firms operating in two or more EAC states hindering not only the movement of goods but business development as well as identified by the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (Anyanzwa, 2016). In the context of capital flow, Tanzania and Burundi have been identified as the most difficult countries in the region to move capital, a factor that has also hindered intra-trade growth in the region (The East African, 2017). It is due to these trade obstacles that intra-regional trade in the region is 9.4%, suggesting that the majority of EAC trade is carried out external of the trading bloc, a trend identified throughout the article and driven by the dis-harmonisation of trade policies by intra-regional trading blocs (Anyanzwa, 2017). Intra-regional trade, not only in EAC but in the rest of the continent's trading blocs, could easily be boosted should uniformity be practiced by all member states per trading bloc.

Table 4: Intra-EAC trade 2011–2014

Year	Exports (billions)	GR (%)	Imports (billions)	GR (%)	BoT
2011	$2.59	0	$2.03	0	$0.56
2012	$2.88	11	$2.65	31	$0.23
2013	$2.81	-2	$1.92	-28	$0.89
2014	$1.33	-53	$1.33	-31	$0.00
Agg.	$9.61	N/A	$7.93	N/A	$1.68

(Source: EAC, 2015 and Nakaweesi, 2017)

Table 4 shows an overall disappointing intra-EAC export performance with export growth recorded only in 2012 at 11%, followed by export growth declines of 2% and 53% respectively in 2013 and 2014. Conversely, intra-EAC imports follow a similar trend with the only growth recorded being in 2012 at 31%, followed by declines of 28 and 31% respectively in 2013 and 2014. The BoT, throughout the time period of analyses, reveals a trade surplus illustrating a healthy intra-regional trade relationship, however, the intra-trade output is disheartening as total trade (exports plus imports) is the lowest at $17.54 billion in contrast to the earlier assessed intra-regional trading blocs statistics suggesting inefficiency caused by the earlier-mentioned NTBs which need to be addressed immediately to enhance trade in the region and foster trade induced development.

CEMAC

CEMAC is an intra-regional trade bloc consisting of six countries, namely: Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the DRC. CEMAC came into effect in 1999 with the purpose of enhancing integration within its membership, particularly in areas of trade. To this end, the trading bloc has not fully succeeded in facilitating and increasing trade among its members despite setting up several institutions and bodies to establish itself into a fully functional Customs Union and FTA. Among these is the Central African Economic Union, Central African Monetary Union, Conference of CEMAC Heads of State, Council of Ministers, Bank of Central African States, and the Development Bank of Central African States to mention a few (WTO, 2013: 7). Its most notable success has been the adoption of the CFA franc pegged to the euro which makes trade among states somewhat fluid as there is no need for currency conversations. Unfortunately, nothing more worth noting can be said in the context of its success, as intra-regional trade has been recorded to be less than 5%, making it the most disintegrated trading bloc in Africa, with some 95% of its trade being carried out external of the bloc (McAllister, 2016).

Contributing to these low levels of intra-trade is a poor capacity by the aforementioned banks and broader financial sector to foster industrial development in CEMAC member states to boost trade due to risk factors aligned to geopolitical tensions and a decline in commodity prices. Moreover, as with trends among intra-regional trade blocs in Africa, factors impeding intra-trade in CEMAC are NTBs such as the over taxation of commodities, arbitrary checkpoints along the highway and corridors deteriorating in condition, as well as a distortion in common external tariffs. In the context of tariffs, it should be noted that in theory, all CEMAC tariffs have been removed though they have not been fully implemented as member states still pay tariffs when they trade among themselves (Nchinda, 2017; WTO, 2013: 7–8). However, almost exclusive to the bloc is the presence of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region and civil unrest in the CAR that has impaired not only intra-trade in the region but external trade as a significant amount of CEMAC trade revolves around the external exportation of crude petroleum, a resource abundant in the region and constituting approximately 84% of merchandise exports implying a resource curse due to the relatively poor nature of the member states, despite their abundant oil resources which has not improved as a result of the security threat posed by the aforementioned (Meyer, 2015: 3–4; IMF, 2018: 3).

The Future of Intra-Continental Trade Under AfCFTA

The future of intra-continental trade in Africa is undoubtedly embedded in the ambitious AfCFTA, a supra-regional trade agreement which, once in effect, will liberalise and integrate not only the trade of goods and services but also intellectual property rights, competition policy, and the facilitation of investment in Africa (AfCFTA, 2018, Article 4). It does not seek to do away with the current intra-regional trading blocs, but rather to improve and facilitate trade where shortcomings may be present:

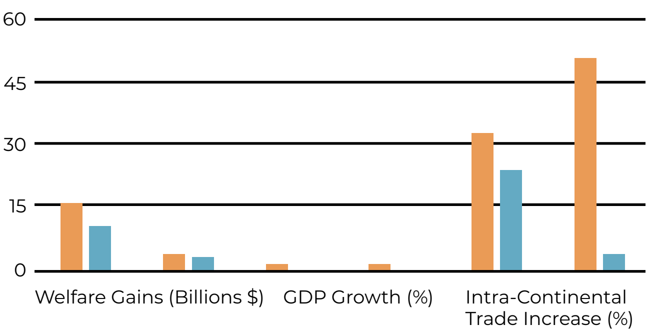
'State Parties that are members of other regional economic communities, regional trading arrangements and custom unions, which have attained among themselves higher levels of regional integration than under this Agreement, shall maintain such higher levels among themselves' (AfCFTA, 2018, Article 19: 2)

Currently, 54 African Union member states have signed the AfCFTA treaty to develop the globe's most robust single market and FTA since the development of the World Trade Organisation (APA News, 2018; African Union, 2018, 1; Infomineo, 2018). It has been ratified by 36 countries and has been in effect since 1 January 2021. Moreover, its ratification by over 15 countries has enabled the protocol on human migration, right of residence, and establishment to come into effect (AFCFTA, 2018, Article 23; APA News, 2018).

Benefits

The AfCFTA wields within it an array of benefits. However, the majority of these can only be realised long term. A study carried out by Saygili, Peters, and Knebel (2017: 12–13) utilised the Global Trade Analysis Project computable general equilibrium model to estimate the quantitative effects of the trade agreement with a two-scenario approach, one in which the agreement would eliminate all tariffs under an FTA, and the other wherein tariffs would be eliminated on a Special Product Category (SPC) basis. The findings are summarised in Figure 1 below.

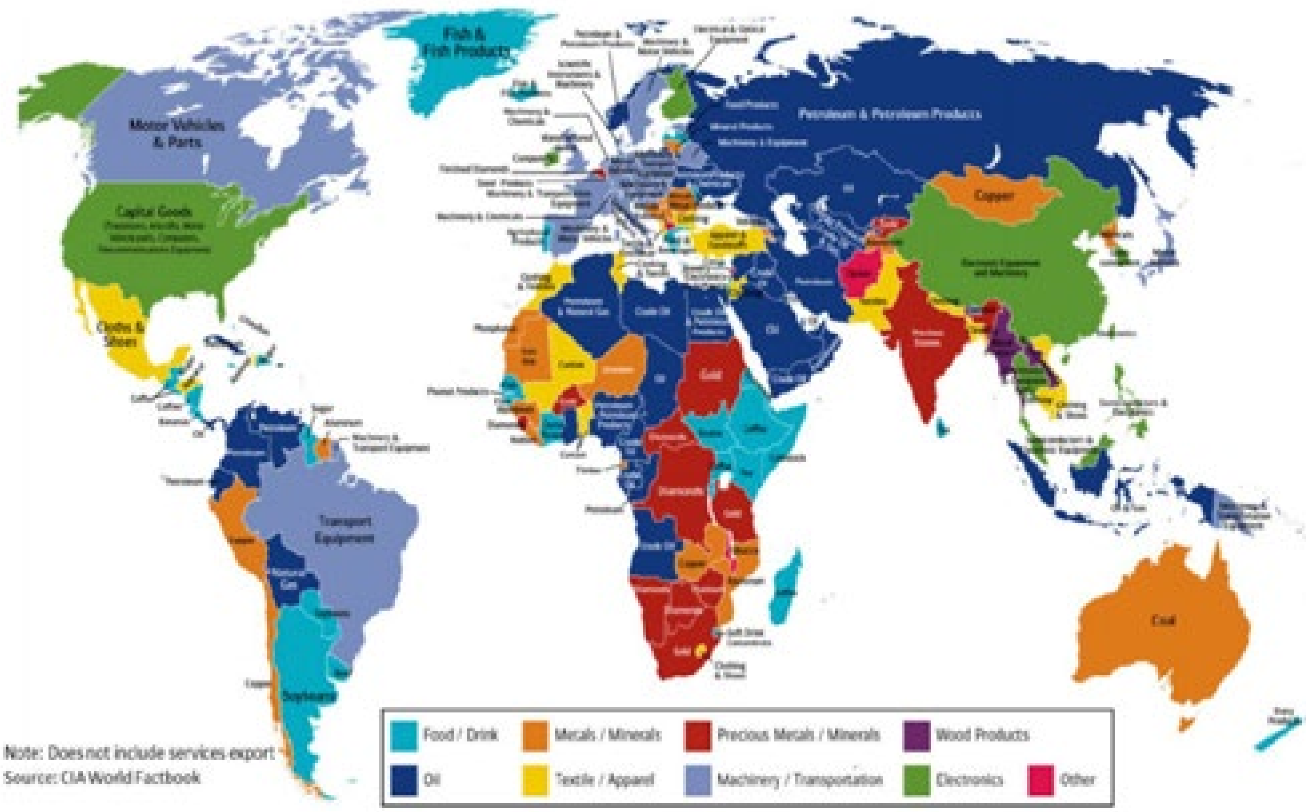
Figure 1: Quantitative impact estimates for the AfCFTA



(Source: UNCTAD, 2017)

In the first category, the model revealed estimated welfare gains of $16.1 billion long-term with a loss of $4.1 billion in tariff revenues, an amount gained over threefold in welfare gains. This would result in a continental GDP increase of 0.97% and an employment increase of 1.17% upon fully eradicating tariffs. Intra-continental trade would grow at an estimated 33% and Africa's trade deficit would decline by 50.9%. In contrast, the SPC scenario revealed welfare gains of $10.7 billion long-term with expected tariff revenue losses of $3.2 billion and continental GDP and employment increases of 0.3% and 0.35% respectively. Intra-continental trade is predicted to grow to less than the first scenario at 24%, while the continent's trade deficit is expected to decline by a mere 3.8%. In the context of the earlier mentioned protocol on human migration, right of residence and establishment, the trade agreement will facilitate ease of doing business for African citizens and prospectively boost the continent's economy and curb unemployment.

Additionally, in the context of boosting economic performance in the continent, the trade agreement will boost intra-continental trade by making available a market of 1.2 billion consumers to beneficiaries and a cumulative Gross Domestic Product of $2.5 trillion, which will enhance exports and industry competitiveness through scale production facilitated by continental market access. Another benefit of the AfCFTA is that it will result in the diversification of the continent's trade portfolio and subsequent reduction of extractive resource trade, that is the trade of commodities such as oil, timber and minerals which have predominantly accounted for most of the continent's exports (See Figure 2), promoting a more sustainable trade profile.



(Source: CIA World Factbook, 2014)

However, trade liberalisation will occur on a reciprocal basis, to help eliminate unfair trade practices such as dis-uniformity in tariffs and arbitrary road blocks among other trade hindrances that impede on the continent's trade performance as identified earlier in the article (AfCFTA, 2018, Article 18: 1). Additionally, given the numerous levels of development among African states, the AfCFTA will act as a catalyst for technology and skills transfer among African states and facilitate the structural transformation of lesser developed states into knowledge-based economies whose trade portfolios are diverse and not resource-dependent for growth. Lastly, the AfCFTA can act as a stimulus recovery package and drive much needed economic growth across the continent following the disastrous economic impact of Covid-19.

Disadvantages

In order for beneficiaries to enjoy the aforementioned benefits, certain adjustments will have to be made and losses incurred during the transition period which could transpire over a short-term period depending on the economic capacity of participating economies and their will to see the transition through for the greater good of their economies. Given that the agreement will require compromises to be made in tariff eliminations, beneficiaries will experience tariff revenue losses, though countered by revenues incurred in the short to medium term or longer term through enhanced market access and exports, depending on participants' level of development, industrialisation, competitive, and comparative advantages among other determinants. These determinants will decide the level at which beneficiaries will be able to exploit trade opportunities presented by the trade agreement.

Additionally, vulnerable industries and sectors – such as agriculture, which employs a majority of the continent's populace, textiles, and other overall underdeveloped sectors in Africa – run the risk of enduring financial shortfalls and, in a worst-case scenario, the possibility of becoming obsolete in the presence of fierce competition from better equipped/industrialised economies if they do not have the appropriate mechanisms in place to improve their competitive advantages. As such, not all countries will benefit equally from the trade agreement. According to estimates by Saygili, Peters, and Knebel (2017: 15), some economies are expected to grow at over 3% at both a full FTA and SPC basis, while others are expected to regress. However, this is to be expected as African economies vary in levels of development determining their capacity to exploit as mentioned earlier.

In order to adjust, beneficiaries will have to reallocate their resources to sectors with the highest prospects for efficiency, which may take time depending on the aforementioned determinants, as well as on the political will to make such resources available and the strategic allocation thereof. In sum, though the AfCFTA presents several noteworthy disadvantages, these do not outweigh its benefits as the disadvantages are only short term and are manageable with the political-economic determination of participating countries.

Impact on youth

It is important to realise that the single amalgamated intra-African market under the guise of the AfCFTA will address many of the continent's challenges if implemented well. It has been asserted that the FTA has the potential to lift 30 million people out of poverty and raise the income of 68 million Africans currently living on less than $5,5 per day (Ayieko, 2021). Additionally, the earlier-mentioned protocol on human migration, right of residence and establishment will facilitate ease of doing business and intra-Africa migration for many of the continent's youth and prospectively boost the continent's economy and further curb unemployment which currently stands at 60%. The FTA might see the development of innovative financing solutions for aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly in areas of exports, e-commerce and fintech to satisfy orders. This can be achieved by launching cross-border crowdfunding hubs to fund youth. However, to attain this, Africa has to enhance youth access to education as that will equip them with the necessary skills to thrive in a single African market. Moreover, information pertaining to what the AfCFTA is must be marketed to the youth, enabling them to take full advantage of the intra-Africa export opportunities embedded therein. This comes after a study by Chepkwony and Vuuren (2019) revealed that many of Africa's youth are still unaware of the existence of the AfCFTA.

Potential overlaps and conflict of interests between the TFTA and AfCFTA

As noted earlier, the TFTA seeks to amalgamate SADC, COMESA, and EAC into a singular trading bloc of members who are also participating in the AfCFTA and have ratified it. The repercussion thereof is an overlap in memberships. To better understand the relationship between the two trade agreements one has to assess Article 19 of the AfCFTA which posits that: 'State Parties that are members of other regional economic communities, regional trading arrangements and custom unions, which have attained among themselves higher levels of regional integration than under this Agreement, shall maintain such higher levels among themselves'.

To date, only eight countries, namely: Namibia, Egypt, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, and Burundi have ratified the TFTA of the 14 countries needed to implement the agreement. Seven countries, namely: Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Comoros, Sudan, Zambia, and Eswatini are in the advanced stages of their ratification processes. It is projected that these will be finalised by 2022 (Gakunga, 2021). Once in force, these will fall under the regional trade agreements discussed in the article. In theory, the TFTA will co-exist with the AfCFTA and the latter should be able to advance its interests. However, the practical co-existence of the aforementioned trade agreements could prove complicated. This is because trade agreements of any nature revolve around preferences and benefits which mainly revolve around preference for exported goods and services from member states which are remunerated through reciprocal trade exchanges with partner states.

The downside of overlapping memberships comes with the exorbitant costs associated with implementation. Moreover, each trade agreement comes with its own unique set of rules and regulations. Thus, overlapping memberships in the TFTA and the AfCFTA could witness a duplication in compliancy and potential conflicts of interests embedded in rules of origin. For example, merchandise that is trans-shipped from a third-party as predetermined by a trade agreement will be barred from accessing any preferential treatment. Article 3 of the AfCFTA alludes to the resolution of overlapping memberships by encouraging states to: '[R]esolve the challenges of multiple and overlapping memberships and expedite the regional and continental integration processes.'

However, the article fails to elucidate how the aforementioned will be achieved and could potentially drive conflicts of interests due to deficits in explanations. Nonetheless, the launch of the AfCFTA is a tremendous fit for intra-trade in Africa, even though certain factors are still not clearly defined, such as overlapping intra-Africa trading bloc memberships. These will remain in place and continue to implement and govern their respective agendas and arguably prolong the low-levels of intra-Africa trade until the issue of overlapping memberships and other outstanding areas are resolved (AfCFTA, Article 5 (b)). This is highlighted in Article 7 of the AfCFTA's rendezvous clause in which member states are to continue negotiating to address outstanding areas.

Conclusion

It is clear that Africa has made commendable efforts in its attempt to boost intra-continental trade by creating intra-regional trading blocs such as SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA, EAC, and CEMAC. However, it has not been able to create meaningful trade gains as it registers the lowest intra-continental trade globally at 18%. Several factors contributing to this intra-trade inefficiency were identified, including: the presence of NTBs such as import and export tariffs, arbitrary road checks, increases in customs clearing times, the dis-harmonisation of custom practices which curb the fluidity of trade, unnecessary public health regulations, post threat containment, and complex/discriminatory rules of origin. The inability by member states within their respective intra-regional trading blocs to adhere to the recommended blanket tariffs curbs trade and sometimes results in trade disputes among states. Additionally, the article identified the overlap of intra-regional trading bloc memberships by African states which makes it difficult for them to simultaneously meet multiple intra-regional trading bloc obligations, subsequently curbing intra-continental trade on an intra-regional trading bloc level.

Nonetheless, promising is the realisation of the aforementioned trade and integration shortcomings by the continent that has driven it to finally launch supra-regional trade under the banner of the AfCFTA to boost intra-continental trade by amalgamating the continent's numerous markets into one singular entity that seeks to promote the fluidity of trade with minimal to zero barriers. To gauge the implications of the agreement, the article carried out a prospective benefit and disadvantage analysis wherein the benefits were found to outweigh the disadvantages which are transition-related and short term should beneficiaries garner enough political will and resources to facilitate a smooth trade transition. Among the benefits identified by the article were access to a continental consumer base of over 1.2 billion people and a cumulative Gross Domestic Product of $2.5 trillion projected to enhance exports and competitiveness among states. Moreover, the analysis found the trade agreement to be quantitatively beneficial on both a full FTA and SPC basis though more on the former than the latter. It also found the trade agreement to be a catalyst for technology and skills transfer among African states, facilitating the structural transformation of lesser developed states into knowledge-based economies whose trade portfolios are diverse and not resource-dependent for growth.

In sum, though current intra-regional trade in Africa has not near reached its full potential and efficiency, the continent's current trajectory towards intra-continental trade under the AfCFTA is promising and could soon see Africa's intra-trade increase and its developmental agenda advanced, as illustrated in the article. However, this can only be realised should an additional 16 African countries ratify the trade agreement enabling it to come into effect as African countries are known to be hesitant and gradual in ratifying intra-Africa trade agreements despite their need to enhance intra-continental trade. It is advisable that the trade agreement be ratified with haste to better equip the continent in sustaining itself and thriving in the presence of America's trade war and curb non-reciprocal trade and aid dependency on China among many other developmental constraints that hover across the continent as a result of its poor economic performance.

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