SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 2.1, (2026), pp. 6862-6872
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19636077

THE IMPLEMENTATION DEFICIT OF THE AFCFTA: EXAMINING THE GAP BETWEEN CONTINENTAL AMBITION AND NATIONAL REALITY

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Received: 26/01/2026
Accepted: 11/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

The Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) commenced in 2021, is a signature project of the African Union and brings together 1.3 billion people into one market; with intra-African trade increasing by 52% will pull another high percentage of poor Africans out of poverty. Now, African heads of state have reached a rare consensus. All but one of those 55 countries has signed it. Nonetheless, trade between African countries on the continent remains poorly integrated and collectively represents just 15-17% of continental goods trade. That gap between continental ambition and national implementation is exposed in this article, which digs up the economic reality. Drawing on extensive analysis of 34 interviews with policy makers, trade officials, manufacturers, exporters, customs officials, and scholars in Nigeria, some major problems have been identified. First, there are severe deficits in infrastructure, making the cost of trading between African countries more expensive than between the continent and the coast. Secondly, customs systems are fragmented, and member states vary in regulation. Thirdly, there's low institutional capacity and weak enforcement mechanisms. All are augmented by heavy reliance on external donors. Using neo-functionalist theory, the article points out that the African Union has successfully set agendas and developed frameworks. However, spillover effects are considerably limited by sensitivity about sovereignty, lack of a strong supranational authority, and domestic political calculation. Finally, the article returns to the country level and urges that finance be gathered, policies harmonized, institutional capacity be built up, and sustainable financing be secured to refine the AfCFTA symbol into real action.

KEYWORDS: Trade Liberalization, Regionalism, Policy Implementation, Non-tariff Barriers, Institutional Capacity, Infrastructure Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key successes of the AU in terms of achieving an integrated African economy has been the establishment of AfCFTA. Launched in 2021, the AfCFTA is a landmark agreement that will create a single African market for goods and services to increase intra-African trade and promote economic integration (African Union, 2021). This audacious new initiative has potentially profound implications for economic growth, poverty reduction, and development more generally in Africa.

By creating a single market for goods and services, the African Union claims that the primary objective of AfCFTA is to promote intra-African trade, which will expand into a continental customs union as foreseen in the Abuja Treaty. The launch of the AfCFTA has been hailed and criticized. In particular, the African Union, UNECA, and UNCTAD all attest that it will enhance trade across all 55 African states (AU, 2012). On the other hand, critics cite insufficient consultation and concerns that continental advantages may contradict national interests, evidenced by early resistance to ratification from Nigeria, among others (Wapmuk & Ali, 2022).

Despite this political consensus at the continental level, Africa remains economically fragmented, with intra-African trade contributing to less than 18% of total African trade. The AfCFTA was designed to reverse this fragmentation through the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, creating a single continental market for goods and services and facilitating the free movement of people and capital. However, several challenges remain that impede the effective implementation of the AfCFTA and limit the African Union's role in fulfilling its integration agenda.

The African Union's economic integration agenda is largely hampered by one of the continent's most critical challenges: its infrastructural deficit. African countries are undermined by a lack of proper transportation networks, energy supply, and digital generation, all needed to enable cross-border trade. The annual infrastructure financing needs in Africa are estimated to be about $108 billion (AfDB, 2022); bad roads, weak ports, and fragmented railway systems leave goods struggling to cross borders efficiently, driving higher transaction costs and limiting the usefulness of the AfCFTA.

According to the World Bank (2020), it takes on average 35 days to export goods from Africa, while the global average is 20 days. This logistical confusion is part of the reason goods from Africa are not competitive enough in regional and international markets. These infrastructural and logistical challenges counteract the African Union's agenda to enhance economic integration via the AfCFTA. Without tackling these impediments, the ambition of establishing a coherent intra-African market will continually have to be postponed.

Another major challenge is the fact that African economies are very diverse, and there is a lack of policy coherence among members. African states enjoy considerable economic diversity, from industrialization capacity and developmental status to resource endowments. Domestic political agendas have precedence over regional integration initiatives for most African states. The lack of this political will is one of the biggest barriers to success in the operationalization of AfCFTA. Some countries have lagged in ratifying the agreement or establishing legal and regulatory frameworks to govern it. By 2023, only 47 of the 55 African Union member states had ratified the AfCFTA agreement, signalling a lack of seriousness that some member states apply to an integration agenda.

Africa’s limited industrialization and dependence on primary commodities exports complicate matters further. Many African countries export raw products such as oil, minerals, and agricultural produce. A commodity-based economic model of this nature does not serve to promote intra-African trade, with African countries producing the same features and competing against each other in identical markets rather than where they sell complementary products.

Given this, the paper explores why Afro-capitalism fails at the national level. For an action which began in a climate of high hopes to have produced desired transformation results so far, and why, behind ever-increasing amounts of change gripping Africa's commercial environment, we ask what is causing a still enduring schism between.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the theory of neo-functionalism by Ernst B. Haas in 1958. Neo-functionalism is one theory of regional integration, and its conception was put forward by Ernst B. Haas shortly after the late 1950s and early 1960s. This theory was conceptualized in response to the weaknesses in classical functionalism that maintained technical and economic cooperation between states to promote political unification (Haas, 2024). Haas was the first theorist to explain how European integration occurs, in his analysis of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the subsequent steps taken toward becoming the European Economic Community (EEC). The Uniting of Europe (1958), a landmark book, laid the groundwork for neo-functionalism by postulating that economic integration would produce both functional and political spillover effects that in turn induced ever-deepening political unity (Niemann, 2020). While frameworks such as functionalism had tended to write off the need for a political framework behind integration, believing that it would happen based on mere economic cooperation (Saurugger, 2023), neo-functionalism understood that political actors, institutions, and interest groups fundamentally influenced the integration process.

The key idea that forms the basis of neo-functionalism is spillover, which explains that economic integration in one sector results in more integration in adjacent sectors through three mechanisms: functional spillover, political spillover, and cultivated spillover (Schmidt, 2024). Functional spillovers occur when economic interdependence between states grows so strong that it becomes difficult for states to operate efficiently without integrating more sectors. Political spillover describes how political loyalties shift from the national to the supranational level as political elites recognize the benefits of deeper integration (Kuhn, 2024). Supranational institutions promote integration through supranational spillover by exercising policy pressure and providing incentives for cooperation between member states (Caramani, 2024). These spillover mechanisms show that integration is not only economic or technical but also a political process dependent upon the preferences and actions of key actors.

Regionalism is defined, further, as an incremental and dynamic process driven by economic need and political will—another founding assumption of neo-functionalism. Haas argued that integration does not come automatically but is the outcome of multiple factors, with economic pressure, calculus of institutions, and shifting political preference (2024) shaping the trend. The theory of neofunctionalism explains the reasoning behind integration, suggesting that actors with limited aims and interests in the initial portion of government management will eventually integrate at a greater level. Nevertheless, it also acknowledges that integration could undergo setbacks and relapses motivated by political opposition, economic turmoil, or changes in public attitudes (Atai 2023). A criticism of neo-functionalism is that it downplayed the role of nationalism and domestic political factors as determinants of integration outcomes. It will also be a theory that is more open to potential developments at the regional level, as later adaptations have brought additional concepts into neo-functionalism.

In this way, neo-functionalism has far-reaching implications for international relations in terms of the regional integration processes taking place throughout various regions of the globe. The theory was also developed to account for European integration, but its tenets have also been utilized in other areas like Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Aniche & Oji, 2023). The theory is a useful perspective for viewing the deepening of political integration across economic fields, even in regions with different systems at the levels of politics and economy. For example, neo-functionalism helps to explain the development of regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). These groups have all adopted various paths of increased integration but show manifestations of the spillover process postulated by Haas (Rauh, 2020).

Applying neo-functionalism to the African Union (AU) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) shows that there are many opportunities for regional integration in Africa. Using neo-functional principles, the AU has thus fostered both integration and regional cooperation. Examples of cooperative ventures between nations, such as the African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), are becoming more frequent. The motivation behind this type of conduct rests on neo-functionalist ideas. As inter-state trade becomes more vital between African nations, so should functional spillover effects dominate new cooperation on problems like infrastructure development, investment policy, and financial integration (Kicha, 2021). The spillover at the functional level exerts pull-under pressure for political coordination and regulatory consensus, both of which foster greater cooperation among continental-level institutions. Yet political spillover is beginning to make itself felt: African heads of state and policymakers are learning that there are benefits in regional cooperation. Neo-functionalism underlines the relevance of supranational institutions as bodies that contrive an official's incentive to serve orders, resolve disputes, and mediate between members. These organizations are central to carrying out policies through AfCFTA. Therefore, they may also have an investor's interest in ensuring that disputes are fairly resolved, policy is functionalized, and agreements among trade partners are effectively managed. Weak infrastructure, conflicting national policies, and political obstacles stand in the way of establishing the factors necessary for structural convergence: strong private sector participation, political leadership, and sound institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a Ph.D. research dissertation, which is among the requirements for the completion of the Ph.D. programme; part of the work must be published. Qualitative research design is used as the design for this paper, as the content of the study necessitated such an approach. Introduction The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has become one of the pillars of the African Union's ambition in driving economic integration in Africa, 2018-2024. A qualitative approach was identified as being more appropriate than a quantitative approach, given the need for in-depth information on the multifaceted nature of implementation and impact of the AfCFTA.

The source of data employed is the combination of both secondary and primary sources of data. Relevant literature on AfCFTA and the African Union, academic journals, reports of international organizations, and government publications were used as secondary data sources. These provided background and context for the study. The primary data is collected from in-depth interviews with relevant actors/agents (policymakers, economists, and experts around African economic integration) to identify challenges in the integration process. Such interviews are held to direct anecdotal accounts regarding the role of the African Union in economic integration via the AfCFTA.

The paper adopts purposive sampling techniques in collecting responses and data using In-depth Interviews (IDI). The IDIs were designed to ensure that only those already involved with or informed about the AfCFTA and AU could be selected. Purposive sampling enables researchers to focus on individuals who can provide rich and relevant information, thereby enhancing data quality. Data came from practitioners in African economic integration. Methodologically, with respect to our approach, this large sample was particularly important in capturing multiple perspectives and experiences related to individuals from different parts of Africa, and emphasized understanding how the African Union has been effective in promoting economic integration through AfCFTA.

Content analysis is employed to analyze the data gathered from the field using interviews. As the data gathered comes in qualitative form, the best method of analysis is the application of content analysis. Content analysis best describes the interpretations, transcriptions, and analysis of text, videos, and audios, and makes meanings out of generated symbols. To better understand the interviews conducted on the assessment of the role of AfCFTA in promoting economic integration in Africa, the content analysis will best analyze the data; as such, it is essential for the analysis application.

4. FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of the research paper. The findings here are the results of the interview conducted, in addition to other secondary data gathered.

4.1. Infrastructure Deficits

Africa's infrastructure deficit has been repeatedly cited by many participants as one of the major challenges to the successful implementation and full realization of AfCFTA's potential, particularly in facilitating intra-regional trade and promoting economic development across the continent. Many participants, particularly exporters, expressed worry that the time of doing business across African countries is unacceptably high, with goods taking weeks or even months to be transported to neighbouring countries, due to the decayed infrastructure. A senior official of the Nigeria Export Promotion Council (NEPC) passionately expressed this position, which highlights the fundamental infrastructure crisis that is killing Africa's trade dream. African countries mostly lack large-scale industrial processes (Respondent-iv, 2025).

Despite the availability of labour and favourable market conditions, one of the main obstacles to AfCFTA is the infrastructure deficit in Africa. You don't get to talk about free trade or regional integration when half-assed and nonexistent basic transport, logistics, and energy infrastructure effectively prevent it. To my mind, the whole idea of a seamless continental market just doesn't hold water anymore. In fact, it's even easier and often cheaper for an African exporter to do business with Europe or Asia than with a neighboring African country — that's how bad things are. Countries with this level of infrastructure problem simply won't be able to fuel industrialization or drive up intra-African trade through AfCFTA, no matter what they say in their public discourses.

The same is true of those people who hold an even more critical view. As one top official from the Cocoa Exporters Association of Nigeria insists, weak infrastructures are vast obstacles to implementing the successful AfCFTA. AfCFTA with those with which it is launched (Respondent-viii, 2025) simply points out that the real problem is the weak infrastructure from which the transaction was cut. You cannot have an integrated continental market if the roads linking countries are all in a mess, touching at points through bush and all stank with rivers, the rail links are not seamless, and the border facilities belong to another age altogether. There are still many areas that cannot offer the tech conditions needed for cross-border e-commerce or efficient trade documentation. This lack of infrastructure on the ground maintains stubbornly high cost and time functions in carrying out business across Africa's borders. But I believe this goes against what AfCFTA is supposed to do, namely, enhance competition among African economies. If Africa remains function-cum-imposed at crossed logistics bottlenecks and transport centers, the AfCFTA will only linger as a magnificent vision intrinsic within limiting structure rather than becoming a practical fact.

4.2. Member States' Political and Economic Ideological Differences

Political and economic divergences amongst member states have been identified by various participants as a recurring challenge that is compromising both the successful implementation and the full potential of the AfCFTA. Commentators took up their various banners on the matter of AU–EU trade and the air of protectionism and closed border policies that preside over them, arguing that whilst few less-matured African markets appear promising with regards to free flow of goods and services, many (including Nigeria) do not share this attitude towards policy favouring national security or self-interest at the expense of continental integration. This perception gap strengthens the long-held view that Africa's drive towards a single market rest on unstable foundations of common political and economic ideologies among member states. This criticism was echoed in the summary (Respondent-xiv, 2025), which said the following:

"Despite AfCFTA's promises, there are challenges to its realization, and one of the most damaging threats is fragmentation in political and economic ideology among African states." True, some surreptitiously liberalize their markets while others roll out protectionism like a red carpet at an embassy. This leads to a situation where there is no horizontal alignment for GAFI members, which creates never-ending friction in aligning the policy and facilitating implementation. There are also competing national agendas — for some member states, AfCFTA will be seen as an opportunity, while others would see it as a threat that will imperil domestic industries. I don't see this thinking changing unless we have a keeper of the vision that is AfCFTA to leverage synergies between national economic plans at a competitive advantage. The outcome is a patchwork of integration shot through with political distrust and economic self-interest at the cost of regional development. Then the AfCFTA can hardly hope to extricate itself from its stratospheric chrysalis and become what it is meant to be: a transformative Pan-African enterprise — if African leaders will settle for mere rhetoric, at the expense of shared commitment to economic integrity, cohesion, and unity.

A member of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria, whilst taking a more analytical approach to AfCFTA, also stated that divergences in economic ideologies present among different African Blockades what can be gained from the policy direction aimed at under an AfCFTA arrangement. "The appeal of protectionism, as a national development strategy for most African governments today, from Egypt and South Sudan through to South Africa, is likely to favor nationalization and ISI polices with negative implications for the realization of continental economic integration, which will ultimately thwart AfCFTA delivery on its promised expectations," he added. Trade in many African states is still more nationalist than a continental affair, and this kills integration, the very purpose of being (Respondent-viii, 2025). Large competing philosophies on whether domestic sectors should be protected by tariffs and non-tariff barriers, or instead deregulated, resulting in gradients of uneven landscape distrust and non-cooperation. I argue that the lack of ideational coalescence, particularly concerning policies regulating regional integration, is reflected in the convergence and divergence to (or omission thereof) AfCFTA provisions at both levels, resulting in weak enforcement mechanisms (e.g., penalties for transgressions). There's plenty of political rhetoric about the unity of purpose, to be sure, but real commitment to collective sacrifice and compromise. African leaders can turn a potentially innovative economic transformation instrument into the continent's political declaration if it decides to press national interests over continental benefits.

4.3. Customs' Procedure Fragmentation and Regulatory Disparities Among Member States

A more prevalent theme among respondents is that one of the most serious threats to AfCFTA goals implementation and realization is a fragmented space of customs regimes across African countries, along with another key step. And so, the deepening of a continental market is almost completely turned around, because in fact every country has its own tariff regime and its own documentation requirements, its own system of tariff classification, and today there are dozens of non-tariff barriers. Despite an official launch of the AfCFTA in January 2021, national barriers are high and outnumber those at the regional level. One senior official of the National Chamber of Commerce is drilling this serious issue when he said:

"It appears as though every country is conducting its own customs process, paperwork requirements, and tariff classification systems, and that wholly undermines the point of having a single trade area." In my experience, transporting goods between two countries in Africa takes longer and costs more than sending them to Europe or Asia. This lack of harmonization contributes to further delays, increased transaction costs, and ultimately discourages cross-border trade altogether. Until Africa defines a genuine integrated customs architecture with common digitalized processes, mutual recognition of standards, and harmonization between borders, the AfCFTA will be little more than a theoretical object rather than an economic reality in practice. "The idea of seamless trade does not hold when each border acts as a barrier to trade rather than an entry point for integration" (Respondent-vii, 2025).

From a more critical perspective, a senior official within the Nigerian Customs Service noted in this regard that tariff and non-tariff barriers remain endemic among AfCFTA member states, thus impeding not only the successful implementation of the agreement but also its ultimate objective of pan-continental market integration. (Respondent-xviii, 2025) explained:

"All this talk about trade liberalization is all well and good, but the reality is a lot of countries still dump hidden tariffs on each other that make intra-African trade far more difficult than it needs to be." Nigeria and Kenya, for example, have been reluctant to completely lift import bans and product restrictions regarding certain products; Egypt and South Africa are also using high tariffs combined with a complicated licensing regime to shelter core domestic industries. In my opinion, if protectionist tendencies masquerading as national interest persist, AfCFTA's promise of a truly open continental market is unlikely to become a reality any time soon. It's a good agreement on paper, but in practice it continues to undermine with barriers that were originally planned to be removed" (Respondent-xviii, 2025).

4.4. Limited Institutional Capacity and Poor Enforcement Mechanisms

Another common argument that surfaced from several participants was the need for institutional capacity to be bolstered — as evidenced, in certain instances, by under-staffing, asymmetric funding levels, and poor coordination within multiple African countries — as a primary challenge inhibiting the successful execution of AfCFTA and its aim of market integration throughout Africa. This concern resonated with a member of the Nigeria AfCFTA National Action Committee, who put it this way:

"Most national trade ministries and implementing agencies don't have the technical expertise, data infrastructure, and bureaucratic efficiency to operationalize something as complicated as an agreement. In multiple ECOWAS and COMESA member countries, customs and standards authorities are chronically under-resourced or poorly coordinated, resulting in weak enforcement of AfCFTA protocols. The AfCFTA Secretariat itself, which is of immense symbolic importance, still struggles with capacity constraints — human resources, financial means, and over-reliance on technical assistance funded by development partners. These systemic shortcomings represent a deep chasm that I believe separates the political vision expressed in AU summits from the realities on the ground. Without concomitant strengthening of administrative institutions, training of officials, and improvement in overall trade-related infrastructure conditions, the AfCFTA runs the risk of remaining a great document with minimal transformative impact on Africa's economic landscape" (Respondent-i, 2025).

Likewise, the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism has also been recognized by a senior researcher and scholar from the Nigerian Army University as one of the most serious challenges frustrating a successful implementation of the AfCFTA from a more analytical perspective. He pointed out that the AU and AfCFTA Secretariat were both institutionally weak and lacked the power to ensure compliance or uniform implementation across member states. In practice, implementation of the treaty depends on individual governments securing goodwill from themselves to implement it, as many of them have shown a selective application of AfCFTA provisions with an appealing interpretation to reflect national interests. Consequently, states often restrict or delay tariff reductions to introduce contradictory trade policies without suffering meaningful consequences. He aptly elaborated:

"The agreement is mostly based on the goodwill of member states — and that's exactly where it falls apart, as most countries decide which parts to implement according to their national interests. Non-compliance does not cost states anything in practice, and although states often refuse to open their borders or delay tariff reductions, no real sanction can be attempted by the AU and AfCFTA Secretariat. So far, ad hoc border closures or stringent rules of import that are contrary to the principles of AfCFTA have been reported in Nigeria and Kenya without any corrective action taken. To my mind, this weak enforcement framework turns the agreement into little more than a political statement rather than a binding economic treaty. Unless there is a credible compliance and dispute resolution system that can act to compel its member states to live up to their obligations, the AfCFTA will never achieve its intended transformative effect" (Respondent-ix, 2025).

4.5. Inadequate Funding and Reliance on Donor Support

Indeed, AfCFTA's acute reliance on external funders has made it one of its most pressing obstacles to effective operationalization. They were very concerned that a single initiative, intended to catalyze Africa's economic transformation, is too reliant on external funding sources for 60% or more of its key programmes, i.e., capacity building through digital customs harmonization and trade facilitation reforms, and most operational activities. Rather than being founded on sound indicative financing commitments from African Governments, its sustainability rests fundamentally on the support of development partners like the EU, GIZ, AfDB, and UNECA. Such dependency creates a brittle implementation context where all progress stalls as donor priorities shift and funding cycles end. However, there are many examples of trade facilitation pilots' customs digitalization pilots in West Africa and East Africa, where donor resources have run out without sustaining commercial interests and hence not moving beyond the pilot stage, while state authorities (customs authorities) are unable to provide the resource counterpart financing needed to enable this. And this fear was beautifully captured by an official of the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who remarked (Economic, Trade & Investment Department)

"I would argue that one of AfCFTA's most under-acknowledged, yet fundamental weaknesses is its excessive reliance on donor support." Rather than establish a solid foundation on strong domestic financing and real continental ownership, many flagship deliverables were found to be relying heavily on external partners like the EU, African Development Bank, or UN Economic Commission for Africa/GIZ. This reliance leads to a brittle implementation structure, where progress is only as constant as the whims of donors—and those whims are in constant flux. For example, implementation of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) faced several national challenges because donor-approved technical assistance was not consistent, while programmes to modernize customs in East and West Africa either stalled before donor funding ended or immediately afterwards. The AfCFTA Secretariat has frequently conceded that its members fail to consistently or adequately fund their work, and as a result, it has been reliant on the support of development partners for even the most basic operational/technical functions. I believe that donor-driven models are compromising the credibility, independence, and long-term sustainability of the AfCFTA project. How do we speak of turning around Africa's economic fate if the engine of that turnaround is being funded and molded by external actors?" (Respondent-xxviii, 2025).

Another senior official of the AfCFTA Secretariat also stressed that insufficient and inconsistent payment by member states for their contributions continues to be one of the deadliest parts of this scourge on making a success of the AfCFTA. He pointed out how a lot of countries are not even able to meet their basic annual commitments to the African Union, therefore making it very hard for targeted resources for AfCFTA-related reforms, institutional strengthening, or trade facilitation programmes. As one of your clever respondents put it:

"The pact was touted with soaring ambitions, but the members' financial commitment has been shockingly weak. Most do not even manage their most basic annual contributions to the African Union, let alone specifically set aside funds in national budgets directed towards AfCFTA-related reforms or institutional upgrades/ trade facilitation schemes. As a result, important initiatives wither on the vine. Many countries in West and Central Africa, for instance, have been unable to upgrade border posts or digitalize customs systems as budgetary allocations needed were not released early enough or never made. In many countries, national AfCFTA implementation committees are simply committees with names; thousands of dollars for strategic plans and consultations cannot be spent because no funds can be sourced to convene a single meeting; there is little capacity, even if they could train customs officials or disseminate new trade protocols. To some extent, this chronic underfunding sends a worrying message: African leaders favor the concept of continental integration over supporting the infrastructure to make it happen. Without consistent and sufficient funding, AfCFTA is going to remain a remarkable architecture with little real-world effect" (Respondent-xxxiv, 2025).

4.6 Challenges Hindering the Effectiveness of Afcfta

Regarding whether there are challenges inhibiting the effective functioning of AfCFTA, the study discovered that there were indeed some challenges hindering its effectiveness. Respondent-iv stated:

"To my recollection, one of the key hindrances to achieving AfCFTA is due to Africa's huge infrastructure deficiency. Free trade or regional integration is impossible even to discuss when basic transport, logistics, and energy infrastructure are either inadequate or non-existent. Numerous countries are still challenged by bad roads, clogged ports, and unpredictable power supply, so that the cost of transporting goods across borders is exorbitantly high.

Respondent-xiv stated:

"The fundamental challenge to AfCFTA's success is the wide political and economic ideological divergence among African states. And while several governments are truly interested in those aspects of trade liberalization and open markets, a good number of the others have turned highly protectionist, settling for national objectives at the expense of continental aims. This disconnect causes perpetual strain in aligning policies as well as holding back implementation" (Respondent-xiv, 2025).

Similarly, respondent VII stated:

"Each country appears to run its own customs procedures, documentation requirements, and tariff classification systems, which defeats the purpose of a common trade area entirely." My experience is that it takes more time and pays more to move goods within two African countries than to move the goods between Europe or Asia.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Challenges Hindering the Implementation of Afcfta

On whether AfCFTA is challenged by any hindrances to effectiveness, it was learnt from the research that challenges are hindering its impact.

Respondent-iv stated:

"In my honest opinion, I believe Africa's major infrastructural deficit is one of the greatest obstacles to AfCFTA's glory. When basic transport, logistics, and energy infrastructure are non-existent or poorly developed, there is no free trade or regional integration to speak of. The cost of moving goods across borders is extremely high" (Respondent-iv, 2025), which they believe is still grappling with poor road networks, congested ports, and unreliable power supply.

Respondent-xiv stated:

"Perhaps the biggest threat to AfCFTA's success is a well-known economic fact: there are very powerful political and economic ideological differences within Africa. Some governments are serious about liberalizing trade and opening markets, while others are still very protectionist, opting for national rather than continental goals. This divergence leads to perpetual friction in harmonization of policies and impedes implementation" (Respondent-xiv, 2025).

Similarly, respondent VII stated:

"One would think that by creating a unified trade area, the member nations would unite their customs procedures, documentation requirements, and tariff classification systems — except that they do not." From what I have seen, logistics can take longer and be more expensive between two African countries than to Europe or Asia. This fragmentation causes delays, increases transaction costs, and prevents cross-border trade altogether.

It is clear from the data presented that Africa's infrastructure deficit emerged frequently throughout this analysis as a significant challenge to achieving effective implementation and realizing the full potential of AfCFTA, particularly due to its role in facilitating intra-regional trade and enhancing value-added economic growth across the continent. A significant number of the participants, especially exporters, expressed concern that the time taken to conduct business across African states is grossly unacceptable, with goods taking weeks and/or months to be moved across borders into neighbouring countries due to decayed infrastructure.

It also confirmed that the political and economic divergence between different member states presents a formidable challenge that is hindering both the effective implementation of, and the maximum potential of, AfCFTA. Numerous others pointed out that while a few other African countries honestly seek the promotion of free and open markets, some people, such as Nigeria, remain favourably inclined toward protectionist and border closure policies, so much so that they repeatedly put their nation's security and interest ahead of continental reintegration. This divergence only highlights the fragility of some of the cases for a single market across all 25 countries, mired with conflicting political and economic ideologies among its members.

Another prevalent theme across discussions was that of fragmentation (if not duplicity) of customs regimes across Africa - widely seen as one of the principal determinants impeding operationalization and realization in full, of AfCFTA's agenda for continental integration. The AfCFTA has come into official effect already, but countries observe different tariff regimes, documentation standards, and tariff classification systems, and are bedeviled by a multitude of both tariff and non-tariff barriers that destroy the core idea of a single continental market.

Although these figures reflect a responsiveness to opportunities that reside in the AfCFTA itself, many respondents cited as the biggest obstacle limiting full implementation of the Agreement and thus realization of its broader goals of continental market integration, low institutional capacity in many African countries manifested as inadequate staffing, funding, coordination, and technical expertise. A major challenge to implementation that was flagged was the AfCFTA's acute reliance on external donors and its constant begging for sustainable funding. So much of the progress in the AfCFTA is reliant upon external partners (the EU, GIZ, AfDB, UNECA, etc) rather than being based on solid financial commitments from African governments. As a result, they maintain a fragile implementation landscape in which momentum is halted as often as donor priorities change or funding cycles close.

6. CONCLUSION

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can be seen as de facto more ambitious than any regional economic grouping of its kind The African Union facilitated this initiative to form one market with a population of 1.3 billion and combined GDP totaling $3.4 trillion however these goals still equated to pushing 30 million Africans out of poverty and increasing overall intra-African trade by 52 percent But as this paper has demonstrated in detail there remains a considerable gap between meeting these continental objectives on the ground at national and regional levels What is important to note though is that while on paper consensus has been achieved at AU level (54 out of 55 member states signed up) progress in terms of realizing the goals of AfCFTA is stymied by numerous related obstacles.

The greatest obstacle is being able to build bridge roads, overburden ports, and establish stable power supplies or efficient rail systems. This makes it incredibly expensive to move products across borders in Africa Respondents noted that it is still often both easier and cheaper for African manufacturers to do business with Europe or Asia than neighbours in Africa — which undermines the whole rationale of a working continental free trade area Trade ministries and suchlike institutions across the continent cannot put such a complex treaty into practice for lack of qualified staff. It is prohibitively expensive and difficult to bring in professionals from elsewhere because, although the AfCFTA arrangement has brought in donors that support its Secretariat, this assistance does not extend to the specialized permanent staff on whom non-trivial matters depend. It is also not so much "anti-convergence" as "integrated cannot advance," which remains the problem here. Besides the impossible financial situation, if there is no coordination amongst customs bands, then even AfCFTA treaties on paper go unfulfilled. As if that were not enough, the Secretariat of the AfCFTA- Symbolically rich and filled with goodwill- is bursting at the seams.

It is strained for funds, staff who cannot be hired on their own account, and are heavily reliant upon outside organizations to take care of essential public services. It is equally bad in some respects that unequal customs procedures and regulatory discrepancies continue to persist. All governments have their own documentation requirements, commodity classification systems, systems of port entry, and customs procedures. This has resulted in an incongruous farce, which goes against what was supposed to be an agreed trade area. Non-tariff barriers, such as roadblocks, border delays, and divergent product standards, remain, particularly in Central and West Africa. They discredit the good faith between countries and raise the cost of doing business across borders. Nigeria and Kenya are currently exceptions to this: while most governments are still reluctant protectionists more inclined toward their own nation's interests than the continent as a whole Both Egypt and South Africa continue to protect local industries with high tariff walls and complex licensing procedures; perhaps the best-known examples of this mentality in Africa today Yet these kinds of outlooks go far deeper than mere differences in words or verbal stance. There are different policies among member states implemented in terms of AfCFTA content or by its means; therefore, it is not enforced consistently across the board.

6.1 Policy Recommendations

Considering the findings and discussion of the paper, the following recommendation is provided for the AfCFTA as a solution to the challenges of the implementation of the AfCFTA:

Firstly, there should be a high level of investment in quality infrastructure by the AfCFTA member states. Investment in quality infrastructure will maximize AfCFTA's benefits when significant challenges like railways, maritime, air transportation, and cross-border land transportation are addressed. Addressing these challenges can ensure infrastructural investments that are aligned with continental economic and trade objectives.

Secondly, harmonization and efficiency of customs procedures among the AfCFTA member states are highly recommended. Harmonizing the member states' customs procedures, trade policies, and trade regulatory frameworks will assist in addressing the challenges of the implementation of AfCFTA by the African states.

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