African free trade and higher education: A two-way street

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Abstract

In 2021, only 15% of African exports were intra-continental (not including informal trans-border trade which in some cases is considerable), compared with 60% for Asia and 67% for Europe. AfCFTA therefore represents an opportunity to improve continental integration through trade. With more than 50 signatory states, AfCFTA can succeed only if it is perceived as beneficial by all parties. Its implementation will require complex negotiations leading to appropriate changes in national regulations, which may vary from country to country, within the framework of the overall objectives of the Agreement. These specific fine-tuning measures are necessary to deal with the range of economic imbalances that exist between partner countries, and to protect nascent industries. As the treaty enters into force, some African countries will need to develop expertise in several areas, along with the establishment of reliable mechanisms for data collection and treatment. This will allow them to better negotiate their interests, leveling the playing field through competence and compromise. Several cases of solutions to deal with trade imbalances will be considered, including the experiences of South Africa's neighbors in the SADC free trade area and of Morocco in its FTA's with Egypt and Turkey. Although not mentioned directly in the initial Agreement, vocational and higher education must thus be considered as priority areas, essential to the success of AfCFTA. Universities can contribute to continental capacity building and integration through both on-site and distance training programs

The Agreement will, in turn, favor the exchange of students, faculty and staff through intra-African mobility (the protocol on free movement of persons is under consideration) and specific training programs. It creates the conditions for cross-border collaborations, including jointly funded universities and research and innovation centers to enable the continent-wide flow of knowledge, contributing to African HE integration. Other initiatives may include support for doctoral students and young researchers to spend time in research universities and/or businesses in other African countries, to enhance capacity building, quality, competitiveness and internationalization. Innovative solutions on the continent will be discussed, including projects such as the education Free Trade Zone (FTZ) planned in Nigeria by the University of Abuja. These measures will additionally contribute to building the trust and common values necessary for African academic and economic integration in the spirit of Agenda 2063.

Key words: AfCFTA, , Economy, Education, Innovation, Youth, Integration

1. Introduction: Africa's economic potential

Africa is a wealthy continent by many standards. The continent has 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of the world's natural gas and 12% of its oil reserves. It is rich in minerals (such as lithium, cobalt, manganese) necessary for the energy transition and has 40% of the world's gold and up to 90% of its chromium and platinum. In terms of agriculture, Africa is genetically very wealthy with great animal and plant diversity, as well as a substantial blue economy potential involving fisheries, aquaculture, desalination, tourism, transport, ports, coastal mining and energy. It is an ideal continent for renewable energy fields, with immense surface areas for wind and solar development. Africa's is very young, with 60% of the continent's population aged below 25, and expected to constitute 42% of the world's youth by 2030. African youth thus become critical players in continental and world development. And yet Africa today by and large has not been able to train the human capital necessary for the exploitation of its natural resources.

Recognizing that international trade can serve as a lever for economic growth, several regional groups around the world have engaged in mechanisms that promote economic exchange and preferential trade. Among these are free trade areas (FTAs), which the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines as "a group of countries within which tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers between the members are generally abolished but with no common trade policy toward non-members" [1].

Although they present definite advantages, FTAs can also pose some threats in the short run when involving economies that differ in scale. This is especially true of AfCFTA. In fact, the African Agreement and its related protocols go beyond the traditional contours of a free trade area to constitute a comprehensive framework that covers trade in goods, trade in services, investment, intellectual property rights and competition policy plus protocols on Free Movement of Persons (FMP), right to residence and right to establishment and a Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) [2].

Some have claimed that in the long run, especially as corrective measure are put in place to deal with inequalities, increased competition due to trade liberalizations may lead in fact to improved efficiency of domestic firms. Competitive pressures require firms to better use their resources, implement new technologies and innovate in order to survive under the new conditions. In some cases, trade liberalization may lead to structural transformation. Especially in the case of South-South trade, trade liberalization may improve skill and technology content of developing countries' exports. For example, intra-African trade has higher technology content than extra-African trade. Godzo[3] reports that although 25.4 per cent of intra-African trade is composed of medium and high technology manufactures, these manufactures only constitute 14.1 per cent of African exports to developed countries.

Despite its potential, Africa as a continent is a newcomer to this strategy. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which took effect on 1 January 2021, sets the stage for the establishment of one of the largest free trade areas in the world, involving 1.3 billion people in more than 50 signatory countries. The continent is as diverse economically as it is culturally and linguistically, with an overall gross domestic product (GDP) valued at US$3.4 trillion, representing a mere 2.9% of global GDP. Estimated GDPs for the nations of the continent vary from first ranked South Africa's $400B (but which also had the distinction of the highest continental unemployment rate in 2022), to last ranked Comoros and Sao Tome and Principe with US$1B (projected figures of IMF, October 2023) [4]. This disparity is an indication of the challenges faced in generalizing the terms of the treaty and in eliminating tariffs and non-tariff barriers in any immediate future. Harmonizing regulations and standards across different countries will present challenges. Differences in regulations, certification requirements, and product standards are sure to create barriers to trade, even with the elimination of tariffs.

Africa's population represents 16.7% of the world's population, its GDP represents 2.9% of global GDP and African trade represents 2.1% of world trade. These statistics do not include informal, undocumented cross-border trade, which can be considerable, and which provides income for an estimated 43 percent of Africa's population [5], favoring the reduction of poverty and access to food. Many African borders are extremely porous, with some borders so long and so difficult in geography that control is virtually impossible. It seems that such cross-border trade is more prevalent in Africa relative to other continents [e.g., 6,7]. Generally, the smaller landlocked countries are where the informal sector trade is most intensive. As examples, the annual boost in intra-African exports by informal exports (data collected between 2015 and 2019, depending on the country) is 12% in Kenya, 27% in Nigeria, 35% in Uganda, 51% in Rwanda and 76% in Tunisia.

The available data suggests that intra-African trade is systematically underreported by anything between 11 percent and 40 percent [8]. As a matter of fact, all informal trade tends to be intra-African, once more demonstrating the importance of this kind of exchanges. One of the expected major contributions of AfCFTA is to bring this "informal" trade in under the "formal" umbrella, thus favoring its contribution to documented GDP. In order to best prepare the ground for the success of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the World Bank (WB) therefore recommends that intra-African trade be preferentially reinforced through the dismantling of barriers during the early phase of the treaty.

The general estimates of the impact of AfCFTA foresee a significant increase in African trade, particularly intra-regional trade in manufacturing. It is estimated that by 2035, intracontinental exports would increase by more than 81%, while exports to destinations outside the continent would rise by 19%. This would represent an overall improvement by volume of almost 29 percent relative to current practices, creating new opportunities for agricultural and industrial workers [9].

2. Regional experiences: The lessons learned

As stated above, while FTAs offer numerous benefits, including wider access to markets, they also present challenges that need to be navigated carefully. Free trade areas can hurt the economies of participating countries through job loss and unemployment, preventing innovation and the growth of nascent industries that need protection. This in turn renders the economy too dependent on just a few products, and endangers security through dependence on the imports of vital resources. In all cases, the economic consequences of the FTAs need to be closely monitored and, when necessary, specific treaty clauses may need to be renegotiated. The following examples of FTAs involving African countries are edifying, often indicating a learning curve whose results may be used to guide the implementation AfCFTA.

ECOWAS. Some of Africa's regional groupings have taken the lead in promoting free trade agreements meant to bolster the regional economy and interest outside investors. West Africa's trade liberalization policy, the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is the main ECOWAS operational tool for promoting the West African region as a free trade area (Echols, 1997). Adopted in 1979 by the 16 ECOWAS member nations, the ETLS aims to reduce trade costs by removing all duties between the members and accelerating the entry procedures through harmonization of technical and sanitary provisions. It was also developed so as to create opportunities for the development of new markets for goods and services outside the signatory countries, and increasing investment opportunities for third countries [10].

Three decades after its adoption, the progress made is still limited and implementation in the region is lagging, a situation generally attributed to the slow adoption of appropriate specific regulations. There are still significant barriers to trade in spite of the stated commitments of the member states to "the removal of obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, service and capital."

Ghana. Trade relationships that are established without taking into consideration relative strengths and weaknesses of partner economies can lead to adverse effects. The European Union Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) are a case in point, causing their share of problems. The interim deal with ECOWAS member Ghana suggests that premature tariff elimination can have serious economic and financial consequences. The country's once dynamic tomato and poultry sectors, for instance, have been crippled by EU imports: in 2023 alone, the Netherlands exported USD $65.7 million worth of poultry meat into Ghana, while Poland followed closely with USD $51.7 million.

It is highly likely that the consequent loss of jobs in the poultry and tomato farms has led to migration to Europe. An average poultry or tomato farm in Ghana employs about 50 persons, with larger operations employing up to 500 workers each. If import competition is controlled in this sector, Ghana's poultry industry is estimated to have the capacity to nearly 500,000 persons nation-wide [11].

The case of Ghana is also pertinent in view of the suggestion by the European Commission that the African Union's (AU) African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could serve as a lever towards a Euro-African free trade area. This would bring together all 54 AfCFTA signatories into a free trade area with the EU-27. Cases such as that of Ghana have however shown that the partners should proceed with caution since premature trade liberalization with a stronger economic partner may undermine the pan-African developmental logic of the AfCFTA – and intensify migratory flows from Africa to the EU member states.

SADC. The SADC Protocol on Trade was signed in 1996, with the aim of eliminating 85% of trade barriers by 2008, thus leading to a SADC Free Trade Area. The disparate nature of the economic performance of SADC countries influenced the scope and speed of the introduction of trade liberalization to attain regional integration in a manner beneficial to all. Although initially judged as promising, recent data have indicated more nuanced conclusions. South Africa accounts for 51% of the region's GDP, with 15% for Angola. Most other countries in the region contributed less than 4% to SADC GDP. Annual GDP growth during the decade ending in 2020 also varied, with only Mozambique, DR Congo and Nigeria growing by at least 5%. GDP growth in South Africa and Angola during the same period was less than 2%. This places all members short of the 2013-2017 convergence objective of 7% per year [12,13].

Morocco. With free trade arrangements with more than 62 countries, the country's experience in several of its FTAs is also worth mentioning. Morocco's FTA with Turkey was signed on April 7, 2004 and entered into force in 2006, eliminating various barriers to trade, including tariffs. Morocco's trade balance with Turkey experienced a deficit early on, and the treaty is yet another example of how an FTA may result in dangerous trade imbalances. The Moroccan trade deficit with Turkey attained $2 billion during 2017, leading to the loss of 44,000 jobs in the textile industry alone the same year. While such deficits with other preferential trade partners may be offset by investments (e.g., EU investments represented 71 percent of total investment in Morocco, US investment accounted for 6 percent), in Turkey's case its investments did not attain one percent, leading to a treaty amendment negotiated in 2020 which imposed customs duties on 1200 Turkish exports by up to 90 percent for a five-year period, renewable. These include textiles, clothing, automotive, metallurgy and wood products [14]. It is interesting to note that both countries were willing to renegotiate rather than abandon the treaty altogether, indicating a strong political will to develop the economic relationship.

Similarly, Morocco and Egypt opted for negotiations to settle their differences. The Egypt–Morocco FTA falls under the Agadir accords, an initiative initiated by Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan at Agadir in May 2001 in response to the Barcelona Process call for a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area. The treaty was signed in Rabat on 25 February 2004, entered into force on the 6th of July 2006, with start of implementation on 27 March 2007. An early point of contention was Egypt's refusal to grant an exemption of customs duties on cars imported from Morocco, which represent an important component of the country's industrial base. The Renault plant in Tangiers is set to reach a production capacity of 500,000 cars per year in 2025, to be complemented by the Stellantis plant in Kenitra, with a production of 500,000 units of Peugeot and Opel vehicles by 2030. Egyptian authorities initially claimed that the treaty's critical 60% local production requirements were not attained and therefore exemption was not warranted. The situation however changed by 2022 when Renault automobile exports from Morocco were certified at 80% local and the issue was resolved [15].

The aggregate of Morocco's free trade agreements has led to an increase in total foreign investments (FDIs) in the country from MAD 77.5 billion between 1991 and 2000 to MAD 249 billion between 2001 and 2010, then to MAD 351.5 billion between 2011 and 2020 (1 MAD = 9.7 US$).

These examples are in no way comprehensive, yet they clearly show that a degree of protectionism even during liberalizing initiatives is common and sometimes even beneficial. Further, the current resistance of French farmers to the EU-Mercosur agreement is a fine demonstration that resistance to liberalization is not limited to the weaker economies. The lessons learned from these few examples is that negotiation and compromise can contribute to the success of the AfCFTA if issues are addressed in a timely fashion and if all partners perceive the arrangements as beneficial and contributing to the attainment of more integrated and more competitive economies.

3. AfCFTA and African youth: Skills and employability

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has estimated that by 2050 the youth population of Africa (15 to 35 years of age) will exceed 830 million, exacerbating unemployment across the continent, already among the highest worldwide: 2022 figures place South Africa's rate at just under 34%, Nigeria's at 31%, Kenya's at 23% and Namibia's at 21%. The AfDB estimates that of the 420 million current young citizens in Africa, one-third is "unemployed and discouraged," another third is "not secure in their jobs" and only one in six is in "wage employment." This situation is at the root of the difficulties facing businesses in Africa, directly linked to the unavailability of skilled labor, and which in turn results in the loss of significant revenues due to low productivity and lack of innovation. Both HE and Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems are not well aligned with market needs and should be reinforced through joint work-study training programs, involving educational institutions and enterprises. It is hoped that AfCFTA will create an environment favorable to such collaboration as well as to the exchange of expertise between member states [16].

Impact of AfCFTA on education and mobility. The AU Free Movement of Persons Protocol, adopted in January 2018, is an Agenda 2063 aspiration aimed at eliminating visas and attaining a continent with "seamless borders." The protocol is economically driven, and meant to facilitate the movement of labor and services. Only a handful of member states (Rwanda, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Mali) have thus far ratified it. A strong political commitment to this protocol may directly impact higher education on the continent, facilitating academic exchanges through student, faculty and staff mobility and capacity building. The circulation of the continent's youth in universities across Africa is sure to contribute to better knowledge of continental cultures, increasing trust and confidence. Increased mobility would also lead to the development of common values and to more effective collaboration in research and innovation related to areas of current common concern, such as energy, novel technologies and climate change.

A strong commitment, through AfCFTA and the FMP protocol, in support of cooperation in higher education, research and innovation can help Africa to train its youth, creating an environment for a better, more integrated future. To this end, the partners should work to strengthen support for the development of jointly funded strategic research and innovation initiatives. Partners should also engage under the FTA initiatives to support PhD students and early career researchers, both men and women, to spend time in each other's research universities and businesses, through funded fellowship and exchange programs.

They should also make concerted efforts to promote their university programs in other African countries, attracting talent and contributing to capacity building through university consortia and alliances. Finally, the mutual recognition of credentials would significantly encourage mobility on the continent, thus further facilitating continental integration.

4. Impact of education on AfCFTA

Data from the Hinrich Foundation sustainable trade index shows that Education and the Trade environment are intimately related. Increasing the per capita average number of years of schooling (educational attainment) led to an increase in per capita incomes and improved skills and capacities [17]. Through access to quality education, countries can train their youth with the skills and knowledge required to produce high-quality goods and services, and compete in the global market. Additionally, Stiller [18] reports that more educated persons are generally more supportive of international trade, essentially because they are in a better position to appreciate the resulting economic gains. In the case of AfCFTA, Education and AfCFTA exert mutual influences on one another. An educated work force is necessary to the success of AfCFTA and a strong commitment of African states to quality education for their youth at all levels will constitute a solid underpinning for the success of AfCFTA, providing qualified human resources. Exchanges via this two-way street need to be constantly reinforced through the implication of universities in economic planning and trade negotiations, and of enterprises in curriculum planning and the orientation of educational reforms.

The training of youth, both men and women, in skills required for success in the coming years, particularly as this impacts economic and human development, is necessary if the continent is to fully play its role in the global economy. In this regard, the reduction, and eventual elimination, of high unemployment rates necessitates a comprehensive e-learning curriculum and infrastructure to make basic education, especially STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) more readily available, coupled with the provision of funding for innovative startups and initiatives.

Universities are called upon to work in collaboration with African and international partners to strengthen the skills of the African labor force, with innovative programs. Initiatives such as the Jobs for Youth in Africa (JfYA) Strategy (2016–2025), and Skills for Employability and Productivity in Africa (SEPA) Action Plan, 2022–2025, launched by the African Development Bank (AfDB) may serve as models for African university strategies to face the skills gap. These programs have led to the creation of 25 million jobs and the training of 50 million African youth with skills for gainful employment or selfemployment. With government and international financing, Africa's universities can envisage similar actions to amplify the effects of these efforts.

The current AU - EU mobility schemes for African students are very important, but their scope remains insufficient to attain the ambitious expectations of African youth and the objectives of Agenda 2063. The effort must be reinforced through additional funding by the member states and spearheaded by African universities. Sub-Saharan African HE student degree mobility is largely oriented towards Europe and North America. Campus France [19] reports that 460,000 Sub-Saharan students were registered for degrees overseas in 2021, of which 64,000 (14%) were in France. The UK and the US followed, with 39,000 and 37,000 respectively. In contrast, Sub-Saharan African universities received only 25% of the total (the lowest intra-zone statistic), with top receivers being South Africa, Senegal and Cameroun, while North Africa received 9%, indicating that 66% of Sub-Saharan degree mobility students were registered in non-African universities. Nigeria alone had 20,000 degree mobility students in the US, followed in second place by Ghana at 9,000. As for North African students, available data for Morocco in 2021 shows 24,000 incoming African students. Egypt reported 14,000 in 2016, but has since launched an energetic recruitment program that in all probability has increased this number several fold. Some interesting trends for students from the combined Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region show that Turkey has overtaken France as the first destination country for students from this area, where the major source countries were, in order, Syria, Iran, Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This quick review of the continental HE degree mobility statistics demonstrates that a major effort needs to be undertaken to improve intra-African HE exchanges for their high value as a tool of continental integration.

Another recent innovative approach that leverages education to ensure the success of AfCTA was initiated by the University of Abuja, which announced plans to establish the first education Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in Nigeria. The oversight Nigeria Export Processing Zones Authority (NEPZA), will partner with the University of Abuja and the Abuja Chamber of Commerce to bring industries closer to the students through this first such education free zone. The university zone is strategically located, close to both the airport and city center, and consists of 11,800 hectares of land rich in mineral resources and rivers. Interns and university students will thus have access to knowledge-based productive activities. Also planned are warehouses for industries as well as hotels and conference facilities [20]. This environment will certainly contribute to the establishment of close relationships between industry and the university, orienting academic programs towards the needs of the economy and placing the country in a more competitive position in its international trade arrangements. The FTZ offers opportunities for intimate university-market interactions and reinforces the competitivity of FTAs. It may afford framework within which to reinvent the relationship between higher education and TVET systems on the one hand, and economic imperatives on the other.

Overseas and Joint campuses offer yet another opportunity for the exchange of expertise in environments conducive to mutual trust and cooperation. African universities may consider a transcontinental approach to higher education, with the provision of degree programs outside of the universities' home country. Such programs would allow the presence of an African alternative in countries where universities based in other continents have established branch campuses. In some settings, such offshore campuses form clusters, 'education hubs' or 'education cities', geared towards serving knowledge-based economies. Kleibert has called these transnational education zones (TEZs) [21]. An initial example is the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) of Morocco which, after opening its first antenna in France (UM6P Paris), is now set to open its second overseas campus, the UM6P Digital Farming School, in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire [22].

These and other innovative initiatives will be necessary to face the rapidly expanding educational needs of African youth and to integrate African education in favor of African economies.

5. Conclusions

African citizens frequently do not fully appreciate the cultural wealth and diversity of their own continent. Air travel from one region of Africa to another, and indeed sometimes from one country to another in the same region, can be onerous and impractical, often requiring passage via a European or Gulf hub. Continental integration can only be attained if this situation is changed and African youth acquire a sense of comfort with their cultural heritage. University exchanges can contribute in important ways to this change, increasing trust and confidence throughout the continent and giving young Africans the chance tobetter know one another, in order to better interact (and trade) with, their fellow Africans from other regions. AfCFTA can serve as a major change agent and driver towards an open, prosperous Africa.

The relationship between African higher education and AfCFTA is perhaps best described as a two-way street benefiting both. AfCFTA creates needs and pressures to constitute a continental cadre of skilled and adaptive professionals to serve the economies of the partner countries, reinforcing their continental and global competitivity. In turn, HE creates pressures to liberate the African space, opening it up to the circulation of goods, services and persons. The success of the AfCFTA is therefore to a large extent tributary to the capacity of African governments to benefit from the human capital provided by the youth of the continent [23].

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