Book Review IV of Asymmetric Power Relations and International Trade Law: A Legal Analysis of Economic Partnerships Agreements

By:

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Asymmetric Power Relations and International Trade Law thoroughly examines the intricacies of international trade law and its impact on developing and underdeveloped countries. The author contends that colonialism underpins the trade disparities between developing and developed nations, asserting that multilateral trading frameworks such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) serve as tools for the exploitation of colonized and post-colonial countries in a parent-client dynamic.

The book analyses colonialism's historical context and its effects on African economic growth and trade practices. The author asserts that globalization is not a recent development in Africa; instead, it is a continuation of colonialism that promotes the exploitation of African resources through unequal trade

deals. The book critiques the European Union's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African nations, claiming they sustain the inherent imbalance between developed and developing countries. Additionally, the author outlines two main theories of free trade: Free Trade Conformists and Free Trade Revisionists.

The author strongly argues that while multilateralism expands economic opportunities for Africa, it simultaneously limits and diminishes policy autonomy on the continent. Instead of encouraging growth, it often leads to the exploitation of developing nations. She delves into the historical causes behind Africa's economic stagnation, associating it with colonialism and imperialism, echoing the views of Kwame Nkrumah. By examining the patron/client relationship, the author shares Nkrumah's vision and contemplates ways to reduce the trade gap between developed countries and Africa. She contends that achieving this aim will remain a distant aspiration unless Africa works together and emphasizes intra-African trade.

A major insight from this groundbreaking book is the need for African nations to review and renegotiate colonial-era trade agreements. While some colonial expeditions were unsuccessful, they left a lasting mark on Africa. Following Britain's abandonment of the slave trade and its attempts to suppress it, a new expedition was launched in 1841, establishing the Model Farm at Lokoja's confluence. Funded by the Quaker Society of London, the farm's land was ceded to Her Majesty, the Queen of England, in exchange for 700,000 cowries. Anja Ame Abokko represented the Attah of Igala during the signing of the treaty. Unfortunately, the project did not generate significant profits as Europeans faced challenges from malaria and the reluctance of laborers to participate. Despite these difficulties, British missionaries increased their activities in the region. Notably, the only treaty brought to the Berlin Conference of 1885 involved the Ata of Igala and Britain, which allocated lands for farming to be returned after a century. The colonial treaties, such as the ones mentioned above, disrupted the steady economic system that was ongoing before slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism.

The book offers insightful case studies on Ghana's and Nigeria's experiences with EPAs, carefully examining Ghana's swift decision to sign and Nigeria's hesitation. The author emphasizes both the challenges and the opportunities

these agreements create. Furthermore, the discussion includes the effects of Chinese investment and trading activities on African economic growth, pointing out that, despite aiding in the diversification of African exports and imports, such investments have drawn criticism for targeting projects that do not improve local community capabilities.

Interestingly, the author does not particularly frown at China's activities in Africa but calls for caution. ACET noted that Chinese investment primarily focuses on projects that do not contribute to the capacity building of local communities, as such activities have been described as a 'colonial agenda.' African nations should be vigilant when renegotiating or negotiating trade and investment agreements with China, focusing on local content and addressing partnership development gaps. Trade negotiation experts must be actively involved; otherwise, it could impede African economic growth. This involvement can be fostered through laws, policies, or agreements mandating that a significant portion of the workforce in Chinese-led projects comprises individuals from host communities and Indigenous populations. The trade disparity between Africa and China, as highlighted by the African Centre for Economic Transformation (ACET), can be alleviated if African nations negotiate for equipment production for Chinese projects to occur within Africa, particularly in host regions, thus facilitating technology transfer and skills development. By adopting this approach, African nations can lessen their dependence on foreign powers and establish fairer trade practices guided by more equitable values. Instructively, the author noted that the African continent can leverage the multipolarity resulting from its trade and investment engagement with China and other advanced countries and pace its policy to afford. For her, the Chinese approach is relatively different from that of traditional African trade partners or former colonialists.

The author further argues that colonialism persists through multilateral practices and must be countered by disrupting the continuity of the continuum. She advocates for African nations to engage in fairer trade among themselves via the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and to actively support initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The book sheds light on disparities in trade dynamics, underscoring opportunities for multipolarity, intra-African trade, and constructive relations with China, while providing crucial insights for fostering global peace and reducing poverty

across Africa. Ultimately, Asymmetric Power Relations and International Trade Law serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and those keen on understanding the complexities of international trade law and its effects on developing countries.

It encourages readers to rethink the assumptions and power dynamics that influence international trade law. This book is ideal for those interested in trade, law, and economic development in developing nations. Dr. Agbo-Ejeh's thought-provoking work echoes Walter Rodney's seminal piece, which argued that Europe strategically exploited Africa, as discussed by Dr. Agbo-Ejeh. Additionally, she addressed the asymmetry by claiming that Africa contributed to Europe's development as much as Europe contributed to Africa's lack of progress; however, Europe has offered preferential treatment to help Africa catch up. Nonetheless, the author contends that this preferential treatment has not significantly advanced the development of poorer countries, as it carries vestiges of colonialism.

The book provides a timely insight into the ongoing discussion surrounding international trade law and its impact on developing countries. It advocates for BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to balance power, creating new pathways for fair trade for historically marginalized nations within the multipolar economic context of multilateral agreements. The book encourages African countries to rethink colonial-era trade deals, promote local content and collaborations, and prioritize technology transfer and skill development, which are particularly important. As global challenges such as globalization, climate change, and economic inequality arise, this book offers a thorough perspective on how international trade law can exacerbate or alleviate these issues.

This book is essential for advancing equitable and sustainable trade practices that support countries, particularly those in Africa—focusing on African experiences and viewpoints that bring a distinctive and vital perspective to the global dialogue on international trade law. The expressed Afro-economic sentiment is particularly praiseworthy. Additionally, the book's exploration of the links between trade law, colonialism, and economic development provides a detailed and insightful understanding of the intricate relationships among these elements. The author's use of case studies and empirical data further enriches

the analysis and solidifies its credibility.

The author asserts that the conditions set by Western nations during trade negotiations and partnerships disadvantage Africa in achieving fair trade agreements. How did Europe accomplish this? Crafting trade deals that mainly favor its interests at Africa’s cost, while abandoning those agreements and commitments. In contrast, the United States adopts a markedly different approach to AGOA and its associated conditions for Africa. The author discusses the underdevelopment theory, highlighting the possibility of an economic revival in Africa. Crucially, the book is grounded in the essential elements of society, stressing how people uphold their livelihoods within the context of in-group and out-group dynamics- us versus them. Regrettably, the book's elitist framework often obscures its deeper significance, which appears aimed at an intellectual audience. However, it holds tremendous cultural relevance for Africans and individuals from the Global South, shaped by their collective experiences of colonial oppression that have left many in poverty. This reviewer also finds it notable that the book advocates that the continent, which consists of 54 countries and other developing nations, should focus on self-reliance and adopt multipolarity in its external economic relations rather than solely pursuing partnerships in Brussels. However, the author should have dedicated a chapter to the African Continental Free Trade Area, illustrated how African countries can trade among themselves, and break away from the colonial framework.

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