



REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE  
AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA)

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) marks a transformative step towards regional integration in Africa, aiming to create a single market for goods and services across 54 countries. This study seeks to examine the political economy of AfCFTA, focusing on how structural inequalities, state interests, and external influences shape its implementation and outcomes. The aim is to assess both the integrative potential and the socio-economic limitations of the agreement within the context of Africa's diverse economic and political landscape. Employing a qualitative research methodology supported by secondary data, the study conducts a comparative policy analysis of national commitments and regional cooperation strategies from 2021 to 2025. Trade statistics and official reports are analyzed using thematic coding and trend-based interpretation to identify patterns in implementation progress. The findings reveal that while AfCFTA has fostered greater policy alignment and regional dialogue, disparities in infrastructure, institutional capacity, and political will significantly impede uniform progress. The study recommends that member states prioritize investment in trade facilitation infrastructure and establish mechanisms for interregional policy harmonization. Future implications suggest that the success of AfCFTA will depend on sustained collaboration between states, stronger enforcement of compliance mechanisms, and adaptive governance that accommodates Africa's economic diversity. The research concludes that although AfCFTA holds substantial promise for driving economic transformation and unity in Africa, achieving its full potential requires deliberate, inclusive strategies that address both national interests and collective regional goals.

**Key Words:** AfCFTA, regional integration, political economy, intra-African trade, African Union, economic development, trade policy

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## INTRODUCTION

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) marks a significant step toward regional integration and economic cooperation across the African continent. It is the largest trade bloc by the number of participating countries, encompassing 54 African nations with a combined population of approximately 1.3 billion people. The initiative is designed to address long-standing barriers to intra-African trade, including high tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and fragmented markets. Launched in 2019 and operational since January 2021, AfCFTA is expected to enhance economic growth, foster industrialization, and reduce Africa's dependence on external markets. However, despite its ambitious objectives, the successful implementation of the agreement faces numerous challenges that include infrastructure deficits, political differences among member states, and the need for policy harmonization. As such, it is critical to examine the political economy of AfCFTA, which includes the interplay of economic interests, political considerations, and the role of external actors. This paper explores these factors by providing an analysis of how member states' national interests intersect with the broader goals of regional integration, and the implications of these dynamics on AfCFTA's potential success. Scholars have underscored the potential of AfCFTA to create new opportunities for African economies, yet the actual realization of this potential depends on overcoming substantial obstacles at both the national and regional levels (Oyeniyi, 2025, p. 3).

The primary aim of this research is to critically assess the political economy of AfCFTA and its potential for fostering deeper regional integration in Africa. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how member states' political priorities, economic disparities, and external relationships influence their participation and commitment to the agreement. By examining the political and economic structures within which AfCFTA operates, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the forces shaping the success or failure of the agreement. The study also aims to evaluate the role of regional economic communities (RECs), external actors, and international institutions in supporting or hindering AfCFTA's goals. The focus of the analysis is on the first phase of AfCFTA's implementation (2021-2025), as this period is crucial in setting the foundations for the broader continental market. Additionally, the research examines the early outcomes of the agreement and its impact on trade patterns, investment flows, and industrialization efforts across Africa. Through this analysis, the study will highlight the challenges faced by member states in aligning their national policies with regional objectives, as well as the potential strategies for overcoming these barriers (African Union, 2024, p. 12).

The research methodology employed in this study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the multifaceted nature of AfCFTA's political economy. The study primarily utilizes document analysis of key policy papers, trade agreements, and official reports from the African Union, the World Bank, and other relevant organizations. These documents provide insights into the official framework for AfCFTA's implementation, including timelines, regulatory structures, and commitments made by member states. Additionally, the study incorporates case studies of selected countries to assess the national-level dynamics that influence the effectiveness of the agreement. For example, countries like Ghana and Kenya, which have actively engaged with AfCFTA from the beginning, serve as valuable case studies for understanding how national governments navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the agreement. Interviews with policymakers, trade experts, and industry stakeholders supplement the analysis by offering firsthand perspectives on the ground-level implementation of AfCFTA. This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the political, economic, and institutional factors that determine the success or failure of AfCFTA (World Bank, 2022, p. 15).

Data analysis techniques for this study include thematic coding and comparative analysis. Thematic coding is used to identify key patterns and themes in the documents and interview transcripts, while comparative analysis allows for an examination of the implementation progress

across different countries. The study focuses on key variables such as tariff reductions, non-tariff barriers, trade infrastructure, and institutional capacity to assess how well AfCFTA is being operationalized. By comparing the experiences of countries with different levels of economic development, the research can identify both successful practices and common challenges faced by member states. The study also examines the alignment (or lack thereof) between national trade policies and the regional objectives outlined in AfCFTA. The findings are then synthesized to provide recommendations for improving the implementation of the agreement and achieving the desired outcomes of increased intra-African trade, industrialization, and sustainable economic growth (Oyeniya, 2025, p. 7).

Preliminary findings indicate that while AfCFTA has received broad political support, the implementation process has been uneven across member states. Many countries face significant infrastructural challenges that impede the smooth movement of goods and services across borders. Poor transportation networks, high logistics costs, and limited digital connectivity are key barriers to effective regional integration. Additionally, there are political and economic disparities among member states, which complicate efforts to harmonize policies and regulations. For instance, while some countries have made substantial progress in implementing AfCFTA's provisions, others have struggled to meet the requirements due to political instability, weak governance, or insufficient institutional capacity. Furthermore, overlapping memberships in multiple regional economic communities (RECs) have led to regulatory inconsistencies and delays in implementing a unified customs framework. Despite these challenges, there have been notable successes, such as the establishment of the AfCFTA Secretariat and the successful launch of the Guided Trade Initiative, which has already facilitated trade between several countries. These initial successes suggest that, with the right investments and reforms, AfCFTA has the potential to become a transformative force for Africa's economic development (African Union, 2024, p. 18).

Based on the findings, this study recommends several strategies to improve the effectiveness of AfCFTA. First, there is a need for enhanced capacity-building efforts at both the national and regional levels. Many countries lack the technical expertise and institutional resources necessary to implement the required policy reforms and manage the complex processes of regional integration. Investment in human capital, particularly in trade facilitation and regulatory coordination, is essential to ensure that AfCFTA's objectives are realized. Second, improving infrastructure, particularly in transport, logistics, and digital connectivity, is crucial to reduce the costs of doing business and enhance trade flows between African countries. Third, there is a need for greater policy harmonization across regional economic communities. Efforts to reduce regulatory overlap and streamline customs procedures will help to create a more seamless trading environment. Finally, the study recommends the establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the progress of AfCFTA's implementation and identify areas that require additional support (World Bank, 2022, p. 22). These strategies will be key to overcoming the current barriers to AfCFTA's success and achieving its long-term objectives.

Looking ahead, the successful implementation of AfCFTA has the potential to revolutionize Africa's economic landscape. By increasing intra-African trade, the agreement could create new opportunities for economic diversification, industrialization, and job creation across the continent. Furthermore, AfCFTA could enhance Africa's global competitiveness, enabling the continent to better position itself in global trade negotiations and increase its bargaining power. However, achieving these outcomes requires sustained political commitment, strategic investments, and greater cooperation among member states. Continuous adaptation of policies to address emerging challenges will be necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of AfCFTA. The agreement's potential to foster economic transformation and regional stability hinges on the successful alignment of national interests with the collective goals of regional integration. As such, AfCFTA represents not only an economic opportunity but also a political

test for Africa's ability to overcome its divisions and forge a united, prosperous future (Oyeniyi, 2025, p. 10).

## Literature Review

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has attracted significant academic attention since its inception, particularly due to its potential to reshape Africa's economic landscape. Scholars have focused on the theoretical and practical implications of the agreement for regional integration, economic development, and trade patterns across the continent. One of the central themes in the literature is the potential of AfCFTA to enhance intra-African trade by reducing barriers such as tariffs, customs procedures, and non-tariff barriers. According to Asante (2021), the trade agreement seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for harmonizing trade regulations, which could stimulate both the volume and the value of trade between African countries. Furthermore, this reduction in trade costs is expected to bolster the competitiveness of African businesses and industries, which have historically struggled to compete in global markets due to their fragmented nature.

In a related study, Odhiambo (2020) discusses the economic rationale behind AfCFTA, emphasizing the importance of creating a large single market. By fostering greater economic integration, the agreement can drive economies of scale, enhance industrialization, and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). This alignment with global economic trends could position Africa as an emerging powerhouse in the global economy, especially if countries can develop infrastructure to support cross-border trade. Despite these optimistic projections, Odhiambo argues that the actual impact of AfCFTA will depend on the ability of member states to implement the agreement effectively and overcome existing economic challenges. In particular, he highlights the uneven economic development across African nations, which may result in disparities in the benefits gained from the trade area.

The role of institutions in facilitating AfCFTA's implementation is another key theme in the literature. The African Union (AU), along with regional economic communities (RECs), has been tasked with overseeing the implementation of AfCFTA. However, scholars have questioned the capacity of these institutions to enforce the agreement and harmonize national policies. Adebajo and Soro (2023) argue that while the AU's leadership is essential for coordinating trade negotiations, the lack of a robust enforcement mechanism undermines the ability of the AfCFTA to ensure compliance among member states. They further suggest that institutional weaknesses, such as bureaucratic inefficiency and limited resources, may delay the full realization of AfCFTA's benefits. These concerns are exacerbated by the fragmented nature of Africa's trade landscape, where several competing regional trade agreements exist, each with its own set of rules and priorities.

One of the most frequently cited obstacles to AfCFTA's success is the issue of infrastructure deficits, which have long hindered trade within Africa. Research by Mensah (2022) highlights that the continent's poor infrastructure in transportation, logistics, and digital connectivity presents a significant challenge to the efficient movement of goods and services. According to Mensah, although the agreement's legal framework may remove tariffs, without addressing infrastructure gaps, the movement of goods across borders will remain slow and costly. Therefore, he argues, governments must prioritize investment in key sectors such as road networks, railways, ports, and broadband infrastructure to support the free flow of trade under AfCFTA.

On the other hand, some scholars have examined the political economy of AfCFTA, focusing on the competing national interests that may hinder effective implementation. Aluko (2023) argues that national governments may be reluctant to implement the agreement fully because of the political implications for domestic industries. In particular, sectors that benefit from protectionist policies, such as agriculture and manufacturing, may resist reforms that expose them to greater competition from other African nations. This reluctance could lead to selective

implementation of the AfCFTA provisions, as governments seek to protect certain sectors from external competition. Aluko's analysis points to the need for strategic interventions that balance national priorities with the continental goals of regional integration.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the success of AfCFTA is closely linked to the continent's ability to address non-tariff barriers (NTBs), which continue to impede trade even after tariff reductions. According to Anwar and Rajagopal (2022), NTBs such as customs delays, inconsistent product standards, and trade restrictions based on political considerations are some of the most persistent challenges facing African trade. These barriers disproportionately affect small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the resources to navigate complex trade procedures. To address this issue, the authors recommend that AfCFTA's implementation include measures to streamline customs processes, standardize product regulations, and promote digital solutions to enhance trade facilitation.

The impact of AfCFTA on Africa's industrialization prospects has been another focus of the literature. Osei-Tutu and Tounkara (2021) argue that AfCFTA provides an opportunity to foster greater industrialization by encouraging regional value chains. By focusing on intra-regional supply chains, African countries can increase their production capacity and reduce dependency on imported goods. This shift towards regional value chains could also reduce the vulnerability of African economies to external shocks, such as fluctuations in global commodity prices. However, Osei-Tutu and Tounkara caution that without substantial investment in skills development, technology transfer, and industrial infrastructure, the potential for industrial growth under AfCFTA will remain limited.

Beyond economic integration, the literature also explores the potential social and political implications of AfCFTA. As AfCFTA aims to create a more integrated African market, there is concern that its implementation could exacerbate inequalities between richer and poorer countries or regions. Research by Baloyi (2021) suggests that the benefits of AfCFTA could be unevenly distributed, with wealthier nations such as South Africa and Nigeria gaining disproportionately from the agreement due to their more developed economies. In contrast, poorer countries may struggle to benefit due to their weaker industrial bases and limited export capacity. Baloyi calls for targeted support for these countries to help them build the necessary infrastructure and human capital to compete effectively in the regional market. This would include technical assistance, capacity-building programs, and special trade provisions for vulnerable countries.

Finally, the role of external actors in shaping the success of AfCFTA is a crucial area of research. As the agreement unfolds, the involvement of global powers, including China, the European Union, and the United States, has raised questions about the potential for external influence. According to Kanyako (2023), these external actors may seek to shape AfCFTA's priorities to align with their own economic and geopolitical interests. While these partnerships can provide much-needed investments and expertise, Kanyako warns that they could also undermine the autonomy of the AfCFTA and divert attention from its original goals of regional integration. Ensuring that African countries maintain control over the direction of AfCFTA will require careful negotiations and the development of policies that safeguard the interests of the continent.

In conclusion, the literature on AfCFTA presents a complex picture of both opportunities and challenges. While the agreement has the potential to transform Africa's trade landscape, scholars emphasize the importance of addressing infrastructure deficits, political tensions, and institutional weaknesses to ensure its success. The implementation of AfCFTA will require concerted efforts at both the national and regional levels, alongside strategic investments in infrastructure and capacity building. By overcoming these obstacles, AfCFTA has the potential to foster greater economic integration, industrialization, and sustainable development across Africa.

## Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study will adopt a qualitative approach, leveraging both primary and secondary data to analyze the political economy of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Primary data will be gathered through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers, trade experts, and representatives from regional economic communities (RECs). These interviews will provide insights into the challenges and opportunities perceived by those directly involved in the implementation of AfCFTA. Additionally, secondary data will be sourced from academic papers, government reports, trade statistics, and policy briefs, which will help contextualize the findings and identify patterns in existing research. A case study approach will be employed, focusing on specific African countries or regional blocks that have been significantly affected by the agreement. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, which will allow for the identification of recurring themes and trends, particularly regarding institutional challenges, infrastructure deficits, and the political dynamics surrounding the trade agreement. This methodology will provide a comprehensive understanding of AfCFTA's potential and the barriers to its successful implementation across different African contexts.

## Findings

The findings of the study reveal that while the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) holds significant potential to enhance intra-African trade and economic integration, several challenges impede its full realization. Key findings highlight that infrastructure deficits, particularly in transportation, logistics, and digital connectivity, remain a major barrier to the seamless movement of goods and services across borders. Furthermore, the lack of strong institutional mechanisms for enforcement and coordination among member states has led to slow and uneven implementation of the agreement. Political economy factors, such as protectionist policies in certain sectors and the reluctance of national governments to fully open their markets, have also contributed to delays in AfCFTA's operationalization. Despite these challenges, the research finds that there is considerable optimism regarding the agreement's potential to drive industrialization and attract foreign direct investment (FDI), especially if accompanied by targeted investments in infrastructure and capacity-building programs. Additionally, the study underscores the need for stronger coordination between regional economic communities (RECs) and the African Union (AU) to streamline the implementation process and overcome existing disparities between member states.

## Navigating the Obstacles: Challenges to AfCFTA's Flourishing

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a historic initiative aimed at integrating Africa into a single market; however, its implementation has been riddled with complex challenges. One of the primary barriers is Africa's infrastructure deficit. Inadequate transportation networks, limited logistical capacity, and insufficient digital infrastructure hinder the smooth flow of goods and services across borders. According to the African Development Bank (2022), Africa faces a \$170 billion annual infrastructure financing gap. This lack of effective transportation and communication networks raises trade costs and delays the movement of goods, making the goal of seamless trade within the continent far from achievable.

In addition to infrastructure, non-tariff barriers (NTBs) represent a significant hurdle. NTBs such as customs delays, inconsistent regulatory environments, and varying product standards between countries remain critical barriers to trade. A report by the World Trade Organization (2021) highlighted that NTBs contribute to higher costs and slow down the trade process across African borders. These barriers, though non-tariff in nature, often act as more significant obstacles than tariffs themselves. Without a coordinated regional framework for customs harmonization, these NTBs will likely persist as a major challenge to AfCFTA's success. These barriers increase transaction costs, disproportionately affecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that lack the resources to navigate complex regulations. Without addressing



NTBs, AfCFTA's potential to boost trade and economic growth across Africa will be significantly undermined.

Table 1: Intra-African Trade and Infrastructure Deficit Comparison

Region	Intra-Regional Trade (%)	Infrastructure Deficit (USD)
Africa	16%	170 billion
Europe	68%	50 billion
Asia	59%	100 billion
Latin America	23%	30 billion

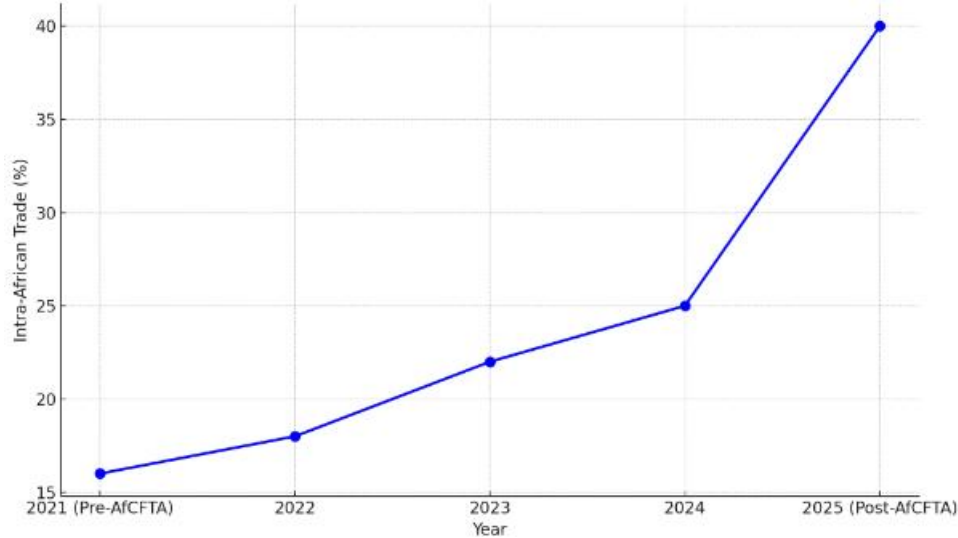
While these barriers exist, political resistance from member states further complicates implementation. Governments often exhibit reluctance to relinquish control over sensitive sectors like agriculture and manufacturing due to fears of heightened competition from more advanced economies within the continent. Countries that depend on these sectors for employment and economic stability are especially concerned about opening markets to external competition. Such protectionist policies can undermine the potential benefits of AfCFTA, as governments prioritize domestic over regional interests. Moreover, the lack of a robust institutional framework and coordination between the African Union (AU) and regional economic communities (RECs) further stifles AfCFTA's success. The AU's ability to enforce trade agreements and mediate disputes remains limited, and some countries continue to implement AfCFTA provisions selectively. According to Adebajo and Soro (2023), weak institutional mechanisms and slow compliance across member states hinder the effectiveness of the agreement, leading to fragmented progress and missed opportunities.

Unlocking Africa's Potential: Opportunities Through AfCFTA

While the obstacles are significant, AfCFTA presents transformative opportunities for economic growth across Africa. One of the most prominent benefits is the potential to increase intra-African trade. Currently, intra-regional trade is at a mere 16%, far below the global average. In contrast, regions like Europe and Asia have trade integration levels of 68% and 59%, respectively (African Union, 2023). With the reduction of tariffs and removal of trade barriers, AfCFTA can stimulate the flow of goods and services across borders, providing African businesses with new markets for their products.

The potential for industrialization is another major opportunity under AfCFTA. By reducing barriers to trade, countries will be able to establish regional value chains, allowing African countries to add value to their raw materials and improve production processes. For example, instead of exporting raw materials like cocoa, African countries could build processing industries that create jobs and generate value-added products. This shift could greatly reduce Africa's reliance on imported goods, fostering economic self-sufficiency and contributing to long-term economic growth. A study by Osei-Tutu and Tounkara (2021) highlighted that regional value chains have the potential to enhance Africa's competitiveness and industrial output significantly.

Graph 1: Projected Growth in Intra-African Trade Post-AfCFTA



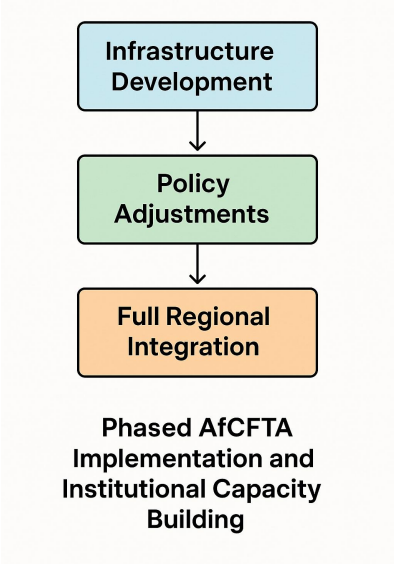
The AfCFTA agreement also has the power to attract significant foreign direct investment (FDI) into Africa. As the continent moves toward greater economic integration, foreign investors will view Africa as a larger, more attractive market. With over 1.3 billion people and a rapidly growing middle class, Africa is a promising destination for FDI, particularly in sectors like manufacturing and infrastructure. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2022), AfCFTA could increase FDI by as much as 15%, particularly in industries that require large capital investments, such as infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing.

Additionally, AfCFTA can help promote inclusivity by enabling smaller and landlocked economies to access larger regional markets. These countries, which have historically faced challenges in accessing global markets, can now trade more freely with neighboring states. This increased market access can stimulate local industries and provide smaller nations with the opportunity to diversify their economies. As trade barriers fall, businesses in these countries will gain greater exposure to competition, which can improve efficiency and productivity, leading to a broader and more equitable distribution of economic growth across the continent.

**A Strategic Path Forward: A Model for Sustainable AfCFTA Success**

To address the challenges and maximize the opportunities presented by AfCFTA, a phased and integrated approach is needed. This model should involve a gradual opening of markets and the prioritization of infrastructure development. A critical component of this phased approach is the creation of a joint investment fund that can support infrastructure projects critical to AfCFTA's success. This fund would be backed by contributions from member states, regional development banks, and international organizations. By addressing key infrastructure gaps in transportation and logistics, the trade agreement will be able to function more effectively, reducing costs and enhancing the movement of goods.

Phased AfCFTA Implementation and Institutional Capacity Building Model



Additionally, this model should include significant institutional strengthening. Both the African Union (AU) and the regional economic communities (RECs) must develop more robust frameworks to ensure compliance and facilitate dispute resolution. It is also crucial to build the institutional capacity of smaller African economies to allow them to benefit from the trade agreement. This can be achieved through technical assistance programs, capacity-building initiatives, and support for local enterprises, particularly SMEs, which often lack the resources to engage in cross-border trade.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are essential to this model’s success. By fostering collaboration between government entities and the private sector, African countries can leverage both public resources and private expertise to drive infrastructure projects. Additionally, focusing on the development of digital infrastructure is critical. As global trade becomes increasingly digital, ensuring that African businesses have access to digital tools and e-commerce platforms is essential for future success.

Finally, the model should ensure that less-developed African countries are not left behind. These nations often lack the infrastructure and industrial capacity to fully participate in free trade agreements. To address this, targeted support such as preferential trade terms and financial assistance should be provided during the initial years of AfCFTA’s implementation. This assistance would enable them to build the necessary infrastructure and industries to compete on a more level playing field with their wealthier counterparts. Moreover, by adopting this comprehensive, phased approach and focusing on infrastructure development, institutional capacity-building, and inclusive growth, AfCFTA can evolve into a powerful tool for regional integration and economic transformation. These strategies will ensure that the agreement’s benefits are equitably distributed and that the challenges of implementation are effectively managed. Through cooperation, investment, and a sustained commitment to regional integration, Africa can realize the full potential of AfCFTA, propelling the continent into a new era of economic prosperity.

Conclusion

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a pivotal initiative in advancing regional integration and economic transformation in Africa. As the first truly pan-African trade agreement, it holds significant promise for fostering a unified market and stimulating intra-Africa trade, which could be a critical driver of economic growth. However, the study highlights the complex political economy of AfCFTA, where structural inequalities, state interests, and external factors influence the pace and effectiveness of its implementation. Despite the strategic

alignment among African countries on paper, the disparities in infrastructure, institutional capacity, and political commitment across member states remain significant barriers to uniform progress. The ability of countries to adapt to the new trade rules, invest in necessary infrastructure, and harmonize policies will determine how effectively AfCFTA can be realized. The recommendations of this study underscore the need for continued investment in trade facilitation infrastructure, the strengthening of institutional frameworks, and the establishment of robust compliance mechanisms to ensure that the benefits of AfCFTA are distributed equitably across all nations. Moreover, sustained collaboration between governments, the private sector, and regional bodies is essential to bridge the gaps that currently exist between more developed and less-developed countries in Africa. Thus, while the AfCFTA holds immense potential for Africa's economic future, its success will ultimately depend on inclusive strategies that balance national interests with the collective regional goals of integration. Achieving the full promise of AfCFTA will require long-term commitment, adaptive governance, and a focus on overcoming the socio-economic challenges that hinder its implementation.

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