The African Continental Free Trade Area: Trade Liberalization & Social Protection

By:

Luwam Dirar

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The reader might sense an aura of skepticism in my writing about the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). This skepticism is not unfounded. For the past six decades African countries have signed and at times ratified integration agreements that have little or no consequential significance in the lives of African workers. This essay makes the case for a labor protocol. Historically, as I have argued elsewhere, African integration projects set out as anti-colonial emancipation movements. Through time this emancipation project went through a complex process of ideological and conceptual configuration. In this process of reconfiguration, the continental emancipatory project was set aside to make room for neoliberal policies that reduced public spending on education, and health among others. In light with these neoliberal policies, African integration also became more about trade liberalization and less about emancipation.

In this essay, I argue that the AfCFTA needs to rethink its relationship with the continental emancipatory movements. Its focus on economic integration without social-emancipatory movements undermines its central aim of creating "the Africa we want." Its top-down approach fails to capture labor movements in Africa. Additionally, by creating yet another integration organization in Africa despite the existence of several regional and continental integration projects it cashes organizational costs that could have been spent in creating a labor-friendly integration project. This essay, therefore, aims to propose an alternative understanding of the effects of regional integration beyond the economistic measures of trade liberalization. With a particular focus on labor protection, this essay will analyze the AfCFTA's failure to protect African workers. Classical economic argument treats labor movements as incompatible with regional integration. It assumes that regional integration has a net positive impact on the economy without actually accessing its impact on labor markets. Alternatively, it presumes that labor protection is inversely related to developmentalism. Consequently, economistic arguments for integration center around two prongs of thinking. The first thought appreciates regional integration in Africa as a pragmatic path to increase choice of products and lower prices for consumers. Indeed, the free flow of goods and services give consumers a choice of product and price. Unfortunately, however, this assumption consistently ignores the purchasing capabilities of consumers. Without protection, trade liberalization can have a negative impact on the domestic industry and the jobs that come out of them. The second thought creates a linear relationship between regional integration, foreign direct investment (FDI) and job creation.

The reality, however, is much more complex than portrayed by either of those thoughts. The aim here is not to discredit the value of economistic arguments in analyzing the relationship between labor and regional integration. On the contrary, the aim is to historicize the link between African integration efforts and labor protection. For instance, in the Southern African context, labor movements, were central to emancipation from colonial and racial oppression. Trade unions in Zambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania to name a few mobilized workers for the independence of their respective countries. And in post-apartheid Southern African states, this history of labor activism is acknowledged in regional commitments of the Southern African Development

Community (SADC). Nevertheless, SADC measures its integration milestones through a linear trade liberalization model despite its commitment for labor standards. In conclusion, contemporary African integration projects treat economic and social policies as complex mostly parallel relations. The question remains, however, whether the AfCFTA treats economic and social policies as parallel or mutually reinforcing. It seems to me that the AfCFTA promotes social protection parallel to trade liberalization. Under article 3(e) it aims to promote inclusive development. Reading article 3(e) in relation to article 4, however, makes one wonder if the formation of the AfCFTA is more of a shift from European Union (EU) integration style in Africa to a more World Trade Organization (WTO) style. The first with a functionalist aim – argues that economic integration will have a spill-over effect on social policies. As a result of the spill-over the EU today regulates non-economic and economic policies of member states through the European Court of Justice and European Court of Human Rights.

On the contrary, the WTO model argues that economic integration is an end in and of itself. Therefore, the aim is about creating fair trade rules between the contracting parties and less about social protection. It seems to me, therefore, by failing to include a comprehensive labor protocol the AfCFTA thinks of trade integration as an end in of itself despite its consequential impact on the African worker. One of the most significant features of the AfCFTA is its promotion of free movement of people. The protocol on the free movement, residence, right to own property for Africans is celebrated by many Africans who have experienced stringent visa requirements from fellow African states. Indeed, it is a great pleasure for Africans to tour and travel throughout Africa easily. However, how do we create policies of labor migration and at the same time create opportunities for locals? How do we create inclusive development at the national, regional, and continental level? The South African xenophobic attacks against unskilled migrant labor from Zimbabwe can serve as a cautionary tale for AfCFTA. Similarly, at the global context, for instance, supporters of Brexit consistently scapegoated free movement of European citizens to fuel right-wing movements. Xenophia and/or the rise of right-wing sentiments, although wrongly associated with migration, is the result of economic policies that failed to create inclusive and redistributive developments. The question, would then be how does the AfCFTA resolve current and or future tensions between migrant and local labor? Alternatively, how does the AfCFTA resolve the

inequalities that exist among African states? I will be engaging with these questions at length in 2019. In conclusion, the AfCFTA's success depends on its relevance in addressing the needs and wants of the ordinary African citizen. And it will be relevant for African thinkers, scholars, policy makers to question the centrality of labor movements and other protections in the continent's integration agenda.

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