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Regional and Continental Integration in Africa in the Covid-19 Era: New Drivers and Perspectives

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Introduction

This contribution aims to provide:

- A review of regional integration in Africa. Presenting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) from the perspective of critical questions, such as complementarity with or substitution for regional integration, and the conditions under which AfCFTA could play a major role in the transformation of Africa;
- Answers to the roles which could be played by major economies, such as Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Morocco, and Kenya, in the consolidation of this zone, and a view as to which countries might lose out from AfCFTA;
- An assessment of how Covid-19 is affecting integration efforts, especially for AfCFTA. Has the pandemic meant a more protectionist era for certain countries, in order to counter the consequences of Covid-19?

These three issues are important to examine given the world's poor image of Africa. The global view of Africa is troubled, catastrophic even (protracted conflicts, endemic diseases, weak economic performance, and a consequent state of extreme poverty). This lacklustre situation is further threatened by Africa's borders being in flux, among nation-states which are a product of colonisation, exemplified by Ethiopia, Somalia, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These countries offer us a preview of the risks for other African countries if no action is taken to address socio-political crises, contain the spread of endemic diseases, and halt the development of mafia networks around mining and the arms trade. Conscious of their unfavourable situation, African Heads of States - supported by some international institutions - decided once they had gained independence to approach the third millennium with determination, launching a range of initiatives to bring new perspectives to address the troubling context they faced.

The first was the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on May 25, 1963, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to fight against excessive Balkanization of the continent. This was followed by the creation of the East African Community by Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in 1967.

These initial steps were followed by the creation of more regional organisations from 1970 onwards, such as the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), the Mano River Union (MRU), the Customs Union of Central African States (UDAC), and the African and Malagasy

Union (AMU), all in 1973. From 1975, a number of other regional bodies saw the light of day, such as ECOWAS, SADC, COMESA aimed at creating larger, more viable economies and markets.

The third step involved the transformation of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU), in 2000, at Durban, South Africa. This evolution, although considered utopian in certain international circles, became necessary as the OAU had become increasingly redundant given its principal goal had been the decolonization of the Continent, which was achieved with the independence of Namibia in 1990, the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1991, and the pathway to autonomy for South Sudan in 2011.

The fourth initiative was the creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in July 2001 in Lusaka, Zambia. In spite of a tentative start, this project - a fusion of the Millennium Partnership for African Recovery (MAP) and Project Omega - benefitted from the special interest shown by many big powers, being given a platform in Canada in June 2002 and becoming the subject of many global publications. However, despite the enthusiasm, NEPAD has been unable to achieve its objectives thanks to the financial crisis of 2008-2009 which brought down banks around the world and made it very hard to mobilise the money needed to get NEPAD's activities underway.

NEPAD is now the African Union's Development Agency (AUDA), its creation having been approved in July 2018 at the AU summit in Nouakchott, Mauritania. This decision was adopted at the January 2019 Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with a new set of objectives centred on:

- Human capital development (skills, youth, employment and empowerment of women)
- Industrialisation, Science, Technology & Innovation
- Regional Integration
- Trade and infrastructure (energy, water, ICT, and transport)
- Governance of natural resources
- Food security

The creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which was finalised in Kigali, Rwanda, on March 21, 2019, by African Heads of State is part of the several initiatives noted above.

The contribution made by this paper will take into account only those initiatives aimed at regional integration and free trade, as they represent the drivers and challenges of Africa today. Among these drivers, we could highlight increasing digitalisation of societies and economies; the link between global warming and a set of new risks (emerging diseases, such as Covid-19); emerging tensions between USA and China as a new element in global structures; the unclear role of new and emerging powers in global governance, stability, and conditions for global peace; and the structural challenges facing Africa in affirming its place in global geopolitics, in the light of current narratives referring to it as the 'new frontier', a peripheral player, and its dependence on others.

Taking into account these drivers, our analysis will be structured in three parts:

- assessing the current situation with regional integration in Africa;
- examining AfCFTA and the future of regional groupings in Africa;
- investigating the impact of Covid-19 on regional and continental bodies in Africa.

1. Regional Integration in Africa : The State of Play

1.1–Reasons for the creation of regional economic communities

In the face of globalisation, multilateralism and, since early 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic, African countries continue to be challenged by:

- fighting poverty by creating an economy that is diversified, dynamic, resilient and competitive;
- a lack of peace, security, and development;

- political governance, credit risks, legitimacy and acceptance of African States in a time of rapid change, not just by their own citizens but also by the rest of the world;
- the capacity and preparedness of African states in relation to new threats and systemic risks;
- the environmental challenges posed by climate change and its consequences for energy sovereignty (especially for those countries with oil and gas, coal, and uranium);
- increasing digitalisation of societies and economies as a result of the growing power of Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon (GAFA) which threaten the foundations and sovereign power of all states;
- the emergence of new diseases in the form of pandemics, of which Covid-19 is only a forerunner;
- and finally, how far States are able to keep their promise of political emancipation and socio-economic development, which lay at the heart of the struggle for independence.

These different issues, which also concern the international community, surpass the capacity and calibre of individual nation-states. In the case of Africa, which has suffered from Balkanisation, there is no appropriate geographical framework to effect the necessary controls to face these challenges that often stem from exogenous forces.

The Balkanisation, considered by the former Organisation for African Unity as "specific to Africa", has led to three types of problems which hamper development even today: many landlocked nations, long and badly defined borders, and the underdevelopment of basic infrastructure. Further, according to Samir Amin, development itself should primarily be self-centred, i.e. driven by domestic demand. The first objective of integration and creating a unified African market would be to allow African States to become more interdependent, while favouring bigger hubs able to satisfy local needs. Regional integration and the existence of a unified market will also allow the African continent to exercise better its areas of comparative advantage.

Therefore, we could say that the regional groupings and the creation of a free trade zone at the continental level aim to give a new impetus to economic development and also improve the continent's business environment. In the light of this, the construction of dynamic regional economic spaces which are able to function as a unified market become a pre-condition for sustainable development, given the broader historical, political and economic factors in play.

From a historical perspective, aside from Balkanisation, the continent's first leaders wished to transcend colonial barriers through a pan-African movement which would allow the restoration of what had been destroyed by colonisation. Indeed, looking back, the development and the emergence of big African empires had been founded on ecological advantage, and the complementarity of different zones according to climatic, cultural and economic attributes, like in the case of the Sudano-Sahel zone. These East-West horizontal zones were broken up by colonisation which introduced a north-south vertical zoning focused on supplying local resources to the global North. Thus, the boundaries of states today reflect these vertical zones.

Vertical zoning has long impacted the nature and structure of infrastructure across the Continent. Take the case of railway infrastructure, for instance, with rail networks often taking on a longitudinal form taking a route through lands rich with natural resources and heading for the sea. Likewise, electricity networks provide very limited coverage and leave most people without power. This vertical zoning has locked African countries into a North-South economy and limited intra-African trade.

Vertical zoning has triggered two consequences which, to this day, hamper the development of these countries: North-South contradictions and predatory economies. Few African countries have overcome these two weaknesses, which have resulted in violent civil wars pitting populations from northern areas against those from southern regions (the case of Ivory Coast, Sudan, Nigeria, Mali) leading to major migration of peoples into more peaceful zones, often in neighbouring countries. One of the main reasons for regional aggregation is to resolve these horizontal and vertical tensions in order to recreate the historical equilibrium which was destroyed by colonisation.

Without recreating this equilibrium, questions of economic development such as those raised when the first regional integrations were attempted, will never find adequate solutions. It is with the restoration of the historical equilibrium that we can put an end to the exploitative and rentier economies of Africa to offer them a platform for competitiveness founded on comparative advantage and more homogenous ecosystems.

Finally, it is from this equilibrium that political issues, such as strengthened linkages to face common challenges, can find adequate solutions, alongside the need for strong regional and continental solidarity to improve the role and presence of Africa in the world, change its negative image, and better face endemic diseases such as Coronavirus. These questions are fundamental and attest to the importance of regional economic communities (RECs), and the actions taken by the African Union so that Africa can express itself with one voice to the world and can fight misery and poverty more effectively.

1.2- Regional integration experiences in Africa

Africa has tried various forms of regional integration, in the ongoing quest for solidarity, trade promotion, and durable economic growth. The challenges of the RECs have been several: institutional, differing mandates, and rationale.

First, as though incapable of learning from Balkanisation, Africa today has the largest number of inter-governmental organisations. It counts around a hundred such bodies, which can be grouped into three categories according to their mandates and activities:

- Regional integration institutions (ECOWAS, ECCAS, IGAD, COMESA, SADC, etc.);
- Institutions for development and regional cooperation (CILSS, ADRAO, etc.);
- Institutions for managing a shared resource (OMVS, OMVG, Liptako-Gourma Authority, Lake Chad Basin Commission, Organisation for Management and Development of Kagera River Basin).

These differing mandates are a handicap for decision-makers who seek a certain rationale. Going by the declared mandates of the majority of these regional organisations, there are only 14 bodies which can be considered as true regional integration organisations. These 14 structures were established in three principal steps.

Au départ, était la Communauté économique de l'Afrique de l'Est créée vers 1967 entre le Kenya, la Tanzanie et l'Ouganda. Elle a été dissoute avec les indépendances de ces pays en raison des divergences politiques. Sur les ruines de la CEEAC, est née plus tard la Communauté d'Afrique de l'Est (EAC). Après cette première expérience, furent créées en 1973, la Communauté Economique d'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEAO), l'Union Douanière des Etats d'Afrique Centrale (UDEAC) et l'Union Africaine et Malgache (UAM).

The first attempts at Union between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda were made soon after independence, but did not succeed, due to their divergent politics. A looser arrangement in the form of the East African Community was born (EAC) in 1973, followed by the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Customs Union of Central African States, and the African and Malagasy Union.

Over time, five other such regional institutions were established between 1975 and 1996: the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The number of regional experiences grew further to 14 with the establishment of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).

The geographical distribution of these 14 regional economic communities are as follows:

- East Africa and the Horn: COMESA which brings together 24 countries from Kenya to Eritrea, EAC which is composed of 6 countries, and IGAD with its 8 member countries.
- Southern Africa: the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). The former has 16 members and the latter 6.

- Central Africa: we have ECCAS with 11 members; Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) with 6 members; and the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL) with 3 members.
- West Africa: the Mano River Union with 4 members, ECOWAS with 15, and the West Africa Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) with 8.
- North Africa: the Arab Maghreb Union which brings together Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya. In addition to the above, there is also the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) which counts 23 member countries.

Table 1: The 8 RECs recognised by the African Union

REC	Date of Establishment	Headquarters	Member states	Population	Total GDP	GDP per pp	Objectives	Results	Weaknesses
ECOWAS	28/05/1975	Abuja (Nigeria)	15	397 mn (2020)	$687 bn	$ 1730	- Promotion of economic cooperation and integration - Economic and monetary union	Free movement of persons and goods	- Monetary deadlocks - Threats from jihadist groups - Monetary blockages
CEEAC	18/10/1983	Libreville (Gabon)	11	186 mn	$255 bn	$1371	Common market for Central African Countries	Multinational force of Central Africa	Asymmetric powers fo Heads of States Lack of leadership
CEN-SAD	4/02/1998	Tripoli Libya, provisionally transferred to N'Djamena (Chad)	23	-	-	-	Economic Union Recognition of the same rights, advantages and obligations of all member countries, free circulation of persons and goods	-	Xenophobia by Libya towards people from other member countries Lack of a Libyan government
COMESA	12/1994	Lusaka Zambia	21	544 mn	$769 bn	$1413	Customs union amongst member states	Higher volumes of intra-community business	Monetary difficulties
EAC	07/07/2000	Arusha Tanzania	6	177 mn	$193 bn	$1090	East Africa N economic community Creation of a common currency	Increased regio nal trade	Certain landlocked countries Problems of governance Large economic differences between member countries
IGAD	21/03/1996	Djibouti	8	289 mn	$286 bn	$990	Free trade zone Economic cooperation Fighting drought Better environmental management Food security	Mechanism to prevent and resolve conflict Peacekeeping Force (IGASOM) East African Intervention Brigade	Insecurity in Somalia Threat from armed groups in Somalia Challenges of landlocked South Sudan
SADC	17/08/1992	Gaborone (Botswana)	16	345 mn	$ 721bn	$2089	Common regional market	Organisation for political, defence and security cooperation	Influence of South Africa and Angola too great in the institution's operations.
UMA	17/02/1989	Rabat (Maroc)	5	103 mn	$521 bn	$5,058	Promoting economic cooperation	None	Conflict in the Western Sahara Too great divergence in political systems

Within each of these RECs there are four principal purposes: political, economic, dealing with natural disasters, and addressing discrimination. These differing purposes are an obstacle in the sense that the member states of these organisations argue that the differing mandates not only justify the existence of each body, despite their overlapping geographies, but also their participation as members in each of these organisations.

Despite this, the African Union took steps at the Banjul Summit in the Gambia, in September 2006, to rationalize these organisations by designating 8 of them as "strategic regional bodies" with which the AU would engage. The following table presents the characteristics of these 8 RECs.

NEPAD, at the beginning, had not chosen more than five RECs to help achieve its objectives. The UN Economic Commission for Africa considers that these five are the most relevant to overcome ongoing issues of overlapping mandates. These reminders showcase the challenges of regional integration through the lens of promoting intra-African trade and economic growth

However, those at the helm of these institutions say that the concept of rationalisation is nothing but an excuse, and the fundamental problem lies elsewhere. It is the non-integration of the different platforms, and the lack of faith in RECs among the different countries, notwithstanding their weak economic performance. It is these aspects that obstruct efficient functioning of the RECs. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of RECs across the world attests to the multiplicity of regional platforms, especially in Latin America, where we can count dozens of such regional institutions.

The challenges for regional economic communities, intra-African trade and economic growth on the continent, come in many forms, from the objectives of the RECs themselves to the future perspectives of these RECs. In order to respond to these different challenges and the hidden drivers of RECs (political, economic, and racial bias), AfCFTA's creation in March 2019 offers an honourable way forward.

1.3 Declared objectives and achievements of regional integration in Africa

Declared objectives

These objectives are numerous and vary according to the institutions. However, we can group them according to historical, political, economic, and social factors. Historically, regional integration concerns were always justified as a response to the Balkanisation of Africa and the need for Pan-Africanism, as fostered by the Fathers of African Independence. These RECs were also intended to re-establish the historical equilibrium which was destroyed by colonisation.

Politically, RECs should support the strengthening of linkages between countries to face common challenges stemming from decolonisation, apartheid, environmental challenges, political crises, and economic management. It brings the Continent a certain strength better to negotiate its interests in the world, counter environmental degradation, and fight the spread of endemic diseases.

In terms of economic strategy, experiences with regional integration support more effective responses to market challenges often resulting from the exploitative and rentier nature of their economies. RECs can also support the much-needed macro-economic reforms in response to globalisation and market liberalisation; and encourage better inter-connections between countries, the creation of a conducive business environment for the promotion of the private sector, and address difficulties in the availability of factors of production. Socially, regional integration should favour better and more demanding training of the young, through higher enrolment in schools and universities. They should also offer a better platform for women by addressing the question of gender equality.

b. Gains from Regional Integration

These gains are important, varying according to each economic community and their respective mandates, which differ little from zone to zone. Some of these achievements relate to the initial objectives of these bodies, while many of the most significant gains are cross-cutting.

Facilitation of Trade : Trade and associated policy reforms remain the most important concern for RECs. Actions undertaken cover domains such as legal barriers, border restrictions, improvement of service infrastructure, and a strengthening of customs controls at many border posts. Despite these efforts, trade within these regional zones does not exceed 16 % of the total volume of global trade for Africa. Across all these institutions, this low trade volume demonstrates the limits to trade promotion achieved so far.
A closer look at these trade flows shows the predominance of strong economies, such as South Africa, Egypt, and Kenya These three economies alone account for more than 42% of the trade among COMESA members, of which 60% is within the EAC. Egypt, Rwanda and Burundi are the main actors. South Africa holds the same prominence within SADC, given its trade with countries such as Mauritius, Tanzania, Mozambique and Botswana. Overall, it is the strong or landlocked economies which contribute to the higher volumes of trade within RECs.

Promotion of the Private Sector: This has come about through the organisation of different actor groups working with a dedicated unit housed in the secretariat of the RECs.

- At ECOWAS, the private sector department collaborates with the Federation of West African Employers' Association which has its headquarters in Conakry, Guinea. The Federation is closely involved in the elaboration of ECOWAS documents on improving the conditions to make trade in goods flow more freely along the main transport routes, as well as lifting of non-tariff barriers. The Federation also supports ECOWAS in getting to know the challenges of the West African private sector. It actively participated in the EU economic partnership negotiations.

- At EAC, based in Arusha, Tanzania, the *East African Business Council (EABC)* was created in 1997 to support the promotion of the private sector in East Africa. EABC worked actively with the EAC on various negotiations with the EU. It also holds talks with the EAC on conditions for creating a customs union among member countries. It advises on tariffs for such a customs union and brings together the different actors to discuss these tariffs before adoption. It also serves as a means to exchange information between private business and regional institutions.

- At COMESA in Lusaka, Zambia, *The Federation of National Associations of Women in Business (FEMCOM)* has a principal role in supporting COMESA take account of the interests of the private sector in COMESA's activities regarding trade promotion, improvement of basic infrastructure, and education against the spread of AIDS and Coronavirus.

Co-operation regarding Infrastructure: Infrastructure co-operation is a major activity of the RECs and cuts across many dimensions. However, given the scope of activities that come under this heading, here we only take two issues into account:

- Physical improvement of existing equipment;
- Management of this infrastructure to facilitate trade and border controls.

All RECs work actively on transport infrastructure and the different networks of road, rail and air transport, and on issues of energy and telecommunications. On roads, the main programmes work on corridor routes of importance to trade, and integration of economies in order to strengthen regional connectivity and access to markets, which remain the main goals of these RECs.

With respect to energy, the main activity is electricity interconnectivity to better serve deficit countries from places with surplus power, such as the DRC, Zambia, and Tanzania. Only ECOWAS so far has managed to transport gas from the Niger Delta via the West African Pipeline Company (WAPCO) to generate electricity in countries such as Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo.

The last aspect of infrastructure concerns telecommunications, where on the one hand the activities promote local/national establishment of telephone lines, and modernization of these lines through use of fibre optics, and on the other hand strengthening mobile connectivity by moving towards a system of regional roaming which would enable communication between countries at harmonised rates. This aspect constitutes an important element to facilitate trade and economic competitiveness, notably through stable rates.

These different activities with respect to trade facilitation, promotion of the private sector, and co-operation on infrastructure, attest to the importance of the "softer" aspects of integration. It is among these softer aspects analysed in feasibility studies and institutional reforms that we see the most significant gains for most RECs.

On the « hard » factors, such as the physical efficacy of equipment and ongoing reforms, there have been fewer gains due to lack of funds, and the difficulty for most RECs to get involved directly in these reforms, which remain the responsibility of member states. This poses the question of how best to balance solidarity (integration) and sovereignty (predominance of national drivers). The principle of subsidiarity should ideally be able to find the solution to this issue.

Protection against natural disasters and large-scale epidemics: These are becoming increasingly important activities for the RECs due to the threat of drought for many countries facing a cereal shortfall and, on the other hand, the emergence of epidemic diseases such as AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis, and today, Coronavirus. All RECs, therefore, have had to adopt new strategies to contain such calamities. These strategies include the elaboration of new agricultural policy measures emphasising control, greater support to and capacity building of producers of basic food crops, such as roots, tubers, maize, rice and wheat. RECs also need to reconsider grain reserves, and better management of these stocks as is currently practiced by Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. These actions also include extensive information campaigns on fighting epidemics, particularly Coronavirus. The RECs have mobilised resources to keep vulnerable populations safe and are working towards increasing food security stock to overcome food shortages stemming from lockdowns in certain countries due to Coronavirus. For example, ECOWAS spent 2.5 million Euros to improve food security stocks by buying rice and maize to the benefit of those countries particularly affected, such as Nigeria, and those such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger that have been made more fragile by climate change and threat of jihadists.

Promoting peace and security: Across the Continent, socio-political crises have increased in these last few years due to deteriorating democratic governance in many countries, and resulting in socio-political instability which is becoming a threat to peace and security, which are the corner-stone of sustainable development.

Conscious of the social fragility triggered by such crises, as is the case in Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, most RECs have started conflict mediation and resolution efforts. The search for peace and security has become essential even for institutions such as ECOWAS and IGAD, the latter having been specifically charged with addressing the socio-political challenges in the Horn of Africa.

All RECs affirm that this activity has now become a priority so as to establish a better basis for development, given the deep alterations and socio-political challenges of all types, which have also led to significant movement of populations.

The migration of peoples due to recurrent social and political crises has been used by governments as an argument to stall reforms relating to free movement of people, goods and services, which is an essential condition for successful economic integration. Almost all regional and continental institutions are preoccupied with conflict resolution and its different mechanisms for prevention and resolution.

While each structure has its own mechanism, ECOWAS appears to be a leader with its rigorous strategy for consolidation of peace and security in West Africa. Back in 1990, ECOWAS put forth a protocol for preventive mechanisms, conflict management, and maintenance of peace and security, which was signed in Lomé on December 10, the same year. ECOWAS is now contemplating a new legal authority for supra-nationality, in order to address challenges relating to integration of migrants and refugees in ECOWAS countries.

Better macro-economic management: This domain can be considered the raison d'être for many structures which have regional integration as their goal. It is embedded in numerous efforts from sectoral reforms to the realisation of certain economic projects. Of the many reforms that have been put forward to improve macro-economic management, a few merit particular mention:

- organisation of macroeconomic policies in relation to a multinational mechanism which seeks to coordinate monetary and budgetary management in member countries and associated reforms;
- concerted efforts to improve the functioning of markets, with harmonisation of customs duties, and the reduction of certain barriers to free movement of goods and persons;
- elaboration and implementation of sectoral policies which aim to lift supply constraints on markets for local production in terms of both quality and quantity;
- Combatting inflation and different forms of economic disequilibrium;
- the standardisation of norms for certain products and services, such as insurance.

Here, we can also consider sectoral reforms aimed at improving basic infrastructure, diversification of production in order to expand the economy, promotion of industry, strengthening human capital through investment in health and education, etc. The achievement of these sectoral reforms will not only determine the success of the various regional experiences in Africa but also support countries to launch regional and continental markets.

The objective of this macro-economic management is to create a framework that is stable enough to generate consistent economic growth. However, the lack of control over critical factors of production, such as inflated costs of energy and unstable prices of primary products, has not allowed most RECs to achieve satisfactory economic results. Further, even the economic growth that is supposed to stem from better macro-economic management tends to fluctuate depending on time-period and geography.

Harmonisation of monetary policies: All institutions, except for WAEMU and CEMAC which already operate with a single currency, have been working actively on establishing monetary union over recent years, especially to facilitate trade, which is often hampered by poor regulations. The RECs consider a unified currency as critical to integration. However, many experts are apprehensive, and consider the success of integration depends less on a unified currency and more on the easy convertibility of existing currencies.

Monetary policies driven by the RECs include various elements:

- seeking macro-economic convergence;
- currency convertibility;
- creating a mechanism for monetary change.

This monetary aspect is a delicate concern. The idea of monetary policy harmonisation is often sidelined due to a lack of political will, which is critical for creating a unified currency. Using Covid-19 as a pretext, ECOWAS's virtual summit of heads of states (58th Ordinary Session) has already postponed the creation of a unified currency to a 2025 deadline. Adding further to the questions of political credibility (which is key to monetary confidence) on the future of a unified currency, this new delay speaks volumes about the sensitive nature of this subject.

Another element that is important to highlight while discussing a unified currency concerns growing levels of national debt owed to emerging economies, especially China. On top of being a risk factor for monetary credibility and stability, these debt levels also hamper countries from effectively maintaining sufficient reserves to ensure monetary credibility. In view of these structural as well cyclical factors, it is understandable that monetary union has been pushed further down the agenda.

As can be observed, the gains made by the different regional institutions are significant and wide-ranging. However, the question remains as to their effectiveness in terms of sustainability and their impact on their respective regions. There appear to be several obstacles, for example, political governance, overlap of actions and mandates, and a heavy bureaucracy which is far from reality on the ground in their member countries.

Regardless of achievements to date, the RECs should frame a strategic plan which makes maximum use of the technologies of the future to achieve their various objectives and provide Africa with a greater chance of exercising its sovereignty, currently threatened by the stranglehold of multinational companies on African leaders. Such a strategic plan would help the RECs face external pressures from former colonial powers as well, as has been the case with UEOMA and France.

While discussing the achievements of the RECs, it is impossible to avoid highlighting the limited leadership of RECs versus the omnipresence of Heads of States. Without the kind of strong leadership that the EU exercises over its member states, regional integration in Africa can never achieve its purpose.

Finally, many RECs have a heavy administrative base. At the 58th Ordinary Session of ECOWAS, some Heads of State proposed deep institutional reforms; especially those that concerned the number of statutory posts within the organisation, such as Commissioners - at ECOWAS there 13 such posts, whereas at the AU, there are only 6 Commissioners. Such a large number of Commissioners brings major costs for the organisation. In future, the institution needs to reduce these costs to make it more efficient in terms of its functions.

1.4 An evaluation of experience

Since 2016, the gains from regional integration have been subject to critical analysis by the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank, and the African Union Commission in a report called *Africa Regional Integration Index*. The 2019 report evaluates the results of regional integration at two levels: the performance of the most significant regional institutions, and those carried out by member states, according to five criteria: production, trade, free movement of persons, macro-economic policies and infrastructure.

Integration through production.

The report evaluates participation by different countries in value chains and in regional contributions to production according to three criteria:

- the share of intra-regional exports in intermediary products;
- the share of intra-regional imports in intermediary products;
- an index which ranks each country according to levels of complementarity for trade in goods.

According to these three criteria, the report states that production is the weakest link in Africa's experience with regional integration. The average score of the Continent for production integration is not more than 0.201 out of 1, and 33 countries are at the lower end of the average. Therefore, it appears urgent for African countries to improve their productive capacity by coordinating better on trade and investment policies, such as through the promotion of expanded production by public and private sector actors. The structural adjustment reforms undertaken by the majority of African countries under the guidance of the World Bank and the African Development Bank offer a clear illustration of strengthening the links between the private and the public sector. These reforms pushed through spectacular advances in the banking, insurance, and mobile telecom sectors in Africa.

Integration through trade.

In spite of the reduction in trade tariff barriers, regional and continental trade continues to be impeded by non-tariff issues such as health standards, labelling, regulations regarding origin and standards, and of course, the lack of quality transport infrastructure. Four indicators were defined to measure trade integration:

- the share of intra-regional exports as a percentage of GDP;
- the share of intra-regional imports as a percentage of GDP;
- the share of intra-regional trade in total trade;

- average tariffs for intra-regional imports.

The average score of the Continent for trade integration is 0.383 out of 1, meaning Africa exhibits a moderate level of trade, and suffers from non-tariff barriers.

Integration from the perspective of free movement of persons

This is subject to visa policies, the relaxation of which is linked to an increase in business activity, investment and innovations. More relaxed visa policies can also support the promotion of local businesses, realise economies of scale, and create profitable value chains. Three indicators have been used to measure the degree of cooperation between countries and RECs with respect to free movement of persons:

- the number of countries offering visas on arrival;
- the number of countries requiring an entry visa;
- the number of countries which have ratified the Kigali Protocol on free movement of persons.

The countries have scored heterogeneously on free movement of persons, with an average score of 0.441 out of 1. Although this represents a higher average score than the two preceding categories, it reflects the barriers Africans still face in terms of travel.

Macro-economic integration

An assessment of such integration is based on convergence, stability of macro-economic policies and the degree of macroeconomic coherence between a country and its neighbours. This allows investors to calculate the value of and the potential for investment in a given country. We consider the following three indicators:

- the differential rate of inflation across the region;
- regional currency convertibility;
- the number of active bilateral investment agreements between countries.

Again, the average score is heterogenous with scores approaching 0.8 between closely-linked countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Mauritius while less linked countries such as Zambia, Angola and South Sudan scoring 0.3 or less.

Infrastructural integration

This is measured by the volume and importance of infrastructure investments that have been undertaken in a country. The more significant these investments, the more they boost economic growth. Economic growth is usually helped by an improvement in information and communications technologies. Two criteria have been chosen to measure the degree of regional integration when it comes to infrastructure:

- AfDB's development index of infrastructure comprises nine criteria, such as electricity, transport, information and communications technology, water & sanitation, cross-border service routes, cross-border electricity infrastructure, mobile roaming connectivity, etc.
- the proportion of intra-regional air transport connections, i.e., the number of intra-regional departures and arrivals in a country compared to the total volume of inter-regional flights.

The average score for this indicator is 0.220 out of 1, with several countries scoring close to 0. Only 11 African countries are moderately well-integrated at the regional level.

The 2019 report states that the level of integration even at the heart of the RECs as with the rest of the continent remains weak compared to the 2016 results with an average score of 0.327 out of 1. This weak result is further impacted by the Coronavirus, in spite of the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The following table presents the results of the different regional integration institutions based on the five criteria presented so far:

Table 2: **Index of Regional Integration in the 8 RECs recognised by the African Union**

REC	Production	Trade	Movement of persons	Macroeconomic aspects	Infrastructures	Synthesis
SADC	0.239	0.340	0.490	0.422	0.214	0.337
CEEAC	0.323	0.357	0.469	0.684	0.373	0.442
ECOWAS	0.220	0.438	0.733	0.469	0.298	0.425
IGAD	0.321	0.444	0.540	0.423	0.480	0.438
EAC	0.434	0.440	0.664	0.660	0.555	0.537
COMESA	0.328	0.445	0.385	0.365	0.317	0.367
CEN-SAD	0.256	0.377	0.508	0.441	0.302	0.377
UMA AMU	0.449	0.481	0.438	0.571	0.509	0.488

Source: Africa Regional Integration Index, 2019

According to the table above, it is clear that the East African Community is the most integrated structure with an average index of 0.537, followed by AMU (0.488), ECCAS (0.442) and ECOWAS (0.425), etc. SADC appears to be the least integrated with an index of 0.337. Based on the five criteria in the previous section, EAC continues to be one of the best performers in terms of movement of persons, with ECOWAS taking a huge lead not only in that criterion but also for macro-economic reforms and infrastructure. EAC, IGAD, ECCAS and AMU are lead scorers in terms of regional integration.

In terms of countries, the report marks across three categories: the highest performers, the moderates, and the least good performers. South Africa (0.625) leads as the most integrated country followed by Kenya (0.444), Rwanda (0.434), Mauritius (0.430), and Morocco (0.424) while Mali, the Gambia, Comores, Benin and Cape Verde are among the moderates. Burundi, Eritrea and South Sudan round out the weak performers. To support these countries in improving their integration and overcoming their landlocked status, improved air transport connections and better governance through strengthened respect for democratic institutions are necessary.

Overall, the index for integration in the Continent is not more than 0.327, implying that in spite of the multitude of regional experiences, proper regional integration remains a distant goal. This result is in direct contrast to the declared objectives of the various regional institutions and brings to light the massive efforts (means, resources, investments, reforms, etc.) that are still needed to bridge the gap between the current results and the expressed ambitions of these institutions.

In terms of individual criteria also, it is South Africa which leads in production - benefitting from an economy founded on agriculture and mining, followed by Nigeria, Angola, Tunisia, and Zambia. The Democratic Republic of Congo is preceded only by Lesotho and Ethiopia, as the least performing countries in the production sector. The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo is a paradox to say the least, given its endowment of diverse natural, hydro, and forestry resources, etc.

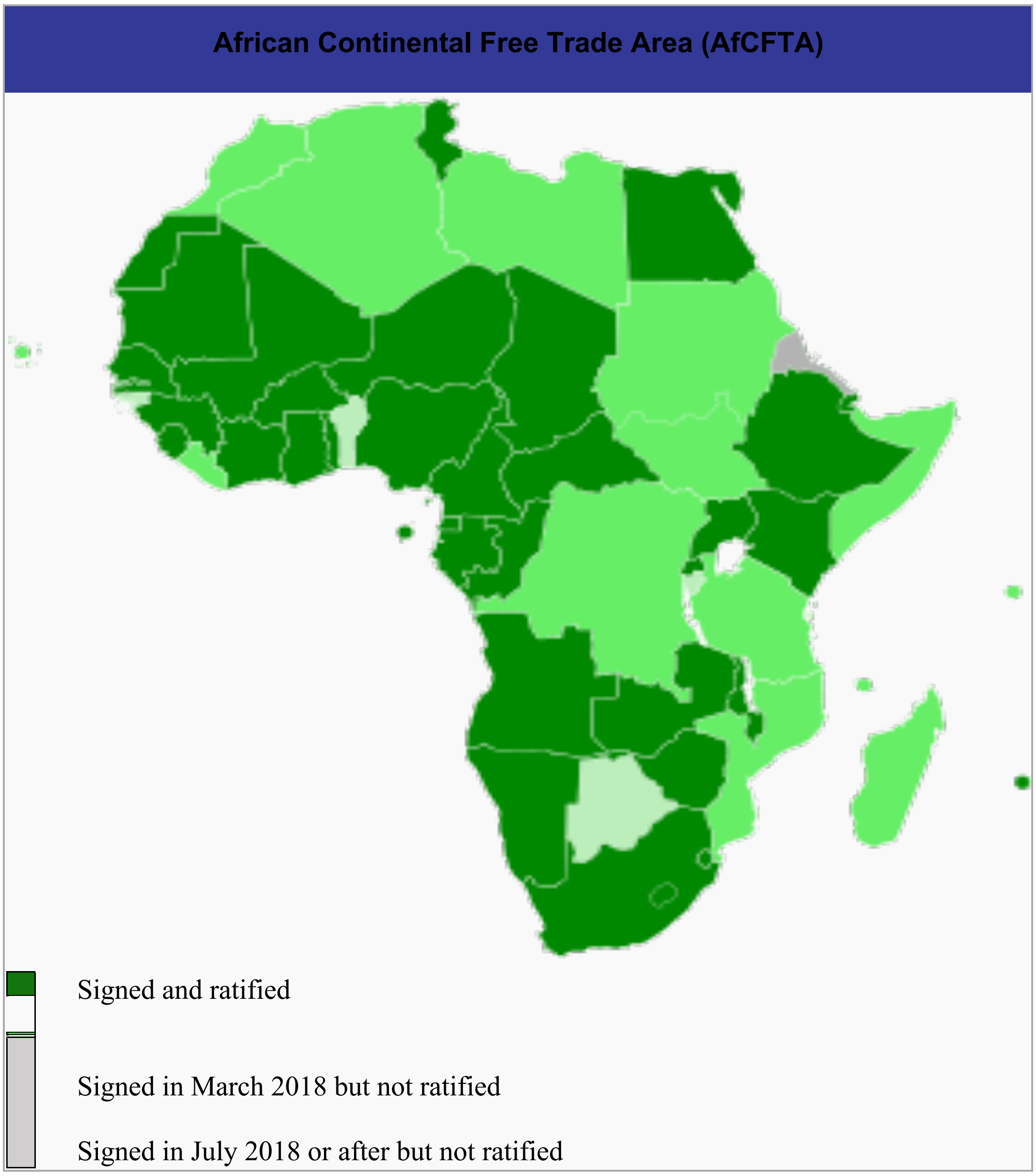
Eswatini leads the trade criteria, followed by Namibia, Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe, all from southern Africa. Somalia, South Sudan and Tunisia come in at the last ranks for this criterion. In terms of macroeconomic performance, Morocco, Mauritius, Egypt, Rwanda and Mali have achieved the best results while South Sudan and Angola round out the bottom ranks. For infrastructure, South Africa leads again, followed by Egypt, Seychelles, Tunisia and Morocco. South Sudan and Eritrea occupy the last positions. With respect to movement of persons, Somalia, Djibouti, Comores, Mauritania, and Mozambique lead the list while Libya and Eritrea are at the bottom.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the different regional integration experiences have resulted in a fragmented Continent compartmentalised into several competing regional blocs while the African Union is working towards continental governance, aimed unifying the Continent and helping it position itself better globally. The setting up of AfCFTA is essential to break open these regional siloes and improve the flow of people, goods and services across the whole of the African continent.

2. AfCFTA and the future of regional economic groupings

The AfCFTA was agreed in March 2019 in Kigali, Rwanda and brings together 55 African states, of which 36 have already ratified the treaty for its creation. The AfCFTA was expected to start work in July 2020. However, due to Coronavirus, it did not begin operations until the start of 2021. It is led by a Secretary General, South Africa's Wamkele Keabetswe Mene, with the Secretariat based in Accra, Ghana. The AfCFTA has a market reach of 1.4 billion consumers, making it the world's largest free trade area.

Figure 1: The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)



To analyse its activities, advantages, and weaknesses, AfCFTA will be presented from the seven following aspects

- the context of its creation;
- declared objectives;
- the steps to its set-up;
- expected results;
- its advantages and its weaknesses;
- the role of the major economies in its consolidation;
- the fear among smaller economies of becoming the dumping ground for others.

2.1-The context of its creation

The idea of a continent-wide government has been floating around the African Union for many years now. This idea is also backed by the negotiations for economic partnerships (APE) with the EU and the improvement of economic and trade relations with Asian countries, notably China through the China-Africa Forum, Japan through TICAD, and India by Team 9.

Whether it is to do with the idea of a continent-wide government or its external relations, Africa has always had to tackle its internal contradictions which pulls the Continent in different directions, three of which represent serious obstacles:

- the opposition between black and white Africa;
- the frequently difficult relationships between anglophone and francophone countries in Africa, due to their colonial heritage, which certain countries struggle to overcome;
- the superiority complex found amongst more advanced economies.

These obstacles have compromised the proper functioning of the AU and various RECs, even leading to the frequent lack of application of common accords. A unified currency for ECOWAS is an example here. However, the most serious consequence of these tensions is that the AU is 90% financed by international aid - proposed solutions such as contributions from import taxes such as in WAEMU and ECOWAS have never been adopted due to opposing views.

The push for AfCFTA in spite of such opposition, comes from the following:

- regional trade has been stagnating at around 16% of total trade in 2020 in spite of multiple regional initiatives;
- the excessive fragmentation of the Continent, illustrated by the RECs, also impedes the Continent from seeing the big picture regarding its economic and social development, in spite of possessing significant economic resources.

2.2 The Objectives of AfCFTA

Precedents for AfCFTA, aside from those mentioned earlier, stem from the failures of the Lagos Plan in 1980 and the Abuja Treaty a few years later, both of which tried to create the African Economic Community. These failures did not result in regional integration, due mainly to the extremely weak intra-African trade. Worse, 66% of African countries are still protectionist, despite their participation in several regional integration organisations. This figure illustrates the preference for sovereignty versus the necessity for regional integration; the strengthening of the latter would convert sovereignty into the supranational domain. This national-regional dynamic has been significant across the different regional integration experiences.

To overcome such obstacles, since 2012, AU has put in place a plan of action to increase intra-African trade to USD 35 billion per year, by boosting agricultural and industrial production. This plan aims at the same time to reduce international imports by USD 10 billion every year.

To achieve this, AfCFTA has the following objectives

- *create a single continental market for goods and services;*
- *promote the free movement of businessmen and investments while also accelerating the set-up of a continental customs union and an African customs union;*
- *favour African development thanks to better harmonisation and coordination among countries and liberalisation tools for trade and facilitation among RECs and throughout Africa in general*
- *resolve multiple memberships which overlap while accelerating regional and continental integration processes;*
- *improve the competitiveness of enterprises through economies of scale, access to continental markets, and a better redistribution of resources.*

Most of these objectives such as the second one, "*promote the free movement of businessmen and investments while also accelerating the set-up of a continental customs union and an African customs union" draw from those of the existing regional integration experiences*

Many African development concerns are absent from AfCFTA's rather diverse objectives; for example:

- harmonisation of the rules and regulations in the sectors of health, pharmacy, finance, and other social sectors related to drug trafficking and crime of all forms. These issues are seriously mixed up with development challenges. They call for reform and promotion of new educational values in Africa;
- the promotion of economies of scale and the establishment of norms to counter irregular practices in trade. The promotion of economies of scale should be based on specialisation of certain countries or zones depending on their comparative advantage, including technical and scientific competence of their human resources. The establishment of norms should gain inspiration from the rules of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO);
- harmonisation of fiscal regulations in order to create competitive conditions in the single continental market;
- political governance and that of enterprises in order to promote ethical values while reinforcing democratic practices and moral probity in the rules governing business competition.

2.3- Steps to Creating AfCFTA

The idea of creating AfCFTA was born in January 2012 during the 18th Ordinary Session of the African Union. The process of creation started in January 2015 in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the 25th Ordinary Session of the African Union. During this Session, the path to the creation was decided upon.

In February 2016, the first forums for negotiation took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The same year, another meeting took place in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to prepare the forum which should bring together all RECs, the UN, the AU, AfDB and the members of African Civil Society to take into account their points of view on the creation of this zone. In May 2016, the second AfCFTA forum took place in Addis Ababa to outline the organisation, and the forms of UN collaboration which could benefit Africa. And on March 21, 2019, 44 countries were signatories to the treaty creating AfCFTA during an AU Summit at Kigali in Rwanda. On April 29, 2019, the treaty was ratified by 22 countries which constitute the minimum number of countries required to ratify in order to adopt the creation of this zone.

On December 15, 2019, the majority of countries which had been reticent to sign the treaty had ratified the treaty, bringing the number up to 44 countries today. On February 10, 2020, South Africa's Wamkele Keabetswe Mene was elected the Secretary General of AfCFTA, and the secretariat is based in Accra, Ghana.

2.4- AfCFTA's expected results

Most of the literature on AfCFTA, particularly from the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa, and the African Union congratulate the setting up of the initiative and have positive opinions about its future. All the institutions affirm that AfCFTA will have many positive impacts on the Continent's development, of which the following are key priorities:

- increased economic growth;
- increase in general income and a reduction in poverty;
- a boom in African trade;
- growth in productive sectors and manufacturing;
- more effective functioning of the RECs due to better harmonisation of their activities.

The improvement in growth, according to the World Bank, will be based on the increase in incomes and salaries and a reduction in poverty induced by the impacts of such a zone on production and trade.

Regarding the revenues, the Bank estimates that AfCFTA could increase regional income by 7% or USD 450 million per year from now until 2035. This increase will be mainly due to the lifting of non-tariff barriers such as quotas, rules of origin, and also the measures on facilitation of trade, such as reduction of administrative formalities or the simplification of customs processes.

For countries and sectors, the gains in revenues are likely to vary. Ivory Coast leads with an expected gain of 13%, followed by Zimbabwe (12%), Kenya, Namibia, DRC, and Tanzania, with gains of more than 10%. The revenue gains would benefit almost all African countries. For example, Burkina-Faso will gain around 7.5%, Ghana 5,7%, and Nigeria 4.2%. However, there are certain countries where the predicted gains will not be more than 2%, such as in the case of Madagascar, Malawi, and Mozambique.

While increasing revenues, AfCFTA will also lift an expected 67.9 million out of poverty with at least USD 5.5 as income per day thanks to an improvement in the performance of the productive sector which would positively impact household incomes. Extreme poverty is predicted to fall by 12.2 million persons in West Africa, 9.1 million persons in Central Africa, 4.8 million persons in East Africa, and 3.9 persons in Southern Africa. The countries which are expected to be the biggest beneficiaries of a reduction in poverty would be in West Africa: Guinea-Bissau (12.2%), Togo (7.2%), Mali (7.6%), Sierra Leone (7.2%), Liberia (5.7 %), and Nigeria (5.4%).

In terms of the number of people expected to benefit from this reduction in poverty, Ethiopia leads with 8.2 million inhabitants, followed by Nigeria with 7 million inhabitants, Tanzania with 6.3 million inhabitants, Democratic Republic of Congo with 4.8 million inhabitants, Kenya with 4.4 million inhabitants, and Niger with 4.2 million inhabitants.

AfCFTA's third impact will be on African trade which would be considerably stimulated, particularly the manufacturing sector. Between setting up in 2021 and 2035, intra-African trade is expected to rise from 16% to 21%. Export volumes will increase by nearly 29%, with intra-continental exports climbing to a whopping 81% even though exports to non-African countries will not increase more than 19%. Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, and Tunisia are expected to profit from the big increase in intra-regional exports due to the dynamic nature of their SME sectors. AfCFTA is expected to impact the production sector, especially manufacturing activities, with a 62% rise in exports anticipated, of which 110% would be within the Continent and only 46% with the rest of the world.

in intra-African exports will not be more than 8% and only up to 2% with the rest of the world. It would be the same for agricultural exports with a gain of 49% for intra-African and 10% for trade with the rest of the world.

These trends are related to the reallocation of resources between different sectors. From now until 2035, the Continent's total production will surpass USD 212 billion. The processing sector is expected to see more than 2% annual growth even if this increase will not be more than 0.50% in agricultural production. From now until 2035, agricultural production exports such as cocoa, cotton, tea, coffee, banana, etc, will fall by up to USD8 billion per year.

However, it is on the functioning of the RECs that AfCFTA is expected to have most impact. It would bring about better organisation and a recentring of their objectives. Overcoming similarities, common characteristics, including membership overlaps, RECs will be required to cooperate together and harmonise their programmes. Regarding this, COMESA, EAC and SADC have already been asked to form a tripartite framework for cooperation which ensure their policies and programme activities are brought together. Over time, this cooperation is expected to result in a fusion between the different bodies, with the goal of accelerating the realisation of a single African economic community.

West Africa, periodic consultations between technical experts at ECOWAS and WAEMU are taking place to harmonise their programme activities and future complementarities between objectives and programmes. "In this respect, since 2014, there has been increased and dynamic cooperation between these two regional organisations. This dynamism is translated amongst others, through the signature of a protocol accord on coherence regarding their community norms, by the two institutions. The creation of a single unified market and free movement of persons and factors of production on a continental scale, along the aspirations of AfCTA, cannot be achieved without this harmonisation of objectives and programmes among RECs. What's expected of AfCFTA is quite ambitious, which simultaneously leads to high expectations but also some concerns.

2.5- Strengths and risks from the AfCFTA.

The creation of a unified market in Africa presents enormous challenges, not only because of the scale of the Continent, but also due to the prevalent context there: heterogeneity of RECs, strong Balkanisation, the shifting global dynamics with new threats (terrorism and insecurity, new pandemics, climate risks, etc.) and new opportunities (the rise of the digital economy has led to the emergence of new actors with influence far beyond their own countries).

Strengths

While speaking about AfCFTA's advantages, one cannot ignore the persistent structural developmental challenges of African countries such as Balkanisation. Africa, as a Continent, has the highest number of countries (55 in total), the populations and budgets of half these countries do not match even certain administrative regions of the OECD, leaving much room for improvement.

At the same time, the lifting of tariff and non-tariff barriers, harmonisation of customs policies, and the removal of entry visa requirements to facilitate movement of persons and goods represent enormous potential advantages. These measures aim to change borders from being obstacles to facilitators of growth, with the people who are currently cut off by these border restrictions expected to be the first such beneficiaries.

AfCFTA's creation is a major step towards achieving the AU's programme of promoting 'border countries', which are expected to become major pathways to continental integration. This move also confers a cultural role upon AfCFTA - a dimension without which trade cannot prosper. Indeed, consumer choices are driven by cultures and ways of life, from clothes to food to activities. The 'border countries', thus, will help bring together the people of a divided Africa, bruised by harsh border restrictions and colonisation.

Another advantage that AfCFTA offers is that of the opportunity to create a unique market around the enormous potential of natural resources as common assets for the Continent. This requires rational use of the resources, and refusal to give in to the exploitation currently practised by certain foreign countries in Africa. Therefore, it appears quite urgent for Africa to formulate a rational, responsible and sustainable plan for use of these resources in order to move away from current practices which mirror colonial exploitation, which, in turn, raise the question of a growth model formulated for and by Africa itself and which steps away from imitating growth models from the West.

However, it should be noted that, there cannot be a single market if the different actors cannot communicate with each other, leading to the role of AfCFTA in promoting the major African languages. Swahili, for instance, was born from trade relations between East Africa, the Great Lakes region, the Sultanate of Oman and the Indian Ocean between the 17th and the 19th centuries.

AfCFTA could also turn out to be an asset in managing the migration flows from Africa to the global North, which has become a serious issue of brain drain and loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea in the recent years. If AfCFTA were to favour free movement of persons across the Continent, this could support establishment of development hubs in pilot countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo which would, in turn, serve as hubs for human resources from all over the Continent. However, AfCFTA risks being another positive but disrupted initiative, historically brought down by the different problems in the Continent.

Weaknesses of AfCFTA

Since the fall of Pharaoh's Egypt, Africa's destiny has never been in its control, even during the building of great empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai in West Africa, Kanem Bornu in Lake Chad, Monopata in East Africa or the Zulu Empire in Southern Africa. All these empires were plundered for their resources by foreign powers.

This was followed by long periods of slavery across the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, by colonisation, and then neo-colonialism by multinationals with their subtle games. These together have increased insecurity through religious antagonisms (jihadism) and weakened democratic systems by mafia networks which have created predatory systems across the Continent today. In the face of such a tragic history, is it right to rejoice in AfCFTA at this stage, which even now is already threatened by the pandemic - a new source of insecurity for peace and development? Can this pandemic have even more devastating consequences than Malaria and AIDS? Current developments echo the adverse impact that the global financial crises in 2008-2009 had on NEPAD's launch.

Apart from the pandemic, there are also questions around the extreme dependence of certain African economies on customs revenues and the true political will of the leaders towards creating a unified market in the absence of leadership across the Continent. A unified market also requires massive investments, as hoped from NEPAD, to provide basic infrastructure on the Continent. Without connectivity and associated equipment, transport corridors, rail, roads, electricity, and air freight, is it possible to believe in the mirage of a unified African market?

While riding on the optimism shown by everyone about this initiative, it is easy to forget that this could easily become another instrument which renders the Continent more fragile, through the subtle games played by foreign multinationals.

In this regard, Jacques Berthelot, who considers AfCFTA to be suicidal madness, says, "Far from favouring regional integration in the Continent, this cannot but disintegrate the Continent further by opening the doors wider for multinational firms who are already widely present in the majority of the countries and who will concentrate their efforts in the most competitive countries and export towards other countries. We can already underline the near geopolitical impossibility of establishing common rules across this massive Continent which had 1.2 billion inhabitants in 2016 and is expected to have 2.5 billion in 2050, with differing political regimes, very weak transport infrastructure, with GDP per capita in 2015 ranging from USD 276 in Burundi to USD 15476 in Seychelles, USD 911 in Senegal, USD 1377 in Kenya, USD 1381 in Ghana, USD 1399 in Ivory Coast, USD 2460 in Nigeria, USD 3615 in Egypt, USD 3783 in Tunisia, and USD 5691 in South Africa. Instead of taking a leap forward based on unregulated free trade, reason demands we begin by reinforcing each REC for at least 20 years before expanding free trade to more RECs and then across the Continent. As Sheikh Tidiane Dieye, ENDA-CACID Director remarks, "frequently it's the countries themselves which refuse to apply the decisions which they have freely signed-up to."

2.6-The role of countries in consolidating AfCFTA

It is important to note the role of training hubs in the build-up of regional processes. Whether you consider the EU, ASEAN or NAFTA, their foundations have been built on the solid pillars of pilot countries which made significant sacrifices to establish strong regional institutions. Germany's role in EU is well known. ASEAN could never have been the dynamic unified market today without China or Japan. The US played a similar role in NAFTA.

In Africa, the free trade zone risks becoming a playground for foreign multinationals if big economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco and Kenya are unable to reinforce the single market with their impressive production capacities. The manufacturing capacities of these countries could really boost the unified market.

The report card from UNECA, the World Bank and the AfDB clearly highlights the countries capable of carrying AfCFTA to success. South Africa tops this list as the most regionally integrated country with its score of 0.625. South Africa is also the best performer in terms of infrastructure and production, and among the top 4 in trade integration. However, the lack of free movement of persons and its periodic bouts of xenophobia are in direct contrast with the principles of regional integration which are founded on acceptance and tolerance of others. This xenophobia is also a paradox given the very wide support received by the ANC from across the Continent in its fight against apartheid.

Nigeria occupies the second position on this list as an important contributor to the Continent's overall GDP, and its good score in production integration (0.525) despite weak scores in regional integration (0.292). However, Nigeria is currently in recession period, due in part to the continued disruptions caused by the Boko Haram rebels and the Delta populations, the impacts of Covid-19 and consequent closure of its land borders. If economic activity does not pick up soon, Nigeria cannot play its expected role in AfCFTA, despite its large, diversified economy.

Kenya takes the third position on this list as the second-most integrated country (0.444). Kenya has displayed remarkable results in integration across production, infrastructure, and free movement of persons, and can bring all these advantages into play so it takes on a pivotal role in the single market.

Morocco (0.430) and Mauritius (0.424) which take first and second positions in macro-economic integration, and have considerable regional infrastructure, follow Kenya on the list of countries that can help the single market be a success. Morocco already leads the Continent in the banking sector and has geopolitical ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa which it considers its strategic priority (the Mediterranean region and EU follow); Mauritius also has a considerable financial market and has positioned itself as the Indian Ocean's financial hub.

Egypt, as an important part of COMESA, Rwanda, thanks to its performance in free movement of persons, and Ivory Coast with strong growth in West African production, are other important countries for the success of the unified market. These 8 countries should be the pillars on which AfCFTA can build its success and are considered to be the major winners from this initiative due to their potential roles as hubs.

2.7- Countries likely to lose from AfCFTA

Amongst those countries likely to lose from AfCFTA are those which are poorly integrated at the regional level and that which depend for fiscal receipts on generating customs revenues. This particularly affects countries with an index score of less than 0.327, which is the average for the Continent.

At the bottom of the list, South Sudan with its score of 0.147, Eritrea with 0.161, Burundi with 0.203, and Sierra Leone with 0.222 could be among the major losers. In spite of their abundant natural resources - diamonds in Sierra Leone and petrol in South Sudan - these countries lack commitment to regional integration and a single market. Burundi and Eritrea, thanks to their political systems, are isolated from the rest of the world, but should make efforts to be part of AfCFTA so that they are not isolated from the Continent which could make them even more precarious and vulnerable.

AfCFTA appears to be a last chance initiative for Africa, following in the wake of NEPAD. In spite of the high expectations, care must be taken that its ambitions and plans for a single market are not disrupted due to the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, and the incoherence of African leaders as regards their commitments to regional integration.

Do African leaders have a free hand and room to manoeuvre with the big powers, such as the United States, European countries, China and Japan, from whom they seek funding not only for their elections but also, mortgage the future of their people? Do they have the support of their people (and the legitimacy it brings) when many have won power through rigged elections? Without concerning itself with these serious questions, AfCFTA risks becoming yet another instrument which threatens peace and development, such as tensions between the elites, the ruling classes and African people on the one hand, and the resource grabbing by foreign powers for continued exploitation of the Continent, on the other.

3. Covid-19's impact on regional and continental structures in Africa

While the coronavirus pandemic continues to ravage the world, at this stage Africa appears to be less affected. Nevertheless, they have been preparing for the worst with the second wave and the emergence of new strains of virus in South Africa. Apart from South Africa and Nigeria, lockdowns have not been used elsewhere as the main solution, with a focus on other measures such as restricting both short and long-distance movement, prohibition of large religious gatherings, making it a norm to wear masks, etc.

Nevertheless, the scale of impact which this disease is having is felt most of all by the main economic activities such as trade, basic production systems, and the growing scarcity of investment, of all sorts, due to short-term uncertainties. The pandemic's impact has hit regional integration and AfCFTA too, due to the lockdowns and movement restrictions. New waves of the pandemic will further worsen the restrictions on movement of persons and goods.

Indeed, without the free movement of persons and goods, regional integration will not work well and AfCFTA's beginnings are at risk of being compromised. Originally planned for July 2020, AfCFTA's activities finally kicked off on January 1st 2021, and many uncertainties remain on the horizon.

For further analysis of the consequences of the coronavirus on regional and continental concerns, we focus here on:

- the effects of Covid-19 in Africa;
- its impact on society and economy;
- lockdowns as an obstacle to integration objectives and AfCFTA;
- and finally, the paradigm shift that the pandemic has brought for Africa, not just with respect to integration but also regarding its global positioning.

3.1 Effects of Covid-19[1]

Africa is the continent least affected by the pandemic. As of June 12, 2020, Africa had recorded only 155,800 cases and 3,700 deaths across 52 countries. By the end of November 2021, the number of cases had increased greatly to 8,832,000 with around 224,000 deaths among this number. While each death is a tragedy, compared with other parts of the world, given the Continent's population of 1,380,000,000 inhabitants (16.7% of the global total), this tally is very low, coming in at only 3.3% of global cases, and 4.2% of global deaths. The more valuable statistic of deaths per million of the population stand at 162, in comparison with a global tally of 668. The number of COVID-19 cases worldwide is now around 266,775,000 and total deaths stand at 5,279,000.

In terms of total case numbers, the most affected countries are: the United States of America with 50,150,000 cases and 810,254 deaths, India with 34,650,000 cases and 473,750 deaths, and Brazil with 22,147,500 cases and 616,000 deaths. In Europe, the most affected are: France, with 7,930,000 cases of which 119,500 deaths, the UK, with 10,515,00 cases and 146,000 deaths, Italy with 5,118,500 cases and 134,287 deaths, and Spain with 5,203,000 cases and 88,000 deaths.

Within Africa, there is a strong regional disparity regarding the disease's impact. In West Africa, for example, according to ECOWAS, as of August 3, 2020, only 13,680 cases were recorded versus a total of 968,800 cases in Africa. By March 31, 2021, the evolution of the disease in this part of Africa had become relatively weak with only 318,000 cases overall. However, within the region, Nigeria (99,063 cases) and Ghana (55,438 cases) were particularly affected, due to the earlier arrival of many of their nationals from UK and US, both badly hit by the virus. In terms of deaths per million, however, Nigeria has a low rate of 14, in contrast to 38 deaths per million in Ghana, and 109 in Senegal.

However, even if countries in West Africa were relatively less damaged by the Coronavirus, it is not the same situation in other parts of Africa. By March 2021, most North African countries had been badly affected, with Morocco registering 494,756 cases et 7,240 deaths, followed by Egypt with 148,799 cases and 7,352 deaths, and Tunisia with 157,114 cases and 4,426 deaths. These rates have risen further so that by end November 2021, the total death rate in Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia had risen to 14,788, 20,770, and 25,400 respectively. In terms of deaths per million, Morocco stands at 394, Egypt at 198, while Tunisia at 2,118 has been hit as hard as many European nations. In East Africa, Ethiopia was the most affected with 372,334 cases by end of November 2021, and 6,804 deaths. However, in terms of deaths per million the rate is 57 for Ethiopia and 96 for its neighbour Kenya.

South Africa with more than 3,038,075 cases and 89,975 deaths is the African country most ravaged by the pandemic. This is equivalent to deaths per million of 1,490, a figure similar to Germany and Sweden. It has experienced a rapid rise in cases, and two new strains of the virus, the Beta and the Omicron

[1] All statistics for COVID-19 refer to data at the end of November 2021, unless otherwise noted.

variants. Even if the coronavirus situation in Africa is not as alarming as in the rest of the world, it is still evolving especially with the discovery of new strains. This is a concern for everyone, firstly due to the low detection rates, and secondly due to its major socio-economic impacts.

3.2 Socio-economic impact of the disease

Three regional integration institutions published exhaustive reports on the socio-economic impact of the disease: ECOWAS, WAEMU, and SADC. These reports show that Covid-19 has had an enormous impact on the functioning of these structures, and their capacity to promote further regional and continental integration. Such impacts are the consequence of measures taken to limit the spread of the disease; whether through lockdowns, travel restrictions, or closure of hospitality and other venues, these have all led to serious costs for society, governance and the economy.

Impact on society

The lockdown measures, restrictions on movement of persons between urban and rural areas, and prohibition of travel, despite limiting the spread of the virus, have ruptured relationships between town and countryside, within families, and in terms of visits to places of worship. Prohibition of travel weighs heavily on the circulation of goods, trading systems and cultural activity.

The lockdown measures have had a particularly harsh impact on the subsistence of informal sector workers and traders, especially in urban areas. In these crowded zones, people are not able to follow the recommended hygiene practices to prevent transmission. In addition to the social consequences, there are also those on education, health, social insecurity and the rupture of social and familial links. Schools, colleges, and universities were closed because of lockdowns. Distance education, which was recommended and put into practice in certain countries, often did not work well in rural areas due to lack of electricity, poor telephone and internet systems, and lack of qualified teachers able to work in this way. In the health sector, the emergence of Covid-19 revealed the limitations of the health infrastructure and poor training of health workers to address this emergency. Covid-19 provoked social insecurity in many forms, particularly food insecurity and the rupture of social and family links. Food insecurity is a result of the low agricultural productivity, the closure of markets, increasing prices for staple foods while household incomes have fallen. At the same time, many street-food outlets and snack-sellers had to shut. The damage to social and familial links has mainly been due to the breakdown in patterns of dependence and exchange between neighbours for food and household services, such as the support daughters giving to ageing parents.

Impact on the economy

Coronavirus has wreaked the most havoc on Africa's economy, with falling growth, rising inflation, decrease in household incomes, growing budget deficits, a fall in internal and external trade, declining migrant revenues, a collapse in foreign investment, etc.. All countries hit by the pandemic saw a fall in their economic growth, as seen in Table 3 below for the SADC region.

Table 3: **GDP growth rates for certain SADC countries**

N°	Country	2019*	Predicted growth rates for 2020 pre-COVID*	2020 Figures revised after COVID impacts
01	Lesotho	2.6	1.8	2.0
02	Madagascar	5.1	5.2	2.3
03	Malawi	5.0	5.2	2.2
04	Mozambique	1.8	5.7	-7.7
05	Zambia	2.0	2.4	-5.7
06	Zimbabwe	-12.8	4.5	-4.9
07	Sao-Tomé et Principe	4.0	4.5	-4.5

Source : Data from AfDB cited in SADC report, page 25

In ECOWAS countries, the situation is similar, as can be seen in Table 4. Economic growth was compromised by the multiple disruptions to work, the breakdown of supply chains, and disruptions to the supply of labour due to death and disease.

Table 4: Economic growth rates for certain ECOWAS countries

N°	Pays	2019	2020
01	Bénin	6.9	3.2
02	Burkina-Faso	5.7	2
03	Cape Verde	5.5	-5.5
04	Ivory Coast	6.9	3.6
05	The Gambia	6	2.5
06	Ghana	6.5	1.5
07	Guinea	5.6	2.2
08	Guinea Bissau	4.7	-1.6
09	Liberia	-2.3	-2.6
09	Mali	5.1	0.9
10	Niger	6.3	1
11	Nigeria	2.2	-5.4
12	Sénégal	5.3	1.1
13	Sierra-Léone	5.1	-2.3
14	Togo	5.3	1

Source : CEDEAO, Op Cit.

Inflation increased due both to the uncertainty in supply, and by some traders who increased prices in order to capture a bigger margin. In some regions, inflation is quite serious, such as in ECOWAS where it has risen from 9.9% to 12%, with some countries experiencing really high rates, such as Liberia with 20.5%, Nigeria 13.5%, the Gambia, Ghana, and Guinea where inflation went up from 6.5% in 2019 to more than 10% in 2020. By contrast, countries in the WAEMU zone have seen much lower levels of inflation at an average of 3%.

The decrease in incomes is mainly due to the lockdown measures which had a devastating impact on the subsistence earnings of workers, especially those in the informal sector who make up 60% of employment in most African countries. Traders and shopkeepers, particularly in urban zones, also had significant falls in revenues due to the low savings and lack of social security nets for their customers. This fall in incomes has been particularly marked in informal settlements.

Budget deficits have increased within all regional institutions, due to the needs created by the pandemic, such as the purchase and distribution of masks, new health equipment, such as oxygen cylinders, new hospital beds, and special protection equipment for health agents. In ECOWAS countries, this budget deficit now stands at 4.3% in Guinea-Conakry, for example, and 4.1% in Guinea-Bissau and Togo.

The fall in domestic and external trade is firstly due to the fall in production thanks to lockdown measures, death and disease. However, the lockdown measures taken by many other countries around the world have also had a very significant impact on trade. The consequences included a big fall in the price of primary commodities, particularly minerals, petrol, food products, cotton, and palm oil, etc. although commodity prices have since bounced back following the progressive global economic recovery

The fall in domestic as well as external demand due to the decrease in purchasing power and market uncertainty also had a negative impact on trade. At ECOWAS, total exports of member countries fell by 11.80% in March 2020 while they had been rising by 7.9% in March 2019. The fall has been even more pronounced in imports. In the third trimester of 2019, imports grew 14.8% and fell to less than 14% in the same period of 2020.

Migrant remittances, which had been a palliative to the irregularity of international aid, also suffered due to Covid-19. For all of ECOWAS in 2019, migrant remittances amounted to USD 37.7 billion which was close to 5% of the region's GDP. Lockdown measures brought this amount down to just USD 25.9 million in 2020, which corresponds to the lowest level in 10 years.

The reduction in investments is a consequence of the slowdown in economic activity around the world. In spite of the debt moratorium for poor countries, especially in Africa, the latter have suffered cruelly from the slowdown in investment, given their increased financial needs due to the pandemic, particularly the need to relaunch economic activity, and fund new equipment needs in the health sector, including vaccines.

3.3 Impacts on governance

Most African countries were already experiencing fragility before the arrival of Covid-19: inter-ethnic conflicts, inter-religious tensions aggravated in recent years by jihadist activity, border disputes, the weakening of democratic systems, etc. These situations of fragility have arisen in a complex political and institutional settings.

In the ECOWAS region, the World Bank estimates that seven countries are amongst the most fragile, affected as they are by conflicts and violence. Elsewhere, four others are classified as highly fragile socially and institutionally, including the two Sudans, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia. "The quality of governance in African countries is also reflected in the indicators for corruption and political stability. The majority of these countries have negative indicators for corruption control."

In the SADC region, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) classifies member countries in three categories: the good, the moderates and the bad. Mauritius, Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa rank as the good performers, with Malawi, Lesotho, Zambia, and Sao-Tomé et Principe as the moderate performers, and Angola, Madagascar, Eswatini, Mozambique and Zimbabwe rounding out the poor performers.

These difficulties in governance create a lack of coherence and efficiency in dealing with crises, such as Covid-19, which has revealed the weaknesses of African institutions. The lack of leadership in the face of the pandemic in certain countries resulted in a delayed and poses big questions about the future.

Overall, the different impacts from the pandemic on multiple socio-economic dimensions raise questions about the functions and effectiveness of regional institutions and the goal of continental integration, above all as AfCFTA starts to get underway. The decline in socio-economic conditions has pushed national governments and regional institutions to pursue a range of strategies in response to COVID-19, amongst which the most common are:

- establishing emergency funds for the health sector;
- creating centres for intensive care;
- disinfection of markets, shops, and public spaces;
- ensuring people adhere to social distancing measures;
- budget revisions due to falling tax receipts such as VAT;
- support measures for different sectors and businesses, especially those which have suffered most, by setting up special funds using state budgets and aid money;
- price support measures;
- food distribution to the poorest and most vulnerable households;
- financial measures to provide rapid support to SMEs;
- financial support for informal sector workers.

All these actions have been made possible with the support of international institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF. Within the ECOWAS region, low income countries have received USD 3.3 billion from the World Bank, the IMF has loaned substantial sums to many African nations, and the African Development Bank has provided USD 7 billion as part of its COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility (CFR)

Despite these many efforts to combat the impact of Covid-19, the greatest challenge for African governments and regional institutions is to be able to vaccinate the population against this disease. Current prices vary between USD 12 and 20 per dose. If Africa does not benefit from large-scale funds, it will not be possible to vaccinate all its people in good time. Scientific research in Africa remains weak, with the continent totally dependent on the large global pharmaceutical companies.

The first countries to launch vaccination campaigns have been the Seychelles, Egypt, Morocco and South Africa. These countries have been supplied by AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sputnik V, and Johnson & Johnson. The difficulty all countries face is the cost of vaccination and consequent reliance by many on the COVAX mechanism. A number of countries, like Ghana, Ivory Coast, DRC, and others have begun to benefit from COVAX. Recently, the USA has put forward USD 400 million to buy doses from

Johnson & Johnson for Africa. And, in the context of its economic partnerships, China has also made available many doses of its Sinopharm vaccine to African countries.

All the strategies put in place by the continent to gain access to vaccines remain hesitant and uncertain, provoking the WHO to raise the alarm about the highly unequal access and use of vaccines as a means to deal with the pandemic. Aside from the urgent need to gain access to Covid-19 vaccines, African countries continue to face difficulties keeping their head above water after many years of limited social and economic development. The road ahead remains long and strewn with many pitfalls.

Conclusion

Regional and continental integration in Africa raises multiple questions, but the following four merit a particular spotlight:

- impact of regional concerns on African societies;
- how far these regional groupings have really influenced development;
- the need to rethink the fundamentals of most African economies which are still based on primary production, with very limited processing of raw materials;
- support for equitable and inclusive development.

Until now, attention paid to regional and continental issues has come principally from African leaders themselves, rather than being a concern of the grassroots. Even though civil society organisations have been playing an increasingly important role in how these institutions function, they are usually considered as the “trade union” of Heads of State, which aim to protect a range of private interests. Due to this, the general African public lacks confidence and trust in these different regional and continental groupings, and most of them are not well-known to the general public. ECOWAS has openly declared that it will transition from being an “ECOWAS of Governments” to become an “ECOWAS of the People”. It appears therefore quite urgent for AfCFTA to change its vision in a radical way to be accepted by all actors of African society. Otherwise, it risks becoming yet another initiative, set up by African nations, without learning any of the lessons from previous experience.

A further observation from this study this study notes the lack of significant continental leadership. This absence of charismatic leaders is in marked contrast to previous leaders, such as Gamel Nasser in Egypt, King Hassan V of Morocco, Ghana’s Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, and more recently, Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Muammar Khadhafi in Libya. Without informed, charismatic leaders, the AfCFTA will lack the vision and authority to ensure its respect by African and the international community.

There is also the need to review the fundamentals of the African economy, which is currently far too centred on rentier activities, such as mining (South Africa, DRC, Angola, Nigeria, Botswana, etc.), agro-exports (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya, etc.), and services (Rwanda, Morocco, Mauritius). The manufacturing sector, for which AfCFTA is well-positioned, has yet to be built, and it will not happen by magic. To bring this about needs massive investment, new infrastructure, and a change of mindset within Africa’s private sector actors, who often turn to immediate income-generating sectors such as banking, insurance, telecommunications, and trade, rather than make the longer-term investments needed to construct an industrial base.

Finally, whatever form development takes as a result of AfCFTA, it should seek to avoid the accumulation of capital and profits through multinational companies. It should aim for a more equitable form of development which generates returns for everyone, and leaning towards the large number of small and medium enterprises which currently mobilise much of Africa’s private sector. This would showcase, globally, how Africa’s socio-economic development experience can be founded on the principles of equity and solidarity.

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