

# Altering Africa's Informal Cross-Border Trade Narratives: COVID-19, climate change and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement

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## Abstract

Africa's Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) is integral to Africans' economic, social, and cultural rights. Africa's decision to uphold the principle of inviolability of colonially-inherited boundaries tangentially favours ICBT mobility for indigenes, especially communities with landed properties naturally spread across unnatural political demarcations. Eventually, smuggling goods across borders feeds into and thrives on existing arbitrary demarcations. The ambitious inertia to address ICBT governance challenges requires engagement, collaborative, diplomatic, strategic, and holistic approaches if cobra effects are to be averted. Using document analysis as the principal methodology, this paper examines intra-African trade, implications, potential prospects and challenges, and the role of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) in altering the status quo. The paper further pierces the veil of ICBT, and its capacity to compromise human and national security by facilitating terrorist incursions, especially in a post-Covid-19 regime and its imposed economic meltdown, worsened by climate crises. The paper argues that the AfCFTA has the propensity to achieve its objectives, and proffers a portfolio of policy recommendations.

## Keywords

AfCFTA; Arbitrary Demarcations; Covid-19; Climate change; Human security

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DOI: 10.26796/jenrm.v9i1.215

Received: 10 November 2022; Received in revised form: 13 February 2023; Accepted: 29 March 2023; Published: 30 April, 2023

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## 1. Introduction

The uniqueness of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) initiative shares similar narratives with the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review

Mechanism (APRM) by the African Union (AU) as mutually agreed-upon instruments in 2003. Both have characteristics of initiatives for endogenous development that are the result of African ownership and leadership. It also has echoes of the energy generated by the former Organization of African Unity (OAU), which in 2022 became a forerunner of the current African Union as the continent's political union.

One of the early efforts by African leaders to create a platform for the socio-politico-economic integration of African governments to foster integration and continental cooperation is represented by this. According to Farahat (2016), several Regional Economic Communities (RECs) had been founded by 1980 to fuse local economies and establish Free Trade Zones. These successes are what gave rise to the 1980–2000 Lagos Plan of Action, an economic road map for Africa that stressed the importance of intra-African trade. This had an impact on how RECs eventually came together to form the African Common Market (Organization of African Unity, 1980). AfCFTA joins forces with the strength and merit of historical antecedence. It suffices to say that the concept of Free Trade Areas (FTAs) in Africa is not a novel one. Africa

is the world's second-largest continent, and the second most populous continent whose strength lies in its diversity, shared natural resource wealth, socioeconomic and geo-political underpinnings. Paradoxically, however, Africa, for some complex reasons, remains one of the world's poorest continents. After several unsuccessful attempts to turn Africa's economic fortunes around, the AfCFTA initiative anticipates leveraging on the continent's 55 sovereign member states and human resources to connect about 1.3 billion people to become the world's largest free trade hub, at least measured by the number of participating countries. AfCFTA nurtures hopes of increasing Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to a value of about USD 3.4 trillion to help lift about 30 million people out of extreme poverty.

Against such an auspicious background, the primary objective of this paper is to interrogate the capacity of intra-African trade to transform the continent's circumstances within the scope of AfCFTA by piercing the veil of AfCFTA's role in altering the status quo and to calibrate its potential prospects and challenges. This paper is therefore significant, coming at AfCFTA's inception stage, and also remarkable in the light of the contemporary global economic meltdown engineered by Covid-19 which hit Africa very hard and worsened by the impact of the climate crisis on world economies. Being featured at a time when Africa is entirely politically independent and yet routinely dependent on international financial aid after six decades of political independence is contextually important, as this paper contemplates the major question: what is the unique selling proposition of AfCFTA in transforming Africa's economic fortunes where other comparable interventions have failed? Notably, Ghana, one of Africa's leading democracies and one of the most thriving success stories in sub-Saharan Africa since independence, and also home to the AfCFTA Secretariat, is negotiating a financial bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the 17th time in 57 years as it struggles to salvage its slugging economy, with its currency, the Ghana Cedi at its lowest ebb.

This paper examines how Africa's decision to uphold the inviolability of its inherited colonial arbitrarily demarcated boundaries continues to feed into the architecture of ICBT as a traditional heritage since political independence. Adotey (2021) notes, in his study of Leklebi and Wli that border residents perceive the international border as just an "imaginary line", which exists only in the imagination of the cartographers, colonial officials, and post-colonial security apparatus to the extent that when one border is closed, many more remain open. Such perception by the residents of these two communities underpins the porous and fragile nature of Africa's borders (which largely facilitates smuggling and ICBT), cross-border crimes, such as organized crime, and terrorism with a growing sense of national and human insecurity.

Dwelling on document analysis as the principal methodology, this paper examines how such phenomena could have a multi-dimensional impact on AfCFTA. It also contemplates the sustainability of AfCFTA and concludes that, with the right attitudes and posture, AfCFTA, has the potential to surmount inherent challenges towards attaining its objectives of resuscitating the economy through enhanced intra-African trade.

## 2. Methods and Literature Search Strategy

Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) remains an inextricable feature throughout Africa's intra-continental trade practice for several interconnected reasons. It is observed that traditional practices of people along the national borders of African states have favoured the active continuum of trade between African states and their neighbours in the broader context of intra-African trade practices. In the context of Ghana, it is public knowledge that many border town dwellers often share common tribes and languages across neighbouring borders, and this is not difficult to appreciate; for instance, the Ewe tribe along the eastern border of Ghana also reside in Western Togo. On the extreme western edge of Ghana, the Aowins of Elubo also share the same language with the Aowins of Noe at the entry border point of neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire. At the northern border point in Paga (Upper West Region), where cattle rearing is one of the main occupations, cattle move and graze across the border between Burkina Faso and Ghana. Such historical, tribal and traditional identities have held afloat, the architecture of ICBT between Ghana and its neighbours beyond political demarcations. This observation is also noticeable in many African countries and their neighbours. Such economic interactions play a significant role in intra-African trade and economy.

Brenton and Soprano (2018) have noted that ICBT contributes to the income of about 43% of Africa's population by providing support to livelihoods and creating employment, especially for marginalized groups who are mostly engaged in agriculture which is meant to reduce poverty and increase food security (Brenton and Soprano, 2018). Yet ICBT lacks a universally-agreed definition and is typically associated with illegal trade practices, notably, smuggling and undocumented cross-border trade. ICBT, therefore, tends to be applied differently by different groups. Cantens, Ireland, and Raballand (2015) offer useful insights into ICBT. To them, ICBT and "illegal trade" or "smuggling" is essentially motivational such that, whereas "smuggling [is] based on the wish to pay more or fewer taxes, or to make profit from trade in prohibited goods such as crystal meth", ICB traders avoid formalities for more legitimate reasons (Cantens, Ireland and Raballand, 2015). Some of such 'legitimate' reasons are informed by their inability to afford costs associated with formal trading.

It may also be the case that some members of the ICBT fraternity lack the requisite skills and or knowledge to comply with formal trade regulations. As Koroma et al (2017) note, ICBT constitutes a significant portion of Africa's economic activity. Kahiya and Kadirov, (2020) suggest that the limited comprehensive or conceptual development in providing a universal definition of ICBT is perhaps due to its complex multi-faceted nature, scope, and determinants. Afrika and Ajumbo (2012) define ICBT as "trade in processed or non-processed merchandise which may be legal imports or exports on one side of the border and illicit on the other side and vice-versa, on account of not being subjected to statutory border formalities such as customs (Afrika and Ajumbo, 2012:2). The OECD defines it as "trade in legitimately produced goods and services, which escape regulatory framework set by the government, thereby avoiding certain tax and regulatory burdens" (Lesser and Moisé-Leeman, 2009: 9). The authors extrapolate three slightly different but closely related apertures (2009: 10) from which we could bring clarity to the appreciation of ICBT implications:

1. Informal unregistered traders or firms operating entirely outside the formal economy.
2. Formal (registered) firms fully evading trade-related regulations and duties by, for instance, avoiding official border crossing points. Martin and Panagariya (1984) associate definitions (ii) and (iii) with what is commonly referred to as "smuggling", which they define as "international trade by firms or individuals that either partially or fully evade trade regulations and border duties, either by avoiding official border crossing posts (full evasion) or by resorting to illegal means like under-invoicing, misclassification and under-pricing
3. Formal (registered) firms partially evade trade-related regulations and duties by resorting to illegal practices, such as under-invoicing or declassification

From the foregoing we note the smuggling and tax-evading-characteristics of ICBT, resulting in ICBT mostly easily going unrecognized, undocumented, or under-documented thereby depriving states of revenue which would have accrued if such transactions were subjected to formal cross-border regulatory interventions. It is further noted that the definitions incline towards identifying trades that sidestep formal channels, which would ordinarily be those of the state(s) through their legitimate state agencies including customs authorities.

Major frustrations in dealing effectively with ICBT engagements are deeply embedded principally in the unnatural partitioning of borderland settlements across natural classifications. A plethora of available literature such as Hyde (2016), AUBP 2014) and Nguendi (2012),

and others confirm how Africa's borders have split families, polities, ethnic groups, and borderland communities without recognition for their original natural settlements. Such non-recognition culminates in families and communities having their landed properties, including farms, unnaturally split across neighbouring politically independent countries. This gives borderland settlers a sense of 'appertaining' natural dual allegiance to both neighbouring countries through no fault of theirs. Thus, rather than denouncing their bonding to any one of the neighbouring countries for the other, such persons naturally prefer to maintain both nationalities and keep switching to when it benefits their needs at any time. This is exemplified in the sale of farm produce when the most beneficial economic choice has to be made. For a farmer whose cocoa farm for instance spreads across Ghana and Togo or Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, he or she might harvest crops on any side of the farm and decide to sell the same on any other side of the farm depending on which is more economically prudent at that time, and for such persons, formal or ICBT is often subsumed by the jurisdiction or spread of the farm. Interestingly, they use either the Ghana Cedi or the Franc CFA or both currencies for business transactions depending on their needs.

In a comparable vein, some ordinary border town businesses trade their goods and services in the currencies of both neighbouring countries at their own agreed exchange rates, providing the "convenience" of paying in either country's currency whether within or outside the territories of Ghana or the neighbouring country. This eventually feeds directly into a thriving and well-patronized 'black market' regime in which their exchange rates are often lower and more "attractive" because its operators either avoid or evade taxes on these services.

The process also tends to be easier and less cumbersome compared to the formal system. The implication is that state revenue tends to be wrongly channelled into private business interests. For such categories of persons, who can conveniently be classified as informal unregistered traders (under category 1 above) the formalized border remains only an imaginary line that they can hardly appreciate in the pursuit of their economic, social, and cultural rights within the larger framework of ICBT. This also covers informal petty traders who transact petty businesses along and across border towns.

One political manifestation of this phenomenon is the recurring accusation and counter-accusations of incumbent governments registering "neighbouring foreigners" to vote in Ghana's presidential elections. This challenge emerges almost every year of presidential elections in Ghana since reverting to multi-party democracy in 1992. Within this same challenge, closing the borders effectively disenfranchises many border town communities, while creating some level of tension between neighbouring sovereign states. More intricate nuances are identified in

Adotey's 2021 study on "Decolonisation, bordering, and border capes on the Ghana-Togo border" which reveals the claim and practice of border citizens that, "As border citizens, they possess the official documents of Ghana and Togo. Those on the Togo side possess (among other documents) the Ghana National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) card which entitles them to free health care and voting in elections, respectively, with its attendant perks. The reverse is equally true" (Adotey, 2021: 11). Adotey is, however, quick to add that border challenges are, however, not unique to Africa alone. "... African boundaries are in no way more artificial than European or other boundaries" (Adotey, 2021: 8). The beneficial lesson that the AfCFTA can learn from this is that the repercussions of arbitrary bordering are not of insurmountable magnitude. What AfCFTA needs to do is to avert itself from the delicate multi-dimensional character of ICBT, and contextualize Africa's peculiar narratives towards the development of suitable comprehensive interventions to the identified challenges for peaceful co-existence.

Luckily, the Africa Union Border Programme (AUBP) remains committed to acting as a unifying force in the process of African integration as reflected in Ambassador Ramatane Lamamra's Foreword to "Delimitation and Demarcation of Boundaries in Africa: General Issues and Case Studies" (Department of Peace and Security, 2014:6). It should be added that the AfCFTA can leverage on hindsight of how comparable initiatives in the creation of regional blocs such as ECOWAS have not achieved a full measure of interventions. For instance, the inherent idea of "free movement of goods and services" within these economic blocks still suffers abuses, especially at the exit and entry border posts manned by respective state agencies. The ability of AfCFTA to provide effective and durable solutions to such challenges will play a role in determining its success.

## 2.1 Key Determinants and Gender Dimensions of ICBT

Identifying the complexities and key determinants of ICBT is critical for AfCFTA in developing a comprehensive strategic portfolio of tools for attaining its Mission of "Accelerating intra-African trade and boosting Africa's trading position in the global market by strengthening Africa's common voice and policy space in global trade negotiations", and realizing its Vision "to create one African market". Such a "common market" consisting of Africa's sovereign states is capable of forming a formidable market conglomerate that ensures the internal circulation of the continent's colossal wealth in trade, goods, and services where the youth and the less privileged could gain employment. Given the high indulgence of women in petty trading, women informal cross-border traders play a vital role in sustaining Africa's economy, and this brings on board, a female gender dimension to the ICBT discourse, though gender is not necessarily about females, but males as well.

The AU notes that women constitute over 70% of cross-border traders, especially those in informal trade.<sup>1</sup> According to Brenton and Soprano (2018), about 70-80 % of Africa's small-scale traders are females for whom Cross-border trade remains the only source of livelihood. But this also exposes them to the vagaries of gender-based violence for various reasons including cultural bias that prioritize male education over female education as well as structural violence and constraints related to cross-border trade activities. ICBT contributes income, provides jobs, and empowers women in some of the most fragile and impoverished communities. Creating gender-responsive policies in development has been one of the major challenges facing developing economies of Africa as a result of cultural and socio-economic underpinnings.

The female gender in many instances in Africa is fraught with limited access to resources, coupled with lower levels of education and social capital required to integrate them into the formal sector. Such challenges tend to fuel the inertia for pushing more females into victimhood and the practice of ICBT. This paper identifies with the view of gender as social relationships, usually associated with unequal power dynamics as a result of which females find themselves mostly at certain levels and in certain trades. It must be noted, however, that males are also involved in ICBT. Comparatively, however, females dominate in the ICBT enterprise.

Though not the focus of this paper, it is an aspect worth mentioning in a discourse of this nature, as an acknowledgement of common knowledge that females are comparatively more disadvantaged than males, at least in the context of employment, economic resources, and wealth and are therefore likely to be pushed to the margins of informal trade.

In Tanzania for example, women are often obliged to take up poor-quality work, mostly within the informal sector alongside care responsibilities to make meagre ends meet (Lambin and Nyssölä, 2022). Why would they not embrace ICBT if that would help them sidestep such discrimination? In the context of Southern Africa, USAID (2016: 17) highlights the extent to which the ICBT industry is highly feminized by documenting that women constitute about 70-80% of the ICBT industry. This was established including research interviews at the Cross-Border Trade Association of Malawi (CBTAM), an organization of about 3,000 members of which 60% are women. It notes further that in Botswana, for instance, ICBT is almost an exclusive female trade. Brenton and Isik (2012) also establish that about 80 per cent of cross-border traders in the Great Lakes are women.

Ghana and several other African states share similar narratives. Such constraints widen the poverty gaps and heighten gender-based inequalities. The latter has also increased the predominance of non-formal employment which was estimated at 89% of the economy of

sub-Saharan Africa before the pandemic (Cilliers, 2021). Women also constitute the greatest percentage in the informal sector as a result of cultural and socio-economic practices.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the African Trade Policy Centre for instance estimate that women account for around 70% of informal cross-border traders. This estimation which places women at risk of social exclusion does not stem from their gender roles but from socio-economic and gender norms and they ought to be factored into the activities of AfCFTA. For AfCFTA to be fully inclusive, specific attention must be paid to the gendered dimensions in the design and outcome of its interventions. Reduced tariffs for example could be a step towards reducing gender inequalities in trade by AfCFTA. With the reduced tariffs, it will be more affordable for women to trade through formal channels where women traders will not have to put themselves in dangerous situations.

AfCFTA interventions towards restructuring ICBT should be tailored to serve as a 'response' rather than a 'reaction' to existing challenges. Due to the complexity and ever-evolving nature of ICBT, there is a paucity of statistics, documentation, and records on the sheer volumes of ICBT compared with official statistics captured for formal trade. This contributes to its poor recognition of Africa's economic underpinnings.

The absence of reliable data and proper information on the coverage of ICBT would not augur well for boosting intra-African trade, which happens to be AfCFTA's focus. Gaarder, Luke, and Sommer (2021), however, note that though some initiatives have been taken on ICBT data collection on the continent, they tend to be either incomplete or are not implemented on regular basis, they still provide useful information. AfCFTA and its agencies would have to invest significantly in data collection and some modicum of monitoring and evaluating interventions to facilitate and scale up its work. This will help ensure that informed and appropriate periodic interventions remain on track towards attaining the goals and missions it set out for itself at inception.

## 2.2 The Role of Covid-19

The closure of borders external to Africa at the height of Covid-19 remains one of the most epic moments when external trade to and from Africa suffered one of its lowest ebbs. While Akinwumi (2021) notes that Economic growth on the continent is expected to turn negative for the first time in 50 years, with additional 43 million Africans possibly pushed into poverty as a result of the pandemic, the IMF estimates that the continent will need USD1.2 trillion over the next three years to recover from the impact of Covid-19 (Foresight Africa, 2021: 67).

Given that the pandemic impacted heavily and negatively across the world, Africa cannot expect to remain at the receiving end of loans and financial aid from the

developed economies, at least not at the same high pre-Covid-19 margins. With the lockdown of many external territories, Africa had almost been restricted from their traditional external business clients, and one of the most viable options was and remains for Africa to have traded among fellow Africans as a regional economic block, though there were lockdowns within Africa too. However, it makes economic sense to consider that, given the shared political, economic, and historical circumstances of Africa, the continent stands a better chance of regulating intra-African trade rather than implementing entire lockdowns.

But even so, it emerges that control measures established at border management points were unable to capture some of the ICBT traders who resorted to unapproved routes due to the porous nature of the borders. Covid-19 management responses were, and remain invariably limited to persons respecting formal border regulations and vehicles doing the same. If this trend continues (while a permanent solution to Covid-19 remains evasive), the spread of the pandemic with its multiple human security implications could run down the sheer human resource of healthy people on whose business activities the AfCFTA partially runs. In this regard, AfCFTA comes in handy and strongly if it can formalize ICBT so that it can preside effectively over required supervisory interventions. This way, AfCFTA will have the capacity to transform Africa's over-reliant exogenous commodity-dependent conglomerates of economies into a formidable integrated African-centred economy. This in itself would enhance African integration, a common African market base. In the end, the extent to which Africa can own and implement the AfCFTA independent of external forces would be a key defining factor.

## 2.3 Climate Change Impact

Additional to the dwindling economic fortunes unleashed by Covid-19 globally, climate change and its impact are weighing heavily against world economies, and Africa is no exception. Whether trading in fisheries, livestock, general agriculture, petty trading, or any other sector, climate crises are hardly escapable. But as George, Merrill, and Schillebeeckx (2021) observe, digital technology wields substantial capacity to deliver sustained solutions to climate change challenges. For instance, the switch to working from home is now in vogue, thanks to ICT-driven systems including video conferencing.

Nishant and Kennedy (2020) envisage that Artificial Intelligence would facilitate environmental governance even more effectively. It is therefore important that AfCFTA encourages climate adaptation strategies including the digital spaces, and also recognise inter alia, a Green Economy in prioritizing the preservation of the environment by reducing and recycling materials. This will help create new employment and keep economies afloat. This includes transitioning to alternative clean energies

in place of coal and oil, recycling used materials as well as using renewable resources, and turning to a carbon-free and resource-efficient economy. Another area worth investing in is the Blue economy as an integrated sustainable use of the oceans and coastal resources to combat resource depletion and environmental degradation. This shares common objectives with the Green economy in social inclusion, environmental protection, and enhancing biodiversity among others.

#### 2.4 AfCFTA's Capacity to Tame the Challenges and Harness the Opportunities

A critical examination of intra-African trade exposes how intra-African trade is rather cumbersome and fraught with frustrations. Among them, currency disparities and associated exchange or conversion challenges easily pop up as initial hurdles, given that none of Africa's Regional Blocks has succeeded in evolving its common currency. Instead, the Franc CFA dominates francophone West Africa. Ghana, which is home to the Secretariat of AfCFTA, would ordinarily have to battle with Ghana Cedi - CFA conversion, not to write of the English / French language dichotomy. Next, travelling by road with or without goods reveals a sharp, dominant, and worrying phenomenon inherent in high tariff and non-tariff barriers which constitute one of the principal incentives for ICBT. Harary (2018) identifies that several African countries exhibit low levels of trade with other African countries when compared with figures about trade with countries from other continents.

Slachmuylders (2018) exemplifies this disincentive of high tariff barriers with the cost of importing items from within Africa is higher than the cost of doing that same business with non-Africa countries. Why for instance, should it be the case that shipping a car from Japan to Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire) should cost about USD1500.00 while shipping the same car from Abidjan to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) both countries in Africa, cost USD5000.00?

Again, while the road network within Africa is generally poor, a good number of existing roads are in deplorable states that are incapable of hosting viable economic trips for the benefit of AfCFTA. The opening paragraphs of Whitehead's (2014) "Trans-African Highway remains a Road to Nowhere"<sup>1</sup> sums it all up: The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) envisioned the ambitious dream of nine roads connecting cities as far apart as Tripoli on the Mediterranean, Windhoek in Namibia and Cape Town in South Africa, measuring some 60,000km in all. This was conceived over four decades ago and launched at the Trans-African Highway (TAH). UNECA first proposed this road network in 1971, when most of the continent's countries were emerging from colonial rule. The objective was to look for ways to boost regional trade and integrate their economies. But nearly half a century on, those roads have hardly led anywhere. How differently and sustainable does the AfCFTA intend

to overcome such challenges towards fostering effective intra-African trade?

Time-consuming border and or customs formalities and protocols constitute another barrier. Non-Tariff barriers include particularly, burdensome administrative procedures associated with import and export which eventually trigger corruption. Having successfully crossed one border post, one is enmeshed in routine intermittent police/customs checks and sometimes disregard for one's travel documentation: a tactic often employed to waste one's time until money is extorted. One's options of surmounting some of these barriers by flying leads to the realization that, direct flights for intra-African routes are mostly unavailable. Where they exist, they are most likely to be more expensive than travelling to destinations outside Africa. One is therefore compelled to use inter-connecting flights with attendant unreliability and transit delays. While intra-African railway systems hardly provide any viable options, seaports are unable to help either, especially for the many landlocked states. The lack of infrastructure, such as poor telecommunication systems, are very dominant and debilitating narratives that may not inure positively for intra-continental trade.

It is important to mention that current experiences of organized trans-border crimes, activities of terrorist groups, and related engagements need to be addressed. Several documentations attest to the fact that Africa's porous and poorly marked borders facilitate terrorism and organized cross-border crimes. As McApreko (2020) argues, Africa remains particularly vulnerable to terrorism with multiple devastating impacts and expresses concerns that terrorism can hold back the progress of economic and social development. He notes that, given its amoeba-like and transnational character, terrorism has no defined form and this peculiar characteristic feature frustrates its combat. He recalls that many parts of Africa have already suffered substantial terrorist attacks at the hands of many emerging terrorist groups. In 2016/17, terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and 2018 by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb were witnessed. It is insightful to add that several Boko Haram Islamic attacks claimed the lives of locals, foreign nationals, and children in pursuit of its radical political and religious beliefs.

In October 2017, armed militants targeted Nigerian military outposts in the village of Ayorou in Southwestern Niger. Al-Shabaab, Uganda, and Somalia all invoke cold-blooded sentiments of terrorism in Africa. Kenya and Mali cannot go unmentioned. Combating terrorism is an imperative that is too delicate to be left on the shoulders of only one or a few affected states. These matters entail issues of human security, and if AfCFTA is to be successful and survive durability and sustainability, it should anticipate effective antidotes to terrorism and cross-border crimes. The state of play of AfCFTA might give insight into the extent to which it is poised beyond

take-off.

## 2.5 The State of Play

Substantial progress has been made since the January 2012 AU Summit of Heads of States and Government in Addis Ababa, which formally cemented the decision to establish an African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), and the subsequent historic AU Summit in Kigali on March 21st, 2018 which formally concluded the first phase of negotiations for the Continental Free Trade Agreement. At that Summit, 44 Member States of the AU signed the AfCFTA Agreement which entered into force in May 2019 after ratification by 22 Member States. As of 31st July 2022, fifty-four (54) African countries had signed and forty-three (43) countries had ratified the Agreement, for trading to commence on 1st January 2021. The official handing over and commissioning of the AfCFTA Secretariat located in Accra, took place on 17th August 2020, setting the tone for a take-off.

It is highly anticipated that AfCFTA's Constitutive Act, revolving around boosting intra-African trade through several means, including progressive elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers; enhancing the efficiency of customs procedures, trade facilitation, and transit, will have the requisite infrastructure to deal effectively in turning intra-African trade fortunes around for the better. This is because it envisages enhancing cooperation on technical barriers to trade with the intended result of developing and promoting regional and continental value chains, as well as enhancing socio-economic development, diversification, and industrialization across the continent (UNCTAD, 2021).

To this end, AfCFTA aspires towards deepening the integration of the African continent beyond a mere free trade area. Notable strengths and merits of AfCFTA include the Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) which comes in handy in facilitating expenditure transactions in a way that effectively contains the challenges of many African currencies. To this end, whether one sees AfCFTA's state of play as half full or half empty, what remains to be done is to involve African citizens, especially the youth in this enterprise. However, a casual random interaction with many Ghanaians suggests that ordinary people do not seem to know much about AfCFTA, and this is not encouraging enough. This calls for broader public education through strategic communication.

## 2.6 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

For ordinary Africans to buy into the affairs of AfCFTA, the organization must engage in strategic communication inherent in public relations, advertising, and brand communication among others. With this, AfCFTA could engage effectively with appropriate stakeholders in showcasing realistic communication goals for what AfCFTA

stands for, what it hopes to achieve, as well as its Standard Operational Practices as a way of carrying everyone on board. This would help ensure that people rally around AfCFTA with healthy and positive attitudes, knowing how beneficial it is.

Today's multiple digital platforms, print, and electronic media spaces provide enhanced opportunities for engagement and visibility for such strategic communications in targeting appropriate audiences and demographics. For example, Africa's teeming youth, the unemployed and the ICBT communities must be made to know and appreciate the AfCFTA, especially in answering such questions as: "What is in it for me?" "How does this improve upon my lot?" "Am I the primary beneficiary or it is all a rehash or rebranding of the many taxes from which I have no direct benefits?" Much of such strategic communication should target social media handles which are the communication tools with which today's youth identifies most.

## 3. Conclusion

From the discussions so far, this paper concludes that AfCFTA has impressively come a long way since its humble beginnings. Given that almost all Member States of the AU have consented to the initiative as a potential tool for transforming the continent, AfCFTA is on a good take-off, especially given that its Head Office is already operational within a relatively short period. It has the structural framework and what it takes to make an impact within its Constitutive Act.

It also benefits from hindsight experiences. However, for AfCFTA to have full control over its activities and establish fruitful engagement with the informal sector players, it may have to consider exploring, standardizing, and defining what constitutes informal cross-border trading.

This will ensure that the negative tag of 'smuggling' which is not necessarily the case for all informal cross-border trading will not be excessively associated with ICBT. This makes it easier for all to get on board. The high percentage of women and children involved in ICBT suggests that they are a force to reckon with. Consequently, it is imperative that deliberate positive interventions that focus on gender dimensions ought to be factored into the AfCFTA initiative.

In the context of the Blue economy, it must be mentioned that Africa, like other continents, has substantial territorial waters to support the creation of employment in the Blue economy industry. Together with the Green economy, the creation of decent jobs to address the high unemployment rate among the youth will work in favour of boosting Africa's economy and its intra-continental economic landscape.

On the whole, however, what remains is the extent to which African states are readily positioned to engage

effectively toward harnessing the gains which AfCFTA professes. How AfCFTA will practically entice the followership of Africans to embrace this continental intervention in its truest commitment remains to be seen.

There appears to be insufficient connectedness between AfCFTA as an institution and the masses of the African people, whose appreciation and involvement will fuel the engines of AfCFTA's growth which needs delicate attention. What also remains to be appreciated is that, like other strategic and autonomous AU initiatives such as the NEPAD and APRM, AfCFTA looks very promising in converting Africa into a giant commercial hub, but it would need the support and dedicated patronage of all Africans to transition effectively from its take off to a sustainable intervention.

#### 4. Recommendations

1. It is important that information on the entire concept of AfCFTA is disseminated to nationals of all participating countries, especially the youth, women and SMEs who form the bulk target, also because they are directly involved in ICBT so that everyone is brought on board, and the private sector could better organize itself appropriately. Particularly, exhaustive education and information should be easily made available for ICBT practitioners.
2. Appropriate and exhaustive all-inclusive infrastructure capable of containing the demands of AfCFTA should be put in place as important and strategic bait.
3. There is an urgent need for building the capacity of the private sector on AfCFTA and its inherent opportunities and operational mechanisms at national and continental levels. Toolkits in different languages at national and regional levels could serve as an effective way to reach out to a large number in the private sector, especially SMEs.
4. Administrative bottlenecks should be drastically reduced and eliminated where possible.
5. Where possible, trading within the same region should be promoted to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions while reducing transportation and time constraints.
6. Emerging graduates of various levels of educational institutions should be exposed to the AfCFTA concept so that they could factor appropriate business interests into their activities.
7. Special attention should be given to the gender dimensions for the many reasons advanced in this paper.
8. In the context of terrorism and organized cross-border crimes, it is important that multilateral and regional cooperation are strengthened to maintain the peace, security and socio-economic development of the continent. Strengthening the capacity to pick Early Warning Signals (EWS), applying Artificial Intelligence (AI) and effective surveillance, monitoring and evaluation could place the icing on the cake.

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