Symposium: Assessing the First Years of Implementation of the AFCFTA: Challenges and Opportunities — Why is the Free Movement of People Important for a Successful African Free Trade Area?

By:

Elmazouni Zineb

December 03, 2025

Abstract:

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has the potential to grow beyond just reducing tariffs. Its success depends on the movement of people, not just goods. Africa needs to develop a shared continental identity, which can ultimately lead to a more integrated free trade area. The African Union

recognized this when it created the 2018 Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, which has experienced slower rates of adoption and ratification (Hirsch, 2021). The free movement of individuals is considered crucial for achieving the objectives of the AfCFTA and promoting regional integration (Lehlongwa, 2024). Lessons from other regional integration models, such as the European Union, may provide valuable insights into overcoming challenges and advancing the free movement agenda (Lehlongwa, 2024). These examples highlight that trust, cultural exchanges, and familiarity are crucial to a better integrated African free trade Area.

The **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** is widely regarded as the cornerstone of the African Union's economic integration agenda, rather than a mere "future aspiration." Its intellectual roots date back to the **Lagos Plan of Action (1980)** and the **Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (1991)**, both of which sketched the long-term goal of a continent-wide common market. Political momentum accelerated at the **18th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly in Addis Ababa (29–30 January 2012)**, where Decision 394(XVIII) instructed the Commission to fast-track a continental FTA. Formal negotiations were launched in **June 2015** and culminated in the signing of the AfCFTA Agreement and its annexed protocols in Kigali on **21 March 2018**. The treaty entered into force on 30 May 2019, after the required 22 instruments of ratification had been deposited (24 had been deposited by that date). Guided trade under the AfCFTA officially began on **1 January 2021**. As of **25 March 2025, 49 of the 54 signatory** states had ratified (Benin, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan have signed but not yet ratified), while **Eritrea** remains the only AU member that has not signed.

If today we are addressing issues such as regulatory challenges with a firm sole focus on the free movement of goods and services, the free movement of people is equally important: *"The principle of free movement of people across borders is one of the most important elements of regional integration. Free movement supports the creation of economic dynamism and assists in building a sense of regional or, in this case, continental identity among citizens. The European Union is an example. It reflects the political, social, and economic benefits that accrue when citizens can move freely across borders to conduct business, engage in educational pursuits, engage in tourism, and experience cultural activities. It is through such endeavors that a sense of European*

identity has been forged over the years." (Ishmael, 2020).

During the Member States and Regional Economic Communities Meeting, which took place from July 3 to 4, 2025, in Accra, Ghana, the Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs, and Social Development, His Excellency Amb. Amma A. Twum-Amoah said, "…**without the Free Movement of People, the Free Trade Agreement will not work**." After expressing his sadness over the "retrogressivity" of the Free Movement of Persons Project. He expressed that although the AfCFTA's core legal text primarily focuses on tariff liberalization, the 2018 Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons has yet to be ratified. One valid explanation would be that member states perceive the free movement of people as a threat. This is due to concerns that the opening of borders could exacerbate insecurity in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, strain public services, and accelerate the exodus of skilled labor. Comparative evidence suggests that Schengen's passport-free zone has increased intra-EU trade and labor mobility. However, African policymakers warn that these gains must be reconciled with the current security landscape and the disparate capacity of states.

Now, it is true that Africa's inconsistent infrastructure and fluctuating conflicts hinder commerce; however, economic and human mobility can mitigate violence. A century of scholarship, spanning from Richard Cobden's concept of **"commercial peace"** to contemporary capitalist-peace models, indicates that an increase in employment and cross-border revenues elevates the opportunity cost of rebellion. Tourism scholars expand this concept by examining the tourism-peace nexus, positing that an influx of visitors shifts local focus from conflict to service delivery; the post-2016 ecotourism development in Colombia's former war zone of Mestas serves as a contemporary example. One might say that "money is still the nerve of war"; however, in post-conflict environments, it can serve as a stabilizing force when livelihoods depend on maintaining open trade routes, whether by air, road, or sea.

So, how is that possible with a lack of genuine ratification and attention to the importance of unrestricted mobility? A focus on economic growth and development has followed years of effort to establish peace. What if we implement a bottom-up approach, ensuring that peace is extracted from economic growth? This requires allowing people to move freely. As Dr. Khabele Matlosa stated in the 2022 promotional series on the African Union Agenda

2063, dedicated to the Free Movement of People and the African Passport Project, “African trade area does not make sense without labor and businesspeople”.

As a PhD student in Political Science and Global Studies, focusing on how overlapping memberships in regional organizations or mechanisms affect conflict mediation in Africa, with Somalia as a case study, visiting Addis Ababa to conduct fieldwork was a strategic move. While traveling to Ethiopia, I realized that much of what I had read about the country’s history and culture was either incomplete or misleading. This highlights the importance of firsthand experience. Books and media can only provide a partial picture; a proper understanding comes from being there, seeing, feeling, and experiencing a place directly. That is why we need the Free Movement of Persons Project to come to life. Would you believe that Lusaka, Zambia, shares a similar vibe and climate with Marrakech, Morocco? Or that its markets, though influenced by British colonialism, resemble the bustling souks of North Africa? These similarities are not apparent until you visit.

The argument I am putting forward might sound controversial, as I believe it is challenging for us, Africans, to trust one another. Trust is the foundation of trade and familiarity is the basis of trust. Not being able to visit when I want simply because I cannot afford it, and even when I can, administrative procedures take forever. Truly, how familiar are we with each other? To what extent do we know about one another? This familiarity cannot be built solely on books and the media; experience, lived experience, is essential. For example, when Moroccans had the opportunity to go to Côte d'Ivoire for football, even their discourse changed. Now, when speaking of Africa—whether North, South, or East—you will hear more young people say “we,” as in Africans recognizing that we are all Africans belonging to the same continent. Yes, it is still growing, but it has changed.

The power of experience is enormous; its impact is long-term. I recall during my BA in International Management, we encountered the concept of “psychic distance,” a fascinating notion that summarizes how firms prefer markets with lower psychic distance. They explained that these markets felt more familiar due to their cultural closeness. In the case we are discussing, although physical distance is significant, since Africa is a vast continent, the fact that we are also

not very culturally familiar makes it seem as if we do not truly belong to the same continent, thereby increasing the psychic distance. If the projects for free movement of people are successful, physical distance would no longer matter, as we would become more familiar with each other. Indeed, familiarity should be nurtured through exchanges and shared lived experiences.

Finally, Free movement is not a luxury but a necessity for the success of the AfCFTA. By enabling Africans to travel freely, we can transform psychic distance into shared identity, creating a foundation for sustainable economic regional integration.

Bibliography

[1] Adesina, A. A., African Development Bank Group, International Air Transport Association, Naumann, E., & Afrika, J.-G. (2023). Africa Visa Openness Report 2023. In J. Petrela & P. K. Cointepas (Eds.), *Africa Visa Openness Report 2023.*

[2] African Business. (2022, June 23). *African Passport and Free Movement of Persons* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRv79wtCNWU

[3] *Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. (2018, March 21). Retrieved August 20, 2025, from https://ghalii.org/akn/aa-au/act/agreement/2018/african-continental-free-trade-area/eng%402018-03-21?utm

[4]Assembly, 10th Extraordinary Session. (2023). *LIST OF COUNTRIES WHICH HAVE SIGNED, RATIFIED/ACCEDED TO THE AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-sl-AGREEMENT_ESTABLISHING_THE_AFRICAN_CONTINENTAL_FREE_TRADE_AREA_0.pdf

[5] Hayford, N. A. (2025, April 28). “AfCFTA Records Progress with 23 Countries Gazetting Tariffs and Opening Borders for Trade.” *NORVANREPORTS.COM | Business News, Insurance, Taxation, Oil &Amp; Gas, Maritime News, Ghana, Africa, World.* https://norvanreports.com/afcfta-records-progress-with-23-countries-gazetting-tariffs-and-opening-borders-for-trade/

[6] Hirsch, A. (2021). The African Union’s Free Movement of Persons Protocol: Why has it faltered and how can its objectives be achieved? *South African*

Journal of International Affairs, 28(4), 497–517. https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2021.2007788

[7] Ishmael, L. (2020). AFRICA'S INTEGRATION not an option, but an imperative. In *POLICY PAPER*. Policy Center for the New South. https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PP%20-%2020-04%20%28Len%20Ishmael%29.pdf#page=7.34

[8] Lehlongwa, T. (2024a). A Continental Free Trade Area in the Absence of the Free Movement of People is Inconceivable. *South African Yearbook of International Law*. https://doi.org/10.25159/2521-2583/14821

[9] Melde, S., Anich, R., Crush, J., & Oucho, J. O. (2014). Introduction: The South–South Migration and Development Nexus. In *Global migration issues* (pp. 1–20). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9023-9_1

[10] Member States of the African Union. (2012). AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA. In *AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA*.

[11] Söderbaum, F. (2015). Early, Old, New and Comparative Regionalism: the scholarly development of the field. *SSRN Electronic Journal.* https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2687942

[12] *The African Continental Free Trade Area | African Union.* (n.d.-a). Retrieved July 23, 2025, from https://au.int/en/african-continental-free-trade-area?

[13] THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA SECRETARIAT. (2022). AFCFTA Rules of Origin Manual. In *THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA SECRETARIAT: Vol. 1.0*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/42397-doc-AfCFTA_RULES_OF_ORIGIN_MANUAL.pdf

[14] Twum-Amoah, A. A., AFRICAN UNION UNION AFRICAINE UNIÃO AFRICANA UMOJA WA AFRIKA UNIÓN AFRICANA, & AMB. PERPETUA DUFU, COORDINATING DIRECTOR AND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA. (2025). Opening remarks by H.E. Amb. Amma A. Twum-Amoah, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Member States and Regional Economic Communities Meeting, 3-4 July 2025: Accra, Ghana. In *Member States and Regional Economic Communities Meeting*.

https://au.int/sites/default/files/speeches/45063-sp-FMP_ACCRA_MEETING_-_STATEMENT.pdf

View online: Symposium: Assessing the First Years of Implementation of the AFCFTA: Challenges and Opportunities — Why is the Free Movement of People Important for a Successful African Free Trade Area?

Provided by Afronomicslaw