

# The Mashariki Today

## The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Revitalizing Pan-Africanism for Sustainable Peace and Development within COMESA



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#### Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), officially launched in January 2021, marks a pivotal moment in Africa's journey toward economic integration, particularly within the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) countries.<sup>1</sup> As the largest free trade area in the world by the number of participating countries, AfCFTA aims to establish a unified market for goods and services, fostering increased intra-African trade and significantly reducing the trade barriers that have historically impeded economic collaboration. Beyond its economic ambitions, it presents a profound opportunity to revitalize the principles of pan-Africanism—a philosophical and political movement that emphasizes unity, solidarity, and cooperation among COMESA member states.<sup>2</sup> In this context, peace can be envisioned as an outcome of the economic empowerment and opportunities generated by the AfCFTA, particularly in an era marked by a growing demographic dividend.

By promoting economic interdependence, AfCFTA seeks to tackle longstanding challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality that have long plagued the continent, including COMESA member states.<sup>3</sup> Its objectives extend beyond economic growth; AfCFTA aims to harness Africa's diverse resources, talent, and creativity. As countries engage in heightened trade and investment, they can collectively enhance their resilience against global economic fluctuations, fostering a more stable and prosperous future. The trade-driven growth holds the promise of reducing tensions and promoting stability by addressing the root causes of conflict, such as economic disparity and lack of economic opportunities. Moreover, AfCFTA aligns seamlessly with the broader goals of the African Union's Agenda 2063, which envisions an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens.<sup>4</sup>

In the following sections, this commentary will explore how AfCFTA can serve as a catalyst for sustainable peace and development in the COMESA region by addressing key challenges and offering targeted policy recommendations to maximize its impact.



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## Key Issues

### Economic Empowerment and Job Creation

One of the most promising aspects of AfCFTA is its potential for economic empowerment. By increasing intra-African trade, it is estimated to boost trade by over 40% within a decade.<sup>5</sup> This economic uplift can lead to significant job creation, particularly among the continent's youth, who constitute a substantial portion of the population. As employment opportunities grow, so too does the potential to reduce poverty and inequality—two key drivers of conflict and instability.

<sup>1</sup>East African Community. (n.d.). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement. Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://www.eac.int/trade/international-trade/trade-agreements/african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-agreement>

<sup>2</sup>World Bank. (2021). The African Continental Free Trade Area. Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/the-african-continental-free-trade-area>

<sup>3</sup>Afripoli. (2023). The AfCFTA can help address African inequalities. Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://afripoli.org/the-afcfta-can-help-address-african-inequalities>

<sup>4</sup>African Union. (n.d.). Agenda 2063: The Africa we want. Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

Additionally, by promoting economic interdependence, AfCFTA fosters a sense of unity among the COMESA bloc. Economic cooperation encourages nations to work collaboratively toward shared goals, creating a more stable and peaceful continent. To fully realize this potential, member state governments must prioritize policies that support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and invest in sectors likely to generate substantial employment.



### Strengthening Regional Cooperation

AfCFTA presents a crucial opportunity for enhancing regional cooperation among COMESA member states. By facilitating increased trade and economic collaboration, the agreement reinforces the principles of pan-Africanism, promoting solidarity among countries facing shared challenges. This cooperation is essential for addressing complex issues such as security threats, climate change, and public health emergencies, which require collective action and coordinated responses.

As a regional trade bloc, COMESA plays a pivotal role in leveraging the AfCFTA framework to tackle these challenges effectively. Increased collaboration among member states can lead to joint initiatives and strategies that address common concerns, such as infrastructure deficits and trade barriers. This dynamic can create a more resilient continent, better equipped to respond to crises and seize opportunities for sustainable development.

However, before these opportunities can be strengthened, it is important to analyze the existing challenges that impede progress. Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) remain a significant obstacle, encompassing issues such as import quotas, complex customs procedures, and technical standards that vary across borders.<sup>6</sup> These NTBs create inefficiencies and increase the cost of trade, undermining the potential benefits of regional integration. Overlapping membership in multiple regional economic communities (RECs) can also complicate cooperative efforts, as countries must navigate differing regulatory

<sup>5</sup>Mo Ibrahim Foundation. (2023). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Intra-continental trade still lowest globally. Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/news/2023/african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-intra-continental-trade-still-lowest-globally>

<sup>6</sup>Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade. Tradebarriers.org. Retrieved from: [https://www.tradebarriers.org/ntb/non\\_tariff\\_barriers](https://www.tradebarriers.org/ntb/non_tariff_barriers)

frameworks and align their policies accordingly. Bilateral agreements, such as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with non-African entities, may further hinder unified approaches, as these arrangements can prioritize external trade relationships over intra-African trade.

Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort from different regional trade bloc member states to harmonize regulations, streamline customs procedures, and adopt cohesive trade policies. Building mutual trust and shared goals is essential for overcoming these challenges and ensuring the effective implementation of the AfCFTA, fostering deeper regional integration and sustainable development.

### Cultural Exchange and Identity

Revitalizing pan-Africanism also involves fostering a shared African identity through cultural exchange. AfCFTA provides a platform for the movement of goods, services, and ideas across borders, enabling cultural interactions that enhance mutual respect and understanding. This cultural solidarity can serve as a foundation for peaceful coexistence and cooperation among diverse communities.

To promote cultural exchange, initiatives should be developed that celebrate Africa's rich diversity while emphasizing common heritage. Governments, civil society, and the private sector can collaborate on projects that facilitate cultural interactions, such as festivals, trade fairs, and educational exchanges. By fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity, AfCFTA can contribute to social cohesion and peacebuilding within COMESA countries.



### Addressing Infrastructural Deficits

Despite the potential benefits of the AfCFTA, several challenges must be addressed to ensure its success. One pressing issue is the inadequate infrastructure that hampers intra-African trade. Poor transportation networks, limited energy access, and underdeveloped digital infrastructure continue to pose significant barriers to economic integration.

To overcome these challenges, COMESA member states should prioritize infrastructure development, leveraging public-private partnerships to mobilize

resources. Investment in critical infrastructure—such as roads, ports, and energy systems—will enhance connectivity and facilitate trade, ultimately contributing to the AfCFTA's goals. However, it is also important to appraise ongoing interventions such as the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and various bilateral infrastructure projects across the continent. These initiatives play a crucial role in shaping the infrastructure landscape, providing lessons and potential frameworks for collaboration that could accelerate progress towards regional integration.



### Regulatory Harmonization

A significant challenge is the lack of harmonized regulations and standards across COMESA member states, which hampers trade under the AfCFTA. For instance, trade between Kenya and Tanzania has historically faced obstacles due to inconsistent agricultural standards, such as varying phytosanitary requirements.<sup>7</sup> These discrepancies result in delays and increased costs for exporters. The COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) aims to address these issues by promoting consistent regulations, ensuring streamlined trade in sectors like agriculture and manufacturing across member states including Zambia.

The African Union (AU) and regional economic communities should work collaboratively to develop and implement harmonized regulatory frameworks. This will require ongoing dialogue and cooperation among member states to ensure that the AfCFTA operates effectively and efficiently.

### Political Will and Governance

Effective implementation of the AfCFTA hinges on strong political will and good governance. Political instability, corruption, and a lack of accountability can undermine the effectiveness of the agreement. Leaders must demonstrate a commitment to this agreement by prioritizing transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in their governance practices.

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for good governance and holding governments accountable. Encouraging citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among citizens, contributing to the successful implementation of the AfCFTA.



### Non-Tariff Barriers in COMESA

Non-tariff barriers, such as customs delays and bureaucratic red tape, present significant challenges to trade under AfCFTA. These barriers undermine regional economic integration and trade efficiency. To effectively address NTBs, COMESA and the African Union should establish robust mechanisms for monitoring, reporting, and resolving these barriers to ensure the seamless flow of goods and services across member states.

By streamlining customs procedures and minimizing bureaucratic hurdles, COMESA member states can foster a trade environment that encourages regional cooperation and economic growth. The adoption of technology solutions, such as e-customs platforms, can further bolster efficiency, enhance transparency, and reduce delays in cross-border trade. These efforts are crucial for enabling COMESA to capitalize on the benefits of AfCFTA while promoting regional trade competitiveness.

### Policy Recommendations

To maximize the potential of the AfCFTA as a driver of pan-Africanism, peace, and sustainable development, within COMESA, the following policy recommendations should be considered:

1. **Invest in Infrastructure Development:** Prioritize key infrastructure projects that enhance transportation, energy networks, and digital connectivity within the COMESA region. Public-private partnerships should be leveraged to mobilize the necessary resources and expertise for these initiatives, ensuring they align with regional development goals.
2. **Strengthen COMESA's Institutional Capacity:** Enhance the capability of COMESA to implement the AfCFTA effectively. This includes robust monitoring of trade flows, addressing non-tariff barriers specific to the region, and promoting compliance with harmonized regulations to facilitate smoother intra-regional trade.

<sup>7</sup>Kenya and Tanzania Veterinary Authorities resolve Poultry trade disputes. The East African. Retrieved from: <https://www.eac.int/press-releases/157-trade/3081-kenya-and-tanzania-veterinary-authorities-resolve-poultry-trade-disputes>

3. **Foster Stakeholder Engagement:** Ensure the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society, in the implementation of the AfCFTA within COMESA. Broad consultations will help address regional needs and concerns, making the trade agreement more inclusive and effective.
4. **Promote Capacity Building for COMESA Member States:** Implement targeted training programs for businesses, particularly SMEs, within the COMESA region to help them effectively navigate the AfCFTA. Emphasize understanding trade regulations and building competitiveness to maximize the benefits of regional integration.
5. **Enhance Trade Facilitation Measures in COMESA:** Streamline customs procedures and reduce delays at key border points within the COMESA region. Adoption of modern technology solutions can significantly improve the efficiency and transparency of trade processes, fostering greater regional trade flows.
6. **Promote Peacebuilding Initiatives through COMESA:** Leverage the AfCFTA as a platform for peacebuilding by facilitating dialogue among COMESA member states on shared challenges. Establish regional forums for collaboration and cooperation to address conflicts and reinforce stability through economic integration.

## Conclusion

The African Continental Free Trade Area represents a unique opportunity to revitalize pan-Africanism and contribute to sustainable peace and development across the COMESA member states. By promoting economic empowerment, regional cooperation, and cultural exchange, the AfCFTA can lay the groundwork for a more united and resilient regional trade bloc. However, addressing challenges such as infrastructure deficits, regulatory harmonization, and the need for political will is essential for the successful implementation of the agreement.

By adopting the recommended policy interventions, COMESA member states can harness the power of the AfCFTA to create a brighter future characterized by prosperity, stability, and unity. Ultimately, AfCFTA is not just an economic agreement; it is a transformative opportunity to reinvigorate the spirit of pan-Africanism and pave the way for sustainable peace and development in the region.



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