



## Accelerating Progress Towards a Single African Market

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### Introduction

Africa is a continent of 1.2 billion people. Soon, around the year 2040, it will be home to over 2 billion people, with pressing economic needs. For the people and countries of Africa, trade policy is nothing abstract. It directly affects their welfare, the possibilities for economic growth, employment millions, and raises the hope of lifting millions from poverty.

On a continent of extremes of wealth and poverty, facing the dangers of conflict and exploitation, at the mercies of global trade, the policies promoted by the African Union are of fundamental importance. For Africa, issues of trade are not dry economics. How they are addressed will directly affect the welfare of all Africa's people, its future as a united continent, and the credibility of the African Union (AU). For the AU, there is no more important topic.

### Background: overcoming colonial legacies

One legacy of colonial rule in Africa was segmentation of territories to serve the interests of colonial rulers. Cooperation across borders was deliberately discouraged, sometimes legally blocked, in order to funnel trade and profits to Berlin, Lisbon, London or Paris.

Only in the 1960s, as colonial rule collapsed and the territories of Africa became independent states, was economic cooperation possible. But old habits and new rivalries continued to make cooperation difficult for decades. Many regional organizations were created, but none performed as hoped.

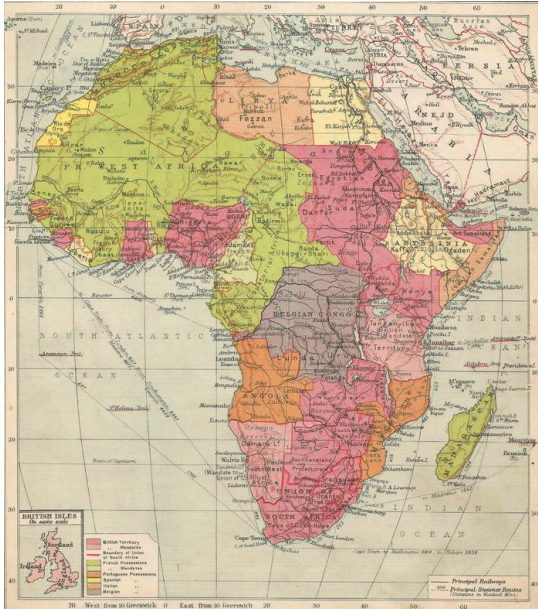


Figure 1: African Heads of State

<https://www.trtworld.com/africa/african-nations-sign-largest-free-trade-agreement-since-wto-16102>

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The colonial division of Africa in 1910.

Since 2000, the barriers to African regional trade—barriers of habit, rivalry and law—finally began to yield. A vision for a new trade order is unfolding in Africa, pioneering a distinct narrative for economic diversity and inclusion. Moving away from a post-independence era of trade exports directed outside the continent, the new economic era stimulates trade within the continental borders, and with the beaming promise comes the real responsibility for African Union Member States to implement and follow through with the goals of a single African market.

Established under the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva, the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** is set to become the largest free trade area by membership, bringing together 55 African economies.<sup>1</sup>

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was originally signed by 44 African

heads of state and government dignitaries at the 10th Ordinary session of African Union (AU) Heads of State Summit in Kigali, Rwanda on 21 March 2018.<sup>2</sup> Trade was officially operationalized on 1 January 2021 (Fig.1).

The development of a single African market could be a game changer for African economies. For the first time, African firms will find it cheaper and more profitable to trade with each other. The immediate benefits include a reduction in tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and the expansion of a continental framework for trade in both goods and services, connecting 1.3 billion people across countries with a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 3.4 trillion. Further, those targeted to benefit the most are the unskilled workers, small and medium enterprise (SME) owners, and women.<sup>3</sup>

As past failures showed, ensuring that pan-African trade lives up to its potential will not happen by accident. The legacy of centuries of colonial disruption and decades of post-independence mismanagement have to be overcome. Success is possible, but will require enormous effort, widespread changes in national trade policy, and systematic efforts to encourage cross-border cooperation. Nothing will happen by accident. Many specific interests, local industries and firms, often of great domestic political importance, will have to be given incentives to cooperate.

### Milestones toward economic cooperation

Economic cooperation is a topic that African leaders have long found it easier to talk about than act on. Everyone agrees on the principles, it seems, but no one actually does anything. With important local interests at stake, including vital

<sup>1</sup> (Apiko, Woolfrey and Byiers 2020, 1)

<sup>2</sup> (Asiedu 2018, 1)

<sup>3</sup> (Apiko, Woolfrey and Byiers 2020, 3)

ethnic or personal supporters, leaders tend to hesitate rather than endanger their supporters. They often see risks more than opportunities.

Progress toward a single African market began in July 1979, at the 33rd Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) - now AU - which was held in Liberia. It was at this Session that the Monrovia Strategy for Economic Development of Africa was adopted. This strategy marked an integral part of the African Development Strategy for the Third Development Decade because it called upon the OAU, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), regional institutions and appropriate international organizations to 'ensure the implementation of the recommendations of the Colloquium on Perspectives of Development and Economic Growth in Africa up to the year 2000.'<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2: Creating one African Market,  
<https://au.int/en>

To further push for a socially and economically self-reliant Africa, the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) was established in 1980, with an ambitious proposal for an African Common Market to be established by the year 2000, as a

consummation of earlier proposals targeting economic integration on a continent-wide basis. The aim of the LPA was to stimulate economic growth for individual African countries in the sectors of food and agriculture, industry, environment and energy.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, in June 1991, the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (Abuja Treaty) was adopted by the OAU. This treaty emphasized the strengthening of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa, the installment of customs union and trade liberalization, and the free movement of persons, with rights of residence and establishment.<sup>6</sup> Again at the 19<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the AU held in July 2012 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the Commission re-affirmed its commitment to deepen Africa's market integration through establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) by 2017. A decision was therefore made to boost Intra-African Trade and fast tracking the CFTA through development of trade-related infrastructure, productive capacity-building programmes, and enabling policy and legal framework by RECs and Member States.<sup>7</sup>

One of the goals of the AfCFTA by the AU was *'to coordinate and harmonize the policies between existing and future RECs for the gradual attainment of the goals of the Union.'*<sup>8</sup> Evidently, Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) have become a key component of trade policy for many countries around the world<sup>9</sup> in that they foster economic growth through implementation of best practices in trade and the transfer of ideas and technology.

According to the United Nations Office of the Special Advisor on Africa (UNOSAA), there are eight RECs in the continent. These are: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central

<sup>4</sup> (Organization of African Unity 1979, 2)

<sup>5</sup> (D'Sa 1983, 5)

<sup>6</sup> (Organization of African Unity 1991, 30-40)

<sup>7</sup> (African Union 2012, 20-21)

<sup>8</sup> (Wikipedia 2021)

<sup>9</sup> (Nguyen 2019, 236)

African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the South African Development Community (SADC).<sup>10</sup>

However, with the upsurge of RTAs within RECs in the continent, also comes the risk of duplicity of agreements serving similar functions, among the same trading partners. This was the case with the Tripartite Free Trade Agreement between EAC, COMESA, and SADC<sup>11</sup> established to create a multi-lateral environment which would build consensus on the core elements of treaty investments for the countries involved. The downside of this third-party inter-regional agreement was the potential to polarize positions which would in turn complicate the original purpose of the treaty.<sup>12</sup>

Much as Africa is ahead of the world in the number of RTAs, the gains from them are mixed.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the AfCFTA is timely in that it consolidates the trade and industrialization goals of all the RECs in the region, thereby creating a platform that capitalizes and catalyzes economic growth. The aim of this issue brief is to analyze how African States' behavior in their local groupings impacts on the AfCFTA. In giving higher preference to the AfCFTA protocol than to their local RECs, AU Member States will resolve the challenge of multiple and overlapping membership that act as barriers to accelerating progress towards a single African market.

Intra-African trade accounts for less than 16 per cent of the region's total trade, making Africa the least integrated continent. However, a fully operational single African market could boost intra-African trade by 60 per cent in an estimated period of just 3 years.<sup>14</sup>

### Current Situation

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a great challenge in the realization of AU's goals for a single African Market. As a result of the global crisis brought on, the start of trading for AU Member States was postponed by 6 months from July 1, 2020 to January 1, 2021.<sup>15</sup> Just as the world economy felt the disruptive impacts of the pandemic, so too was Sub-Saharan Africa set to experience economic growth reversal plunging to between -2.1 per cent to as low as -5.1 per cent, a shrinkage projected to cost the region between \$37 billion to \$79 billion in lost output in 2020, owing to diminishing output growth.<sup>16</sup>

Other setbacks included lockdowns and restricted movements to curb the spread of the virus. Particularly in South Africa, a National State of Disaster was declared, with the new policies limiting the size of public gatherings, imposing travel restrictions, suspending schools, ports of entry, and cancelling government events. This spiraled into job losses due to decline in demand and supply of many industries, impacts which spilled over into the macro economy.<sup>17</sup> These effects were felt across the region.

However, amidst pandemic-related challenges, African leaders' resilience was evidenced in the virtual launch of trade as per the agreement on January 1, 2021 (Fig. 3). Under these circumstances, the AfCFTA became Africa's stimulus package and the main post-COVID recovery mechanism, to revamp the economies of AU Member States. The success of this launch showed even greater commitment to the adoption and implementation of decisions for regional economic integration as a mutual strategy for development of the continent, in line with Global Agenda 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> (Asiedu 2018, 1-2)

<sup>11</sup> (Nagar and Malebang 2016, 22)

<sup>12</sup> (Naidu and Vickers 2014, 10-11)

<sup>13</sup> (Ngepah and Udeagha 2018, 1177)

<sup>14</sup> (Owusu 2020, 4)

<sup>15</sup> (Apiko, Woolfrey and Byiers 2020, 2)

<sup>16</sup> (Owusu 2020, 1)

<sup>17</sup> (Arndt, et al. 2020, 2)

<sup>18</sup> (Owusu 2020, 1)



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### Role of international organizations



Figure 3: Official Start of Trading under AfCFTA, <https://au.int/en>

The United Nations has been notably present in Africa since 1960, a year which saw 15 African countries gaining independence and 17 new States admitted to the United Nations, 16 of which were from Africa. This was also the year when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, esteeming the right to self-determination and decolonization. The UN has continued to work closely with Member States concerned and regional organizations, such as the AU and ECOWAS in peace keeping missions and crisis response.<sup>19</sup>

Particularly, the Economic Commission for Africa, headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia working under the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has helped to promote the development of its member States,

to foster intra-regional integration, and to promote international cooperation for Africa's development.<sup>20</sup> Further, the Trade and Development Board, one of the governing bodies of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) established under resolution A/RES/1995 (XIX) of December 1964 manages all planning, oversight and evaluation of UNCTAD programmes.<sup>21</sup>

#### *The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)*

At the 2021 session of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, a summary report of the work of the Economic Commission for Africa, E/2021/17, for the period July 23, 2020 to July 22, 2021, was transmitted by the Secretary General. Support by the Commission in the implementation of the AfCFTA alongside

<sup>19</sup> (Mindaoudou 2021)

<sup>20</sup> (United Nations 2021)

<sup>21</sup> (United Nations 2020)

private sector and infrastructure development was in the form of speeding up of ratification of the Agreement by African countries. With Zambia's most recent ratification, the Agreement has now been ratified by 36 Member States representing almost three-fourths of the continent's GDP. Notably, this support is what made possible the beginning of the operational implementation of the Agreement on January 1, 2021.<sup>22</sup>

Further, ECA has worked directly with countries in helping to formulate national strategies which purposely enable them to harness the full benefits of the Area through the identification of comparative and competitive advantages, through value addition, and through creation of trade and investment opportunities. The report highlights that Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Togo have begun implementing their strategies around trade integration, productive integration, free movement of people, macroeconomic integration, and infrastructural integration.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, a regional strategy is in place for the East African Community to support negotiations on investments, regional value chains, services, competition, movement of persons, the blue economy and tourism as affects the Trade Area. ECA also developed a public budgeting framework, mainstreaming demographic dynamics and building capacity for 15 ECOWAS States.<sup>24</sup>

### *The UN Trade and Development Board*

At the sixty-seventh session of the 2020 Trade and Development Board, several regional groups and some delegates highlighted that the COVID-19 crisis underscored the need to move forward on regional cooperation efforts of which the AfCFTA forms a part. Additionally, delegates called on UNCTAD to improve efforts in support of pandemic-related needs of emerging economies which include: *'supporting productive capacities for resilience, enhancing*

*regional food and agricultural food chains, mobilizing resources for health systems, mobilizing financing in form of concessional and development bank resources, attracting and recovering investment, securing debt relief, facilitating trade, promoting digital transformation, integrating value chains and addressing challenges in economic sectors.'*<sup>25</sup>

### *Limitations of the United Nations*

The United Nations is currently limited in what it can achieve in Africa partially due to hindrances from regional economic bloc participants. For instance, despite the decision by SADC to lift restrictions on trade, some countries are still enforcing tariffs against the agreement in place, and even worse some countries have been known to reinstate previously removed tariffs.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the enforcement of the Agreement at local level falls within the bounds of sovereignty, whereby States are the ultimate overseers or decision makers in their own affairs, a principle which the UN cannot override unless enforcing a Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

Secondly, political stability remains an issue which is yet to be fully confronted, despite the good working relationship between the AU and the UN.<sup>27</sup> The kind of growth and development potential envisioned for the new single African market relies heavily on strong political commitment by the AU Member States. However, according to the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), protracted conflicts in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan will predictably remain top on the agenda of the AU and Peace and Security Council (PSC) in 2021. Additionally, no less than 10 very important presidential elections were planned for 2021 – in Benin, Cape Verde, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Republic of Congo, Sao Tome and Principe, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Zambia – indicating fragile political transitions.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2021, 4)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>25</sup> (United Nations General Assembly 2020)

<sup>26</sup> (Tafirenyika 2014, 6)

<sup>27</sup> (Gaye 2014, 18-19)

<sup>28</sup> (Diatta 2021)



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### Landmark Resolutions

At the core of major UN resolutions towards acceleration of a single African market is the recognition of the adoption of African Union's Agenda 2063,<sup>29</sup> alongside the 'Agenda 2030' for Sustainable Development. On this basis, two major draft resolutions were adopted by the General Assembly at its seventy-third session, which are highlighted in this section.

At the seventy-third session in August 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted - by a record vote of 110 in favor to 1 against (United States), with 38 abstentions – the resolution, "*New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): progress in implementation and international support.*" In this, the assembly recalled the importance of supporting AU's Agenda 2063 for ensuring a positive socioeconomic transformation in Africa by 2063, as well as its first 10-year implementation plan spanning 2014 to 2023.<sup>30</sup> The success of this partnership hinges on continued collaboration between African States and the international community.

Also adopted at the seventy-third session of the UN General Assembly – by a recorded 115 votes in favor to 1 against (United States), with 40 abstentions – was a second resolution, *Implementation of SG's Recommendations on Causes of Conflict and Promotion of Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa*. This recognized that, 'international and regional efforts to prevent conflict and consolidate Africa's peace should be directed towards Africa's sustainable development, with encouragement to African governments to reinforce their national structures and policies for purposes of establishing an environment conducive to the promotion of sustainable, inclusive economic growth.'<sup>31</sup>

The UN General Assembly also called on the international community to '*enhance support and fulfill its commitments to take further action in areas critical to Africa's economic and social development.*'<sup>32</sup>

### Country and Bloc Positions

**COMESA:** Senior Research Fellow at **The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa** Secretariat, Mr. Musengele Benedict, in a Special Report published for the Secretariat maintained that the AfCFTA has the potential to reduce external imports from external sources and increase intra-REC and African trade by opening more regional markets through improved infrastructure connectivity. He added, 'This combined with enhanced trade promotion and market information sharing will increase intra-COMESA and African trade. The leading imports from EU such as food and live animals are readily available in COMESA and the region has huge potential to produce manufactured goods and pharmaceuticals.'<sup>33</sup>

**EAC:** Within the **East African Community**, it has been implied that Kenya may be on the threshold of becoming the first violator of the AfCFTA commitments. In February 2020, former US President Donald Trump and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta announced their intention to launch a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) 'to serve as a model for additional agreement across Africa.'<sup>34</sup> This contravened the July 2018 resolution of African heads of state at the AU Summit in Mauritania, which established that Member States would not enter bilateral free trade negotiations with third parties once the AfCFTA came into force. Article 4 of the AfCFTA Protocol on Goods, calls for extension of the same preferences to all State Parties, implying that any US preferences accorded to Kenya would have to be extended to

<sup>29</sup> <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

<sup>30</sup> (United Nations General Assembly 2019, 3)

<sup>31</sup> (United Nations General Assembly 2019)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> (Musengele 2021)

<sup>34</sup> (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2020)

AfCFTA state parties on a reciprocal basis.<sup>35</sup> As much as this protocol was enacted to protect the AfCFTA, the current situation spotlights the dilemma of loyalty to existing and future bilateral agreements for AU Member States.

**ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States** has made noteworthy contributions to the realization of the AfCFTA. At the regional meeting on AfCFTA for ECOWAS institutions and specialized agencies, the ECOWAS Commissioner for Trade, Customs and Free Movement, Mr. Tei Konzi, stated that ‘ECOWAS has continued to play its role of coordinating the positions of its member States for engagement with other parties in AfCFTA negotiations.’ The workshop held virtually in July 2020, had the objective to ‘improve Member States understanding of the AfCFTA within ECOWAS in order to enable ECOWAS Institutions and Specialized Agencies to better contribute to the negotiations and implementation of the Agreement.’<sup>36</sup>

**SADC:** A huge portion of intra-African trade originates from the **Southern African Development Community** (SADC), and one of the great benefits of the AfCFTA is that it will create access to the North and West African markets, with which SADC Member States have previously struggled to trade due to high tariffs.<sup>37</sup> In March 2021, through the Chairperson, Hon. Veronica Nataniel Macamo Dlhovo, the Council of Ministers of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) urged non-compliant Member States to sign and ratify the AfCFTA and the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) to allow for the implementation of the agreements.<sup>38</sup>

## Proposals for Action

**Authorize major studies of possibilities for cross-border economic cooperation:** Studies often have a bad reputation. They can be a

substitute for action, a way of delaying difficult choices. This is true, and a danger to be careful of.

But criticism also misses the vital role of studies in identifying the best opportunities for action, the areas future policy should stress, and for building political support for future action. Studies can be the place to start. Especially when governments are uncertain, hesitant about making economic changes that could mean risks or pain, studies can help unify support for the path ahead.

A good study resolution clearly explains the mandate for the study, what are goals for the study, who will undertake it; experts and officials appointed by the governments to represent their country, or independent experts appointed by the African Union? Most governments like the first choice, so they have more control over the outcome. The study may involve lots of on-sight visits and local consultations. This makes it expensive. So the study has to be paid for. Finally, a schedule is required to ensure timely conclusion and widespread dissemination of findings.

Studies might be sector-by-sector, industry-by-industry. For example, if agriculture continues to be protected, to minimize adjustment pain for small farmers, what are the implications for regional agricultural trade? Who suffers and who benefits? Studies—if done right—can clarify that.

**Calls for practical action:** A major challenge lies in moving from verbal Agreement to implementation as the basis of the success of a single African market. Beyond committing to the principles of integrated trade, African countries need to follow-up on their commitments by ensuring the implementation of practical steps towards reduction or elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers such as prohibitive transaction costs, limited capacity of border officials, and costly import and export licensing procedures.<sup>39</sup> Beyond AU summit

<sup>35</sup> (Ogotu 2020)

<sup>36</sup> (Economic Community of West African States 2020)

<sup>37</sup> (Komane 2018)

<sup>38</sup> (Southern Africa Development Community 2021)

<sup>39</sup> (Tafirenyika 2014, 6)



sessions and negotiations, African Heads of States and government dignitaries are encouraged to actualize the goals of the Free

Trade Area for the mutual good of the entire region, seeing as the Agreement enjoys goodwill from various key stakeholders.

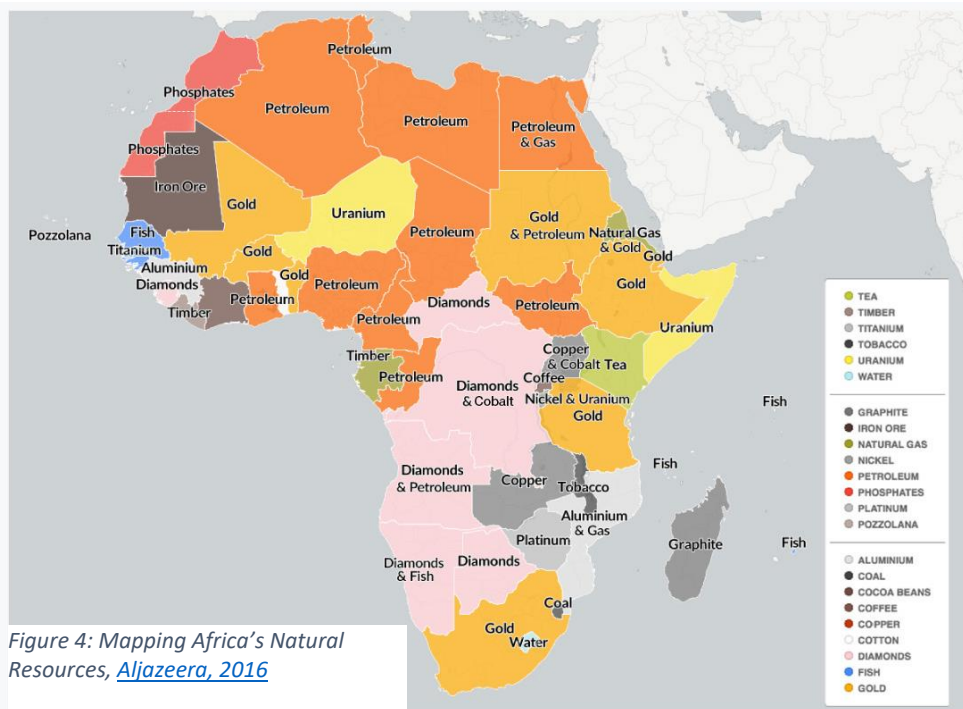


Figure 4: Mapping Africa's Natural Resources, [Aljazeera, 2016](#)

**Move from economies based on production of commodities and raw materials to economies based on service industries:** Reliance on agriculture and mineral mining has been easy for African economies, but also holds it back. The biggest growth sectors in the global economies are service industries—knowledge production, internet based activities, industries like insurance and on-line retail activity. But African economies are not part of this.

Debates on trade liberalization have often focus on goods or manufacturing (Fig. 4), but trade liberalization in services would equally profit African countries.<sup>40</sup> With the COVID-19 crisis, the world has shifted to prioritizing a technology-centered service industry, across sectors such as business, banking, tourism, and healthcare. Whereas most African economies are infrastructure-led, there is need for more investment in the technology for the service industry beyond transport. The youth, women, and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are

now more than ever leveraging ICT in the service industry to lower operation costs and increase profits. Therefore, African countries should consider more investment toward improving technology services.

**Preference for continental integration over local preferences:** African governments have a long history of protecting local interests, often because they are politically powerful, sometimes connected to the presidential palace by ties of profit or family relationships. Preferences for local industry make a lot of short-term sense for weak governments. But in the long term these preferences suppress trade and economic growth, they make it impossible for newcomers to enter the market, and hold the entire country back.

This issue brief has acknowledged the foundational role of the eight RECs in Africa over the years in spearheading trade integration between different regions in the continent.

<sup>40</sup> (Baker Mckenzie Research 2021)



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However, there is need to emphasize the significance of the AfCFTA as a continental stimulus package, which is not in direct competition with RECs but rather compliments

the existing groundwork already established under the RTAs, with the intention to steer the continent towards even greater goals of sustainable development.

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