

Promoting Intra-African Trade Through Agenda 2063 to Accelerate Continental Economic Growth for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Agenda 2063 document is regarded as Africa's progressive plan to root out socio-economic challenges facing the continent of Africa. Agenda 2063 is not just dream, however, it is the continent's strategic framework that aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development and is a concrete manifestation of the Pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance. The pushing factor to Agenda 2063 was the realisation by Africa that there was a need to refocus and reprioritise Africa's agenda from the struggle against colonialism and the attainment of political independence for the continent which had been the focus of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union; and instead to prioritise inclusive social and economic development, continental and regional integration, democratic governance and peace and security amongst other issues aimed at repositioning Africa to becoming a dominant player in the global arena. The realization of the African continent potential to become a global powerhouse in terms of rapidly achieving sustainable development goals is through the promotion of Intra-African trade. The paper will argue that for Africa to achieve all sustainable development goals as enshrined in Agenda 2063, there is a need for African continent to shift more focus from external trading partners and promote intra-African trade. The paper will further argue that through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Africa can rapidly achieve its own sustainable development goals if the pact is to be fully implemented accordingly.

Keywords: Economy, Growth, Regional Integration, Trade, Sustainable Development, African Union

Introduction

Promoting intra-African trade is the driving factor towards integrating Africa. In order to achieve the main goal of unifying Africa, the AU is pushing for establishing a one united Africa by the adoption of Agenda 2063 master plan. This paper will argue that, for the AU to successfully reap the benefits envisaged in its master plan of Agenda 2063, it should place its much focus on promoting intra-African trade as means to accelerate continental economic growth for sustainable development.

The 2022 Mo Ibrahim Index Report (2022) indicate that trade amongst African nations still remain the lowest as compared to the rest of continent globally. The Index report on African governance shows that the government's wavering commitments to open up the continent through improved transport network infrastructure and reduced restrictions to free movement of persons and labour have adversely affected intra-African trade, which stands at less than 13 percent. According to the report, this compares unfavourably with Europe, Asia and the Americas whose intra-continental trade stands at 66.9 percent, 63.8 percent and 44.4 percent respectively. The report notes that despite government efforts to promote regional integration and a relaxation of visa regulations for travel among African countries intra-regional trade has still declined at an accelerating pace since 2012 (2022). Ongoro (2023) posits that intra-continental trade remains the lowest of any world region. The continent's reliance on foreign markets makes it very vulnerable to crises and development in other regions of the world, as showcased by the impact of Covid-19 and uncompromising geopolitics (Ongoro, 2023).

However, there are conflicting narratives whether indeed intra-African trade is relatively low. Some authors like Mold and Chowdhury (2019) beg to differ and argue that intra-African trade has much greater economic significance than is commonly believed. They further argued that the orthodox narrative is driven by three errors: 1) The comparisons made with other regional blocks are frequently misleading and do not compare like with like; 2) the picture of intra-African trade is distorted by large-scale commodity exports to destinations outside the continent; and 3) there is a systematic failure to recognize the scale of informal cross-border trade (Mold & Chowdhury, 2019). Farhat (2022) is of the view that in order to improve intra-African trade, African countries need to undertake bold domestic structural reforms to scale up the supply capacity of the region by improving digital connectivity, reforming fundamental institutions of legal frameworks, such as contract enforcement and property rights protection, maintaining stable and competitive exchange rates and low inflation, lightening the regulatory burden, improving access to imported inputs through low domestic tariffs, and enhancing access to infrastructure through the creation of effective special economic zones.

Intra-African Trade Through African Continental Free Trade Agreement

Signed in 2018, officially launched in 2021, and now in full operation, the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement better known as AfCFTA, aims to establish a common market in Africa by eliminating trade and labour mobility barriers. AfCFTA further aims to create Africa and the world's largest single market for trade in goods and services which is now the largest free trade agreement worldwide designed to achieve intra-African economic cooperation and integration (Phakathi, 2019). The African free trade zone is estimated to accommodate 1.7 billion people by 2030 and oversee consumer and business expenditure to the value of almost 7 trillion US Dollars. AfCFTA was conceived by African leaders who saw the need for integration of the African market and viewed cooperation rather than unilateralism as the most effective way to intensify regional economic integration and global trade (Vhumbunu, 2019). There is considerable significance, associated with the fact that the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) has the potential to lift 68 million people out of moderate poverty.

The main burning point is that the AfCFTA has the potential to be a model of development for the continent of Africa if a number of issues are resolved, such as dealing with the proliferation of RECs, implementing a migration and labour policy with a development focus, or creating a side labour agreement akin to other free trade agreements worldwide to address other issues like harmonising worker treatment and conditions and pursuing industrialization that will help manage the unfavourable effects of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Sibanda, 2021). If fully implemented, the AfCFTA is estimated to increase regional income by 7% by 2035 (Joseph, 2023).

Gerhard (2024) also posits that the AfCFTA also has the potential to bring about major changes and benefits to how trade in goods and services will be conducted on the continent. Africa's global trade will also benefit from better customs administration, eliminating Non-tariff Barriers (NTBs), and generally complying with the rules about transparency and the notification of measures impacting trade in goods and services, and investments. According to Sibanda (2024), the adoption of this free trade agreement came at an interesting time given the fact that both the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) count Africa as one of the continents that has not leveraged its development on industrialisation and historically has the lowest Manufacturing Value Added (MVA) performance compared to other continents.

Africa was in need of such continental free trade agreement to bolster its participation in global trade and investments. Africa to date remains unindustrialised and the continent's development and economic wealth remain dependent mainly on "exporting primary commodities and importing manufactured goods" (Moyo, 2016). It is therefore important to note that the successful implementation of the AfCFTA is dependable on several factors, including the cooperation of African nations and the ability to effectively address challenges identified as trade barriers to policies implementation. In order to strengthen the region's competitive edge in the global market, the AU Heads of State and Government had foreseen an opportunity to establish the AfCFTA as a trading tool among the African states (Osoro, 2019). It was and still predicted that the AfCFTA will boost productivity, long-term competitiveness, increase intraregional trade, and provide AU consumers with more options and higher-quality goods (Osoro, 2019).

Agenda 2063: Master Plan for African Development

Benson, Honig, Moses, & Acquah (2016), argues that Africa was long been depicted as "the dark continent" with a chaotic and uncivilized legal system, abundant on resources but less on productivity. The continent had systematically exploited over the centuries for its resources and raw materials (Benson *et al*, 2016). In 2013, African heads of state

and government launched the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063. This agenda is an ambitious vision and action plan intended to drive Africa's change, development, and transformation for the next 50 years (DeGhetto, Gray, Kiggundu, 2016). The African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 is the continent's strategic framework for transforming Africa from 2013 to 2063 (Mo Ibrahim, 2024). The plan is structured around seven (7) pillars known as Aspirations with the aim of achieving sustainable development in Africa by 2063. Below is a summary of the key priority Aspiration African Governments, Regional Economic Communities, Continental AU Organs and other stakeholders must address in order to achieve sustainable development for "Africa we want by 2063" (The African Union Commission Report, 2015):

Aspiration 1 which aims at building a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Aspiration 2 which aims to build an integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance by accelerating progress towards continental unity and integration for sustained growth, trade, exchanges of goods, services, free movement of people and capital through establishing a United Africa.

Aspiration 3 which aims to promote an Africa of good governance, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law by consolidating democratic gains and improving the quality of governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law; building strong institutions for a development state; and facilitating the emergence of development-oriented and visionary leadership in all spheres and at all levels.

Aspiration 4 which aims to promote peace and security in Africa by strengthening governance, accountability and transparency as a foundation for a peaceful Africa.

Aspiration 5 which aims to build Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics.

Aspiration 6 which aims to build Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.

Aspiration 7 which aims to promote Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner by improving Africa's place in the global governance system; improving Africa's partnerships and refocusing them more strategically to respond to African priorities for growth and transformation; and ensuring that the continent has the right strategies to finance its own development and reducing aid dependency.

Aborisade and Adedayo (2018) highlights that inclusive economic growth and structural economic transformation have been priority development areas in Agenda 2063. AU leaders must take cognisance that to achieve all aspirant envisaged under Agenda 2063 might even go beyond the time frame stipulated due to unforeseen and current challenges opposing to development in Africa such as political instabilities, growing insurgencies, unconstitutional change of governments, contracting economies and other related factors.

Agenda 2063 and Integration Process in Africa

The African continent is lagging behind the rest of the globe in terms of development. As a result, the AU and African States have made several attempts to accelerate growth and development in order to catch up with the rest of the world. One example of this is Africa's Agenda 2063, which was initiated by the AU in an attempt to develop and integrate the continent (Thusi, Mlambo & Mkhize, 2024). Agenda 63 is striving to ensure that by 2063, Africa takes full responsibility for financing its own growth and transformation. Agenda 2063 has a wide and diversified scope of operation. The AU has identified number of areas economically where regional integration can embark upon in order to achieve total integration in the future for preferential trade areas, free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, economic unions, economic and monetary unions, and total economic integration (Joseph, 2023). Geographically it concerns the whole of Africa as a continent and all 55 African countries and members of the AU (Ndizera, & Muzee, 2018). The Agenda is not only aimed at transforming Africa, it has the potential to integrate the continent through the proposed first ten year plan of action. Some of the most important aspect that harnessing integration in Africa within the proposed ten-year period includes: the establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area by 2017, Investment Bank and Pan African Stock Exchange in 2016; the African Monetary Fund in 2018; and the African Central Bank between 2028/34, a single African air transport market, the African Passport and free movement of people. Below are explanation of these practical projects which were planned for in the first ten-year implementation plan of the Agenda that will further African integration effort (Ndizera, & Muzee, 2018).

- (i) Establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) by 2017 aims to significantly accelerate growth of Intra-Africa trade and use trade more effectively as an engine of growth and sustainable development, through doubling of Intra-Africa trade by 2022, strengthen Africa's common voice and policy space in global trade negotiations and establish the financial institutions within agreed upon time frames;
- (ii) Establishment of the African financial institutions aims at accelerating integration and socio-economic development of the continent, as they are important institutions when it comes to the mobilisation of resources and management of the financial sector such as the African Investment Bank and Pan African Stock Exchange;
- (iii) The African Passport and free movement of people aims at transforming Africa's laws, which remain generally restrictive on the movement of people despite political commitments to bring down borders, with the view to promoting the issuance of visas by Member States and enhance free movement of all African citizens in all African countries by 2018; and
- (iv) Establishment of a single African air transport market. This flagship Programme aims at delivering the single African air transport market to facilitate air transportation in Africa.

These proposed plans, if adequately financed and well implemented, have the potential of taking African integration to the next level and raise the hope that the dream of a united Africa such as envisaged by pioneers of Pan-Africanism can come true (Ndizera, & Muzee, 2018). To avoid the fate similar to other AU initiatives, Agenda 2063 should avoid following the same path as other AU initiatives has embarked and became another example of failed projects either at regional or continental level. In order to avoid failures and find viable means to implement the action plans of Agenda 2063 at country or regional level, it is crucial to look at the reasons for which past continental initiatives had limited success (El Fassi & Aggad-Clerx, (2014). For example, when the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was launched, it was welcomed from all angles. It was meant to provide a guiding framework that would shape the agenda for the continent's development for years to follow. Quickly however, the interest perished as the initiative faced financial and strategic challenges that would hinder its implementation (El Fassi & Aggad-Clerx, (2014). Kimaro and Fourie (2017) argued that, Agenda 2063 has to work on applying the lessons learnt from previous strategies for Africa, in order to address the many challenges of and bottlenecks in the development of the continent. To ensure that the Africa 2063 Agenda is successfully implemented, the AU must play a key role in fostering collaboration and cohesiveness among African states Thusi *et al*, 2024). Without embracing cohesion among African states, the AU will find it difficult to harvest the benefits from Agenda 2063 to diversified nature of African population.

Challenges Towards Agenda 2063 Goals

Agenda 2063 is rooted in Pan-Africanism and African renaissance; it provides a robust framework for addressing past injustices and the recognition of the 21st century as the African century (Agenda 2063 Document, 2013). The Agenda is a flexible instrument and a living document to be adjusted according to exigencies of the time. Implementing Agenda 2063 begins with a ten-year implementation plan, which lays out in an incremental manner the concrete steps and milestones to be achieved in the journey towards 2063 to fulfil the AU vision (Agenda 2063 Document, 2013).

Agenda 2063 is not an overnight or a short-term event. Its success will depend on how it will be implemented and what specific steps will each AU members state is prepared to take in order to fulfil all the aspirations envisaged in the document. The attainment of all Agenda 63 Aspirations might either or nor possible to achieve within stipulated time frame due to number of challenges facing the African continent. As alluded above that Agenda 2063 places a strong emphasis on the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, it hopes to provide the foundation for making the twenty-first century truly African and rectifying historical wrongs that the AU's predecessor (OAU) has failed to address. The below challenges are identified and might also pose threat to the AU's continental development strategies through Agenda 2063:

Political Challenges

From politics point of view, it is an issue of common facts that politics plays pivotal role towards building a developmental state. However, poor political leadership or uneven political instability often drives poor or weak developmental state. Most of the African countries are facing bleak political future due to poor governance and poor political leadership. Unlike the AU with developmental mandate, the OAU's formation was profound and signified Africa embarking on a journey to eradicate all forms of colonialism from the continent, promoting the unity and solidarity of African States and defending their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence (Nxumalo, 2019).

In September 9, 1999, the OAU heads of states and government pushed for the creation of a new African Unity through the Sirte Declaration by agreeing to establish the AU. The AU's goal was to solve the complex social, economic, and political issues that the continent was experiencing in the face of growing globalization while accelerating the continent's integration process and assisting African governments in becoming more powerful players in the world economy (Tralac, 2024).

Even though the AU embark on a partially different path from its predecessor the OUA which focused much on African solidarity, the AU is pushing a developmental agenda from the continental level. However, it can be argued that the AU's developmental agenda will suffer significantly due to lack of political will and political instabilities among some AU member states.

With the current political trends in part of the African continent such as ongoing civil wars, unconstitutional change of government and unwavering anti-government protest, it is unlikely that the AU will rapidly grasp the sustainable development goals enshrined under Agenda 2063. It is a norm that no country or organization can flourish under severe political turmoil. For the AU to achieve sustainable development goals contemplated under Agenda 2063, it must promote a culture of political tolerance and stability in the continent.

Financial Challenges

Most of the AU institutions and projects are not fully functional or either limping success because of financial challenges. If not adequately funded, Agenda 2063 might also suffer the same fate as other previously initiated AU projects. With Agenda 2063, the AU had identified numerous sources of funding models to fund the implementation of Agenda 2063. However, these sources of funding are merely anticipatory before the AU can reach full funding potential to all programs enshrined under Agenda 2063. It cannot be denied that these funding models as proposed by the AU's Agenda 2063 document has exceptional challenges to finance all aspiration envisaged in the document. The AU itself has identified three challenges that might pose threat towards financing Agenda 2063 aspirations to its fully capacity. These challenges include (Agenda 2063 Document, 2013):

- First and foremost, about mobilizing a stable and predictable base of financial resources that can be achieved largely only through domestic financial resources.
- Secondly, within a regional context characterized by many levels of market failure, Agenda 2063 financing, is not only about mobilizing domestically-generated financial resources, but is also about leveraging and intermediating those resources for productive investments and program implementation within the framework of the Agenda 2063. In other words, Africa needs not only funds, but also a more effective and inclusive means of channelling these funds (including financial institutions and markets, financial instruments and financial services) to where they can be most effective and where there is market failure in the allocation of the needed resources.
- Thirdly, because the availability of financial resources does not guarantee their access by individuals, communities, infrastructure and industrial projects and players in priority sector such as agriculture due to market failures, a proactive access to finance support for these parties will be considered as part of the Agenda 2063 financing process.

The Agenda 2063 presents a funding strategy that is broken down into three main areas: financial access, resource intermediation into investments, and mobilization of domestic resources. Ndizera and Muzee (2018) further argued that The Agenda 2063 additionally commits to implementing more efficient and comprehensive methods of directing those funds to areas with market failure in resource allocation and where they might be most effective. Adogamhe (2008) postulate that, in order to achieve developmental continent, funding is necessary, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, local resource processing and industrialization based on science, technology, and innovation, agriculture and food security, and environmental sustainability. However, the AU lacks the funding necessary to carry out these initiatives.

Legal Challenges

The AU has enacted and adopted number of key legal instruments since its inception to address challenges that her predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) has failed to resolve. The OAU paved a way for African independent while the AU embarked on building a developmental African continental state to promote good governance, peace and security and stable economies. However, the serious setback for these legal instruments that the AU has adopted is non-compliance by some AU member states. Some AU member states still act contrary from

the directives enshrined under some of the AU legal instruments. Human rights abuses remain a norm by some African state even though some instrument such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples right speaks against human rights abuse (African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 1981).

From the legal point of view, the AU is unable to enforce or implement its own legal instruments from the continental level. It is clear that the AU is struggling with enforcement strategies over its adopted legal instruments. Unconstitutional change of government and human rights violation are wavering unabated on the continent despite the AU adopted numerous legal instruments condemning such practices. The believe was that that, the formation of the AU in 2002 sparked hopes for a new era in African integration that would put an end to the most heinous violations of human rights and democratic norms that have plagued the region since independence of African states (Zamfir, 2022).

Infrastructural Challenges

Inadequate infrastructure remains a major impediment towards Africa realising its full potential economic growth. With the continent seen as one of the world's fastest growing economic hubs, meeting the demand for key infrastructure has been identified as a key priority for the purpose of smooth transition towards free trade agreements implementation. The feasibility of Agenda 2063: "Africa we Want" can be achieved through reinforcement of African infrastructural development programs. Infrastructure is essential for the increase in economic productivity and also to achieve growth in the economy. Infrastructure has an impact in the growth of economy and investment, therefore it is crucial for Africa to invest heavily on infrastructure development. The African continent has recorded a slight improvement in other sectors of infrastructural development and these Improvements in Infrastructure have largely been attributed by the growth of digital infrastructure. Every country on the continent has greater access to internet and computers than in 2012 (Mo Ibrahim Index Report, 2022). However, not all areas of Infrastructure have improved without the exception of rail, transport networks which have made no progress since 2012 (Mo Ibrahim Index Report, 2022). Most countries have seen a decrease in the size of road networks and the prevalence of paved roads per capita. Shipping and postal facilities have also deteriorated (Mo Index Report, 2022).

Pottas (2022) notes that funding remains a key challenge to infrastructural development in Africa. African governments have historically financed a sizeable share of the continent's infrastructure development on balance sheet, and infrastructure rollout has thus been constrained by budgetary restrictions. The development of infrastructure will be essential to the advancement of Africa as a whole as well as to productivity and long-term, sustainable economic growth (African Development Group, 2024). It will have a major impact on reducing poverty, advancing human development, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). More than half of the recent increase in economic development in Africa may be attributed to infrastructure investment, which has the potential to accomplish considerably more (African Development Group, 2024). Regional integration of infrastructure can be a solution to overcome intra-African trade barriers and other similar challenges since it will allow African countries to increase trade and its competitiveness in the world markets (Dethier, 2015). As Africa becomes more urbanized, essential goods will become easier and less expensive to deliver to a more densely populated areas.

Digitalisation of African Economy for Trade Simplification

Trade and investment among African countries is relatively low as compared to other regions of the world. In terms of trade, Africa remains a large potential market for investment due to its demographic patterns and population size. However, Kere and Zongo (2023) argues that since 1995, Africa's share of world trade has not exceeded 5% according to World Trade Organization (WTO) data. Oramah (2001) also add that the drop in Africa's contribution to world trade is attributed to the decline in intra-African trade.¹ As a source to improve intra-African trade digitally and following protracted negotiations, and industry consultations, the AU adopted the much-anticipated AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade during its 37th African Union Heads of States Summit held on 17 – 18 February 2024 (AfCFTA, Digital Trade, 2024). This protocol has the very important task of defining the desired digital environment for digital trade within Africa, and by implication, also has bearing on Africa's digital trade with respect to the rest of the world (Stuart, 2024). According to (Mkhize et al, 2024). The AfCFTA Digital Protocol establishes an important legal instrument that will, through harmonized rules and common principles and standards, support and enable an acceleration of technology driven innovation and commerce in Africa. It focuses on promoting intra-African digital trade, enhancing cooperation on digital matters among State Parties, and creating a transparent, secure, and trusted digital trade ecosystem (Mkhize et al, 2024).

¹ Oramah, B. (2001). Afrixembank in the era of AfCFTA. Journal of African Trade, 8 (2), 24 -34.

As matter of the seriousness to transform the intra-African trade digitally, the AU previously introduced the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa in 2019 to run from 2020 to 2030, based on previous initiatives and following consultations of multiple stakeholders in the digital ecosystem in Africa (Benoit, 2021). This Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa is based on five foundation pillars which aims at enabling environment, policy and regulation, digital infrastructure, digital skills and human capacity, digital innovation, and entrepreneurship in six critical sectors which are digital industry, digital trade and financial services, digital government, digital education, digital health, and digital agriculture, and aims to drive digital transformation through five cross-cutting themes digital content and applications, digital ID, emerging technologies, cybersecurity, privacy and personal data protection, research and development to support the digital ecosystem (Benoit, 2021).

Conclusion

The AU has long route to travel before it nourish some of sustainable development goals envisaged in Agenda 2063. With challenges in place, it is not a matter of debate that Africa will take so long build a developmental continent. The current political climate in Africa makes it difficult to the AU to invoke some of the key reforms enshrined in Agenda 2063. For example, aspiration 4 of the Agenda 2063 aims to promote peace and security in Africa by strengthening governance, accountability and transparency as a foundation for a peaceful Africa. However, it would be much difficult for the AU to nourish such aspiration while part of the African countries still embraces for the unconstitutional change of governments through military juntas. Unconstitutional change of governments threatens peace and security since power within Africa since in most cases power is claimed through the barrel of a gun or through military coups.

Part of the problem to delay proper implementation of aspirations envisaged in the Agenda 2063 is that there is lack of respect by African leaders to AU legal instruments adopted by AU ordinary sessions. AU instruments are adopted for member states to abide or enforce the policies of the organization, however, member states especially through state leadership opt to disregard the directives of such instruments. For example, some AU member states are defaulting from the desired monetary contribution to finance AU peace and security structures. These practices hinder the AU to become a fully-fledged, autonomous and resourceful organisation.

Furthermore, the AU must ensure that the AfCFTA as a pillar of strengths towards achieving sustainable development goals under the Agenda 2063 must use technology to build centralised digital platforms for trade information and compliance tracking, thereby boosting accessibility and cooperation among member nations. There is also a need to scale up the adoption of the Digital Trade Protocol in order to empower African traders to use ICT tools, notably for cross-border digital trade. The AU must also collaborate closely with research and financial organizations such as the African Development Bank to boost scientific research and innovation through African networks of excellence. They should work together to create dynamic, creative platforms with global connections and mentorship programs to prepare the next generation of entrepreneurs.

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