



Symposium: Assessing the First Years of Implementation of the AfCFTA: Challenges and Opportunities — The Geopolitics of Neo-Colonial Trade and the Necessity of an Effective AfCFTA

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November 19, 2025

I. Introduction:

Trade has long been an instrument for growth and development, namely among African traders who have sought to trade their way out of poverty in difficult and uncertain times. Furthermore, and beyond its material and financial benefits, trade has long been regarded as an instrument for the establishment of peace and the promotion of mutual benefits. While scholars

like Tandon (2015) provocatively argued that “Trade is War”, several others have contended otherwise. On one hand, Montesquieu’s theory of “*Doux Commerce*” associated trade with peace through mutual benefit, on the other, African and Global South thinkers such as Nkrumah (1965), Nyerere (1967), and Amin (1990) offered a more nuanced articulation to this view: trade is indeed a strong catalyst for peace and prosperity, but only when it is equitable, decolonized, and is enabling nations to go beyond structural dependencies and subjugation. Throughout history, for most of the Global South countries, trade liberalization was never an “opted for” choice, but a strategic request from the ex-colonial power to keep a grip on the market of the ex-colonies even after their independence.

The nostalgia towards the imperial setting is not only displayed in discourse and practice, but is fully institutionalized. Therefore, we can easily trace the persistent neo-colonial or “The New Imperialism” articulated through the articles of international trade institutions that have in a way taken advantage of Africa’s lack of agency and resilient social, economic and political institutions to be able to advocate for their interests. Hence, the current global instability and the shifting of alliances and power dynamics could be a chance to renegotiate unfair and asymmetric trade treaties with Western powers, most of which are inherited from the colonial era. But most importantly, it is a unique chance to rethink the opportunities within. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents the most ambitious attempt to unify the continent’s markets under a single framework, with the potential not only to expand intra-African trade but also to reposition Africa within the global economy. Can the AfCFTA break Africa’s cycle of dependency and reposition the continent in the global economy?

In this paper, we aim to offer an analysis of the impact of persistent colonial institutional practices on development in Africa, and the role of an African Continental Free Trade Area in articulating agency, creating shockproof economies, establishing continental trade corridors, building regional value chains, and finally asserting Africa’s position in the global economy.

II. Colonial Dismantling of Intra-African Trade

One of the many outcomes of the colonial era, and even before that, since the first European incursions of the African littoral, was the displacement of the historical trade routes. The establishment of the first European ports in West Africa marked the beginning of a new commercial axis, shifting away from the traditional trans-Saharan routes toward the Atlantic Ocean. This pivot toward the ocean led to the economic decline and marginalization of cities that had once been veritable beacons of prosperity.

Not only did these newly formed *comptoirs* shift the trade routes, suppressing what had been the principal non-violent channels of communication between the multiple groups and empires populating Africa at the time, but they also reduced the inland regions to mere extraction points, with resources transported to the ports for shipment toward European metropolises. This is one of the key reasons why intra-African relations remain deeply divided and poorly connected.

The popular notion held by the West, and even by a part of the continent's population, portrays Africa as the “Dark continent”, a place without civilization until European contact. Western historical accounts, as noted by Philip Curtin (1984), often picture Africa as a “stagnant continent” where commerce was initiated by outsiders. Yet, evidence shows that before the Portuguese and other European arrivals for the scramble of the continent, the existing trade was one of great complexity and was conducted by the people without external intervention (Staros, 1996; Ngwu et al., 2024). The trans-Saharan trade was a two-way exchange between sub-Saharan regions and the North African coast, and the East, South, and Central parts of Africa used the lakes and the Indian Ocean to interact with their Asian trade counterparts. Akrong (2019) notes that the establishment of trade routes in Africa, while contributing to commerce, settlement, and early state formation, simultaneously entrenched patterns of exploitation. These routes facilitated to some extent the penetration and domination of Africa by the European powers, who eventually used them for slave raid activities and raw materials collection to the trading ports for shipment from out of the continent.

In that sense, the article of Inikori (2002) emphasizes the idea that Africa was poised to industrialize from “within”, and that the disruption of the routes created fragmentation among local economies. This is clearly seen in Africa’s

intra-continental trade rate, the lowest in the world despite recent improvements (Arbouch & Pelkes, 2024). Many leaders voiced, as early as 1963, at the inaugural ceremony of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the ancestor of the African Union (AU), the urgent need to unite Africa through trade integration (Organization of African Unity, 1963). The first notable initiative in this regard is the creation of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), to facilitate regional economic integration between the members of individual regions and, more broadly, through the wider African Economic Community (AEC), which were established under the Abuja Treaty (1991). Yet, these regional groups are not, and should not be, an end in themselves, but the building blocks of a more ambitious vision: the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This latter is one of the Flagship Projects of Agenda 2063, Africa's development framework (African Union, 2018).

III. The Trap and Fallacy of the Neoliberal Free Trade Promise

Since the end of the Second World War, the aim to create a “rule-based order” pushed the international community to develop organizations and institutions that have two ambitious goals: to achieve a large membership extended to the totality of the states, and to be able to establish a platform for peaceful dispute resolution, fair trade operations, and global migration cooperation. The latter led to the establishment of the Bretton Woods conference, where the new world order's institutional, ideological, and moral principles were established, as well as the Bretton Woods system that aimed to create a stable exchange rate to facilitate trade operations (Williamson, 1985; Terborgh, 2003).

In this regard, and to be able to achieve smooth and facilitated global trade, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs was established under the guidance and initiative of the United States of America in 1947 (Terborgh, 2003). In the context of African nations, a few issues arise when we discuss the implications of this rule-based order on their autonomy and sovereignty. For most African countries, the fight for independence was far from over, and the establishment of their legal personalities as well as their economic and political sovereignty remained unfinished. Some other African nations, on the other hand, were still recovering from the colonial era and lacked the necessary agency, resources, and institutions to advocate for their positions and protect their interests.

Trade is one of the key aspects that the new world order tried to institutionalize and regulate between states. As we mentioned before, GATT was the very first contractual scheme created for that purpose. The GATT outlined 38 articles and was criticized later for lacking concrete regulatory frameworks or even a comprehensive charter that could potentially lead to better trade operations under its one overarching mantra: “Trade Liberalization and non-discrimination” (World Trade Organization, n.d.). Moreover, reading through the charter, a few elements suggest that it was custom-made for a few member states that already had the necessary mechanisms and potential to assert their agencies at the regional and international levels. Principles such as “reciprocity” and “trade liberalization” were far from attainable, namely at the level of freshly independent African states (Obida, n.d).

Although the GATT tried to address some discrepancies that arose at the moment of its instrumentalization through mechanisms such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), during the Uruguay round of 1994, a general understanding among member states regarding the importance of a new comprehensive and full fledged formal organization led to the establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995 (Latif, 2012). Besides having a more nuanced set of articles, and including services and intellectual property among its charter, the WTO also considered and included articles regarding dispute management (World Trade Organization, n.d, articles 3 - 22 of Annex 2). However, the articulation of a new framework to order trade operations did not promise a new chapter for African traders. Hence, the AfCFTA came as a response to calls for long-marginalized African traders, and presents a promising and potent framework for economic recovery, growth, and integration.

IV. Rising from the Ashes

Fundamentally, the AfCFTA is the world's largest free trade area, aiming to create a single continental market with a consumer base of about 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately US\$ 3.4 trillion (African Union, 2023). The AfCFTA’s first goal is to remove most tariffs between African countries (up to a 90% cut in tariffs), but the bigger challenge is tackling non-tariff barriers like import bans and border delays (ibid). The plan is to boost

cooperation on trade rules, aiming to form a customs union. Ultimately, its overarching goal is to raise the standard of living for Africans, as 30 million people will potentially be lifted out of extreme poverty as a result of the establishment of a successful and fully operational free trade area (ibid).

While the AfCFTA aims to reduce intra-African trade barriers, it also indirectly serves a defensive function in light of external trade pressures such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Much like the G77 allowed developing nations to collectively assert their interests within the UN system, a consolidated African trade bloc can give the continent stronger leverage in global trade negotiations. The creation of regional value chains is one of the cutting edges of the AfCFTA, as the creation of a single market with a clear, strong regulatory framework across 54 signatories will bring about productivity gains and an unprecedentedly efficient use of factors of production. At the same time, the recent isolationist and inward-looking policies adopted by multiple Western powers does not only represent a strategic win for their geopolitical rivals (mainly China), but also a historic opportunity for African economies. Yet, most African countries are still relying on exporting low-value goods, like raw materials or unprocessed food.

A quick move up the global value chain ladder, from extraction and assembling to manufacturing and innovating, is crucial to generate a virtuous cycle of development, especially as global demand grows for critical minerals, like rare earths, found in Africa. But capital is key, as is the development of human resources. Boosting total factor productivity (the efficiency with which inputs like labor and capital are turned into output) will depend on technology, training, and education (Mills et al., 2002). We know from past experiences, like Mexico's, that it is impossible to start a higher-value "mindfacturing" without first building solid manufacturing capabilities and investing in people (ibid). The former Ethiopian PM noted in 2016: *"We see China becoming expensive, but Africa being unready to take advantage, partly because the continent's labour costs are expensive"* (ibid). With the AfCFTA facilitating investment and the free movement of people and goods, this is Africa's moment to step into the space that China is gradually leaving behind, as rising labor costs and a shift toward high-tech, capital-intensive industries redefine its economic model.

V. Moving Forward

As was highlighted in this article, the African continent has been suffering from inequitable and exploitative trade organizations that build on structural and historical inequalities, and marginalize the continent in global debates related to trade and development (Krpec & Hodulak, 2019). Since the advent of the colonial enterprise, and due to the disruption of the continental industrial and production systems, the continent has been unable to escape the dependency trap. The AfCFTA represents a potent and transformative instrument, aligning with the principles and objectives of the Agenda 2063 on one hand, and allowing African traders to establish agency and potentially negotiate through collective statecraft with other Western partners.

However, as any project of the scale and magnitude of the AfCFTA would naturally entail, several challenges emerge, hindering its ambitious and transformative goals and objectives. Limited support for African Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), regional tensions such as RECs fragmentation, East Africa's 'Coalition of the Willing', ECOWAS withdrawals and Maghreb stalemates, create serious inherited unresolved conflicts that not only hinder the establishment and prosperity of the AfCFTA, but can have a negative spillover effect on other potential areas of continental cooperation. Other crucial and detrimental threats such as climate change and its uneven burden and gender inequalities undermine the efficient and equitable implementation of the AfCFTA, particularly its protocols regarding child labour, and trapping women in precarious informal and subsistence economies (Harary, 2018; Kasirye & Matshalanga, 2020; Ngom, 2023). The success and sustainability of the AfCFTA is contingent upon the overcoming of these critical structural and historical vulnerabilities.

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