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Bridge between Trade and Development

Contribution of women and youth in AfCFTA trade to reduce poverty and create jobs

- Potential Impacts of a Continental Law on Special Economic Zones and the Development of Intra-African Trade



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Potential Impacts of a Continental Law on Special Economic Zones and the Development of Intra-African Trade

As Africa seeks to strengthen its economic integration and boost intra-African trade, the idea of a continental law governing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) takes on strategic importance.

Signed by: B. D. M.

A continental SEZ law should establish a robust legal framework that integrates the specificities of Member States, ensures coherence with national and regional policies, protects states' regulatory capacity, and promotes inclusive participation—transforming SEZs into true levers for sustainable development across Africa. A unified legal model for SEZs would facilitate the alignment of national legislation and reduce regulatory asymmetries, which are essential for streamlining intra-African trade. The 237 SEZs located across 37 African countries could thus become a strategic tool for promoting investment, accelerating growth, and enhancing the competitiveness of African nations.

In Africa, the legislative evolution of SEZs calls for a structured and attractive governance framework, particularly through the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which provides preferential access mechanisms for goods originating from SEZs, as stipulated in Article 23(1) of the Protocol on Trade in Goods and its Implementing Regulation No. 01/2023. ►

*Of the Special Economic Zone
(Senegal)*



In short, although the harmonization of SEZs in Africa presents real opportunities for the development of intra-African trade, it must be accompanied by flexible mechanisms to respond to local realities while promoting effective and sustainable economic integration.

The adoption of a continental law regulating SEZs could enhance intra-African trade by harmonizing states policies and strategies.

The Impact of Legislative Harmonization on SEZs

The implementation of a continental SEZ law would harmonize regulations across African countries, facilitating cross-border investments. It could reinforce:

- Standardization of tax and customs regimes: The African Union, through AfCFTA, is working toward harmonizing SEZ tax regimes to avoid disparities that create competitive distortions. For example, in Senegal, Law No. 2017-06 was adopted to structure SEZs and address shortcomings in previous free¹ zone regulations.
- Unification of administrative and regulatory procedures: This would improve cooperation between African states. The African Economic Zones Organization (AEZO) has issued recommendations to align SEZ regulations with AfCFTA objectives, thereby facilitating intra-African trade and strengthening economic² integration.

However, such harmonization may pose challenges, particularly regarding adaptability to local contexts. A supranational law would require effective coordination between governments to avoid legal bottlenecks and ensure successful implementation within the AfCFTA framework.

In summary, while harmonizing SEZs across Africa presents real opportunities for boosting intra-African trade, it must be accompanied by flexible mechanisms that accommodate local realities while promoting effective and sustainable economic integration.

Opportunities and Challenges of a Continental SEZ Regulation

A continental SEZ law would have profound implications for the development of intra-African trade.

■ OPPORTUNITÉS

- Transparency at the continental level and improved oversight of companies operating in SEZs, facilitating their access to the AfCFTA market.
- Increased attractiveness of African SEZs to multinational companies thanks to a unified framework, clear regulations, and attractive fiscal incentives.

¹<https://www.foncier-developpement.fr/wp-content/uploads/Presentation-Senegal-ZES-IIED-CTFD.pdf>

²https://www.africaeconomiczones.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Expose-de-politique_Declarations-et-recommandations-du-CT.pdf

The adoption of a continental law governing SEZs could play a crucial role in boosting intra-African trade.

- Facilitation of transactions and logistics, strengthening regional value chains: for instance, the Suez SEZ in Egypt plays a key role in logistics and regional trade. Located near the Suez Canal, it provides companies with easy access to African, Asian, and European markets, thereby optimizing value chains.
- Protection of African states' interests against foreign investors: Nigeria's Export Processing Zones Authority (NEPZA) has enforced strict regulations to ensure that foreign companies operating in its SEZs contribute to the local economy, such as by imposing employment quotas for Nigerian workers.

■ CHALLENGES

- Risk of excessive standardization, which could hinder the adaptability of local regulations: in Ethiopia, some SEZs have faced difficulties due to overly rigid regulations that failed to consider local specificities, causing delays in investments and project³ implementation.
- Need for effective intergovernmental coordination to avoid legal deadlocks: Ministerial Regulation No. 01/2023 on AfCFTA SEZs aims to overcome obstacles linked to regulatory divergences between member countries, which slow down the integration of SEZs into intra-African trade.

This legal framework represents an opportunity for reindustrialization and the development of intra-African trade, provided it is supported by an investment guarantee fund, a socio-economic impact observatory, and inter-state compensation mechanisms. Its success depends on its adaptability to local realities and its integration into a coherent continental strategy.

The adoption of a continental law regulating SEZs could play a crucial role in boosting intra-African trade. A harmonized regulation would strengthen investment flows, enhance economic integration, and position the continent as a strategic player in global trade. However, its implementation will require effective coordination among states to ensure a balance between attractiveness and economic sovereignty. ●



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³<https://afriqueconfidentielle.com/afrique/succes-mitige-des-zones-economiques-speciales-zes-sur-le-continent/>

Implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement in Ivory Coast: Status and Prospects

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, signed in March 2018, came into force in May 2019 and became fully operational in January 2021. This flagship project for Africa's development aims to boost intra-continental trade and support sustainable economic growth. To date, 49 Member States, including Ivory Coast, have ratified this historic agreement.

Signed by: K. O. D.



The African Union initiated the AfCFTA as part of its fundamental mission to promote the continent's economic integration. Negotiations began during the 25th Ordinary Session of the AU Summit of Heads of State and Government, held on June 15, 2015, in Johannesburg, South Africa. After four years of negotiations, the AfCFTA entered into force on May 30, 2019, following its ratification by 22 countries. Today, the Agreement has been ratified by 49¹ states, including Ivory Coast, demonstrating the strong commitment of African nations to this major continental initiative.

Ivory Coast, which has always viewed economic integration as a key development model, was among the countries that actively pushed for swift negotiations and was one of the first to submit its instruments of ratification to the AU—specifically on November 23, 2018.

In line with this strong interest in intra-African trade, Ivory Coast has launched several concrete initiatives to bring this vision to life. Considering the enthusiasm shown by economic actors, there are promising prospects for effective implementation of the AfCFTA in the near future.

¹Madagascar is the last country to ratify the AfCFTA agreement.

To date, the Agreement has been ratified by 49 states, including Ivory Coast, demonstrating the commitment of African nations to this major continental initiative.

State of Preparedness for AfCFTA Implementation in Ivory Coast

Even before submitting its instruments of ratification, Ivory Coast established the National AfCFTA Committee (CN-ZLECAf) through Decree No. 2018-514 of May 30, 2018. Under the guidance of this body, numerous activities have been carried out, including:

- Development of the National Strategy for AfCFTA Implementation;

Implementation of the CN-ZLECAf communication strategy;

Submission of signature specimens and seals for the certificate of origin to the AfCFTA Secretariat;

- Various consultations and meetings of Thematic Working Groups on different protocols of the Agreement;
- Awareness tours targeting key stakeholders;
- Several capacity-building workshops for private sector actors;
- Validation of the Private Sector AfCFTA Strategy in November 2023, including the development of an Action Plan for women and youth;
- Development of sectoral action plans for the five priority service sectors;
- Completion of a study on potential markets for Ivory Coast under the AfCFTA;
- Hosting of six (6) delegations for benchmarking purposes (Tunisia, Niger, Madagascar, Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo);
- Adoption, in April 2025, of the ordinance implementing the first phase of AfCFTA negotiations. ►



It would be desirable for Member States to regain their initial dynamism to enable economic operators, currently on hold, to fully participate in this continental project.

In addition to these tangible actions, Ivory Coast also commissioned studies to assess the economic impact of AfCFTA once fully operational. These studies suggest that Ivory Coast stands among the countries that could benefit most from effective implementation of the agreement. However, to fully capitalize on these benefits, the country must adopt a more aggressive trade approach, leveraging its structured industrial base and robust trade support institutions.

Key Priorities for Effective Implementation of the AfCFTA

The adoption of the April 2025 ordinance on the implementation of the first phase of AfCFTA negotiations marks a decisive step toward operationalization. This institutional breakthrough now paves the way for the effective rollout of a carefully crafted multi-level action framework.

At the regulatory level, it will be necessary to adopt the implementing decree on rules of origin and the implementing decree of the ordinance, as well as circulars from the General Directorate of Customs.

At the technical and operational level, key actions include integrating the liberalized tariff lines into the Automated Customs Clearance System (SYDAM) to enable declarations of goods benefiting from preferential tariffs.

Another crucial action is the financing and implementation of the national strategy, especially to support the private sector.

By making integration a national priority, Ivory Coast is strongly committed to implementing the AfCFTA. If we look at the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, which has positively impacted the Ivorian economy through the approval of numerous local companies and products, this momentum could justify a strong push for full implementation of the continental agreement.

However, it is worth noting that the initial enthusiasm surrounding the adoption of the Agreement seems to have waned somewhat during the implementation phase. It would be desirable for Member States to regain their original dynamism to enable economic operators - currently in a waiting position - to fully participate in this continental project. ●



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Tariff Challenges and Liberalization Imperatives: how to Build an AfCFTA That Fosters Sustainable Intra-African Trade and Growth?

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a historic opportunity to boost intra-African trade and accelerate the continent's economic growth. However, its success hinges on the implementation of appropriate tariff policies and a progressive liberalization of trade. In this context, how can we balance trade openness and the protection of local economies to build a sustainable AfCFTA that drives inclusive growth?

Signed by: **G. S.**



Understanding the Framework

Under the market integration model, a free trade area is defined as a space where entry duties and charges of equivalent effect (customs duties) are eliminated. However, each State retains sovereignty over its trade policy, including the right to set its own customs tariffs.

The AfCFTA is a space where Member States have agreed to gradually eliminate customs duties and quantitative restrictions, while strengthening cooperation on services regulation.

Nevertheless, States retain full authority over their trade policies with third countries, including the application of tariffs. ►

The AfCFTA is an economic area in which the participating states have agreed to gradually eliminate customs duties and quantitative restrictions among themselves, while strengthening cooperation in the regulation of services.

To achieve the AfCFTA's ultimate goal—a sustainable and growth-oriented intra-African trade system—it is essential to:

- Identify the key challenges to be addressed;
- Propose pragmatic solutions;
- Analyze the major opportunities the AfCFTA offers for African populations and the private sector.

I- Challenges and Constraints to Overcome

Most African countries lack adequate industrial infrastructure.

1. In many sub-regions, the industrial sector represents a relatively small share of GDP.

2. Persistence of non-tariff barriers:

Intra-African trade is hindered by complex customs procedures and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards, sometimes imposed for protectionist purposes.

3. Market fragmentation: Intra-African trade remains largely concentrated within the same regional blocs (ECOWAS, CEMAC, SACU, etc.), limiting continent-wide integration. Moreover, trade is primarily based on raw or unprocessed products, rather than high value-added goods.

II- Proposed Solutions

While not exhaustive, the following solutions are crucial to achieving



The AfCFTA offers numerous opportunities for the private sector. By implementing innovative and ambitious strategies, African countries will be able to leverage this unprecedented initiative to develop and prosper.

the AfCFTA's objectives:

1. DEVELOP LOGISTICS INFRASTRUCTURE:

Massive investment in transport networks (road, rail, maritime) is vital to streamline intra-African trade.

2. HARMONIZE TRADE REGULATIONS: This key measure includes:

- Simplifying and standardizing customs procedures;
- Aligning technical and sanitary standards;
- Resolving competitive distortions (unequal tariff policies, disproportionate subsidies, special regimes in free zones).

Without such harmonization, commercial imbalances may worsen, relegating less developed economies to the role of mere consumers of goods from more industrialized African countries.

3. STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES): Targeted training and access to finance should be offered to SMEs to support their growth and integration into the continental market.

SMEs represent over 80% of Africa's economic fabric and are the main driver of inclusive growth. Their development is directly linked to the success of continental economic integration.

4. PROMOTE INDUSTRIALIZATION: Investment in the industrial sector is essential to ensure the transformation of raw materials, increase local production, and create value-added products.

III- Opportunities to seize

Meeting these two preconditions (infrastructure and harmonization) would unlock key opportunities:

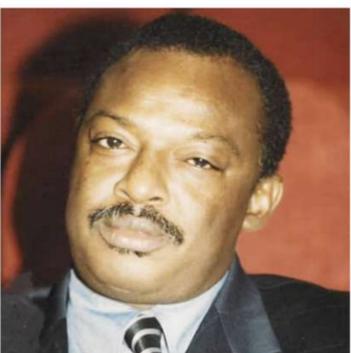
1. ACCESS TO A LARGER MARKET: AfCFTA provides businesses with access to an integrated market of over 1.2 billion people.

2. GROWTH OF INTRA-AFRICAN TRADE: Reducing trade barriers should stimulate intra-African trade, promoting endogenous development through economies of scale made possible by market integration.

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AfCFTA can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Africa by promoting rational management of the continent's natural resources.

Conclusion

Although the implementation of AfCFTA will not be without challenges, it offers tremendous opportunities for the private sector. By deploying ambitious and innovative strategies, African States can leverage this unprecedented initiative to develop and prosper. ●



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AfCFTA Operational Tools: Concrete Levers for Implementation or Qualified Compromise Measures?

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) relies on several operational tools to facilitate intra-African trade and strengthen the continent's economic integration. Among these mechanisms are the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), the Guided Trade Initiative, the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, among others. These tools are essential to ensure the success of the agreement and maximize its benefits for African economies.

Signed by: A. M. D.



A continental ambition backed by concrete instruments—that is the essence of AfCFTA's operational tools. In fact, the start of trade under the AfCFTA on January 1, 2021, marked a decisive step toward Africa's economic integration.

Founded on the political will to build a single market for goods, services, investment, and the movement of people, AfCFTA relies on a set of technical instruments designed to bring the commitments of Member States into practice. These operational instruments are considered the pillars of implementation, supporting trade reforms, facilitating commerce, and fostering an enabling environment for economic actors. However, their actual effectiveness depends closely on their ownership by Member States and how well they are rooted in national and regional contexts.

Tools for Making AfCFTA Operational

Since 2021, several operational tools have been introduced to support the implementation of AfCFTA. One of the key pillars is the rules of origin, now nearly 90% finalized. These rules determine which products are eligible for preferential tariffs. The remaining 10% primarily concern three sectors: automotive products, certain chemical products, and electronics.

At the same time, an online tariff portal was launched, compiling national tariff offers from all Member States. This digital platform re-

The AfCFTA's operational tools embody considerable potential for transformation, provided they are managed in a coherent, coordinated, and inclusive manner.

presents a major step forward in terms of transparency and access to trade information.

That same year, two complementary mechanisms were established:

- The Non-Tariff Barriers (NTB) Reporting Mechanism;
- The Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM), which has successfully resolved 80% of the cases brought before it.

On the financial side, AfCFTA has rolled out two major instruments that are already proving effective:

- The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), launched in January 2022, facilitates cross-border transactions by enabling payments in local currencies. By the end of 2023, the system had processed over USD 500 million, reducing transaction costs by 20%.

The AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, launched in July 2022, mobilized over USD 100 million to specifically support vulnerable countries.

These two mechanisms illustrate AfCFTA's ability to implement concrete financial solutions that meet the specific needs of African economic players while promoting financial inclusion and reducing the costs of intra-African trade.

In addition, the African Trade Observatory (ATO), active since 2022, provides valuable data on intra-African trade flows. That same year, the Guided Trade Initiative enabled pilot trade operations under AfCFTA rules in eight countries: Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Tunisia, covering over a hundred products.

Structural Constraints That Must Be Addressed

Despite the relevance of these tools, their impact is hindered by several limitations.

First, technical and institutional capacities are unevenly distributed across countries. Many face a triple constraint: lack of digital infrastructure, limited human skills, and inadequate financial resources, all of which restrict the optimal use of these instruments.

Second, uptake by businesses—especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)—remains low. These companies often lack information about available mechanisms, due to the absence of awareness campaigns or user-friendly platforms. Furthermore, the lack of binding enforcement mechanisms at the continental level allows states to delay or bypass integration of these tools into their public policies. ►



Activating Synergies for an Integrated African Market

The effectiveness of these operational tools depends on a systemic and synergistic approach. It is crucial to ensure interconnection with national trade policies, trade facilitation programs, and the priorities of Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

A key element often underestimated is the African Union Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, adopted in 2018. If widely ratified and implemented, this protocol would enable greater mobility of skills, entrepreneurs, and workers—further accelerating the trade dynamic fostered by AfCFTA. The alignment of technical tools with this framework for human mobility presents a unique opportunity to create a truly integrated African space, economically and socially.

Conclusion: From Tools to Transformation

AfCFTA's operational tools carry significant transformative potential—if managed coherently, inclusively, and in a coordinated manner. Their success will depend on three key conditions:

- The ability of states to integrate them into national development strategies;
- Strong political will to support effective implementation;
- The active involvement of economic actors.

It is through the articulation between technical instruments, human mobility, and institutional leadership that AfCFTA can fulfill its objectives and become a driver of a more prosperous, competitive, and resilient Africa. ●



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Critical analysis of the afcfta investment protocol as a tool for sustainable development in the face of climate challenges

The adoption of the Investment Protocol within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in February 2023¹ marks a major milestone in the continent's economic integration efforts, while embedding investment policies within a sustainable development perspective. This instrument aims to promote, facilitate, and protect sustainable intra-African investments, in line with next-generation investment treaties. However, its effectiveness in responding to climate challenges warrants critical analysis.

Signed by: **A. S. B.**



A Lever for Climate Financing

Faced with a structural climate finance gap estimated at USD 2.8 trillion between 2020 and 2030², Africa must mobilize resilient investments aligned with its climate objectives. In this regard, the Protocol is a promising tool. It recognizes the right of States to regulate for environmental purposes (Article 24) and provides incentives for low-carbon projects (Article 8). This normative recognition offers a framework to reconcile economic attractiveness with climate imperatives.

Notable Advances, but In Need of Further Development

The inclusion of a specific provision on climate change (Article 26) reflects the negotiators' desire to equip the continent with a legal framework adapted to energy transition and the fight against greenhouse gas emissions. This provision targets specific sectors (renewable energy, biodiversity preservation, water resources), while encouraging regional cooperation among State Parties. ►

¹At the 36th Ordinary Summit of the African Union (AU), held in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), on February 18 and 19, 2023.

²Climate Policy Initiative (2022), Landscape of Climate Finance in Africa.

The AfCFTA Investment Protocol offers African states the opportunity to attract green capital flows while protecting their right to regulate environmental matters.

However, several weaknesses remain. On the one hand, key sectors for climate adaptation—particularly agriculture and transport infrastructure—are not explicitly mentioned, despite their strategic vulnerability. On the other hand, the Protocol lacks a clear link with other AfCFTA protocols, such as those on Intellectual Property Rights and Competition Policy, which could either positively or negatively impact the promotion of green investments.

Secondly, the Protocol does not establish operational connections with other AfCFTA instruments—especially those concerning intellectual property and competition policy though their alignment could either support or hinder the growth of green investments on the continent.

State Obligations Creating Constraints for Investors

While environmental obligations imposed on investors are fewer than those imposed on States, they are nonetheless binding. States' commitments to environmental regulation indeed apply to investors, who must comply.

Article 34 imposes substantial obligations on them (precautionary principle, damage repair). Similarly, social responsibility (Article 38), although not binding, is becoming an increasingly decisive criterion for project acceptability. The Protocol thus establishes a normative interdependence between States and investors, making it necessary to strengthen implementation mechanisms. In this context, civil society plays an essential role in monitoring, advocacy, and applying pressure to ensure the accountability of both public and private actors.

Ultimately, the AfCFTA Investment Protocol represents an important first step towards building an African legal framework for investment governance that is compatible with climate objectives. It offers African States the opportunity to attract green capital flows while protecting their right to regulate environmental matters. However, to fully achieve its ambitions, this instrument will need adjustments, particularly through the adoption of operational³ annexes and the periodic revision of its provisions, in order to integrate overlooked strategic sectors and reinforce investor obligations. ●



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³ Annex on the Rules and Procedures for the Administration and Operation of the Pan-African Trade and Investment Agency (Article 42) and Annex on the Rules and Procedures for the Prevention, Management and Settlement of Disputes between Investors and States (Article 46).

The AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade: A Relevant Contribution to Artificial Intelligence for the Continent?

Information technology, the Internet, and advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed communication methods, economic systems, and social dynamics, marking the rise of the Digital Revolution. It is present in all sectors of life, including trade. Incorporating it into trade agreements such as the AfCFTA can only enhance the productivity and competitiveness of African economies.

Signed by: **A. D.**



Artificial intelligence is a dynamic tool to boost productivity across economic sectors in both developed countries and emerging economies on the African continent. It will transform jobs, optimize government services, facilitate access to information, and bring innovative solutions in sectors as diverse as healthcare, education, agriculture, and the environment and natural resources. However, through the reduction of transaction costs, services delivered digitally will generate the most significant gains.

In contrast, the manufacturing and extractive industries will be less affected by the rise of AI technologies (WTO, 2024). The key challenge for African policymakers, therefore, is to bridge the divide between large and small economies, and between various economic sectors.

In this context, the African Union has developed an ambitious strategy to harness AI solutions as a driver of socioeconomic, cultural, and technological transformation to achieve both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. ►



According to the European Parliament, artificial intelligence is a tool used by machines capable of “reproducing human-related behaviors, such as reasoning, planning, and creativity.” It is an automated system, based on algorithms, capable of replicating human behaviors by processing data to generate predictions, recommendations, or decisions that influence its environment (UNECA – United Nations Economic Commission for Africa).

The AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade: A Legal Foundation for AI Development

The AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade, adopted in February 2024, establishes a regulatory framework to promote innovation and trade in Africa. While the core text does not explicitly mention artificial intelligence, Annex 7, which deals with emerging and advanced technologies, includes AI among the areas that require ethical, trustworthy, safe, and responsible¹ governance. The protocol therefore encourages Member States to develop governance frameworks for the responsible use of such technologies, thereby laying the groundwork for an environment conducive to the development of AI on the continent.

Despite the challenges AI poses for Africa, the relevant provisions of the AfCFTA facilitate its adoption by setting standards for its regulation while providing exceptional measures to protect public health and security.

AfCFTA as a Catalyst for AI Deployment and Use

Article 4 calls on Member States to facilitate the deployment of AI solutions produced within the AfCFTA market across their territories. It prohibits any discriminatory measures, reaffirming the principles of Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment and National Treatment (Article 5).

Moreover, to stimulate innovation and research & development, AI solutions should benefit from an appropriate protection regime—whether through patents or sui generis mechanisms.

One of the key issues raised by AI adoption is data protection and cybersecurity. The protocol’s annexes emphasize the need to address these aspects to ensure the stability of the digital market.

¹“O article 1.o deste anexo define as Emerging and advanced technologies as Technologies in development, novas or developments, including, but not limited to, Internet of products, artificial intelligence, automatic learning, robotics, 5G, 3D impression, quantum computing, blockchain, virtual reality and other existing technologies and future relationships with digital commerce.”

"Artificial intelligence is a tool used by a machine capable of reproducing human-like behaviors, such as reasoning, planning, and creativity".

According to the European Parliament

Given the dynamism of African startups specialized in advanced technologies, the protocol envisions the establishment of regulatory sandboxes to supervise experimentation and encourage the development of innovative solutions, while minimizing risks for consumers and markets.

AfCFTA as a Shield for Ethical and Responsible AI

Although artificial intelligence provides innovative solutions and facilitates socio-economic activities, it also poses real social and cultural risks. To preserve ethics in AI-based solutions, the protocol provides for the development of technical standards and regulations (Article 11). Member States must ensure these standards are consistent with international guidelines such as those of the AI Safety Summit², the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI)³, and the Montreal Declaration for a Responsible Development of AI.

AfCFTA and the Protection of the Public Interest

Promoting the deployment and use of AI solutions in Africa must not undermine the implementation of public policies. Therefore, Article 12 recognizes the right of Member States to adopt any measures to prohibit an AI solution on their territory in order to achieve a legitimate public policy objective—protecting security, health, the environment, and public well-being, or safeguarding essential national security interests and preventing deceptive practices.

Conclusion: Toward a Harmonized and Inclusive AI Framework

The AfCFTA protocol offers an ideal legal and institutional framework for the harmonious deployment of AI solutions. However, several challenges must still be addressed, such as:

- The fragmentation of legal frameworks across the continent;
- The energy-intensive nature of AI infrastructure;
- The need for regional and international cooperation.

Only through coordinated efforts, ethical governance, and strategic investments can AI become a lever of inclusive growth, innovation, and resilience for Africa in the digital age. ●



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² AI Safety Summits are biannual international meetings organized by governments to discuss the safety and regulation of artificial intelligence, particularly advanced AI systems. The first AI Safety Summit was hosted by the United Kingdom in November 2023.

³ The Global Partnership on AI (GPAI) is an international initiative to promote the responsible use of AI that respects human rights and democratic values. It brings together experts from industry, government, civil society, and academia to advance cutting-edge research on these topics and to lead projects on priorities related to AI development.

How the Implementation of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade Can Help Reduce Poverty and Create Jobs?

Women and youth are a key driving force in Africa's trade sector. Their inclusion in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers a dual advantage: reducing economic inequalities while generating new professional and business opportunities across the continent.

Signed by: K. A. S.



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As we navigate the complex web of global challenges, the empowerment of women emerges as a beacon of progress, reflecting not only a commitment to women and youth but also a strategic imperative to promote and achieve sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development by leveraging the trade opportunities offered by the AfCFTA, as stated in Article 3(e) of the Agreement Establishing the AfCFTA.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector accounts for between 25% and 65% of GDP and provides between 30% and 90% of total non-agricultural employment. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employ a large portion of the population, particularly women and youth, and need a supportive environment to enhance their productivity. The AfCFTA appears as an instrument offering a new horizon to this dynamic segment of Africa's population.

Key AfCFTA indicators:

- A vast market: over 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion.
- Income growth: 68 million people currently live on less than \$5.50 a day.
- Poverty reduction: 30 million people could be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2035.

It is essential to recognize the progress made by the African Union

As we navigate the complex web of global challenges, women's empowerment emerges as a beacon of progress, reflecting not only a commitment to women and youth, but also a strategic imperative to promote and achieve sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development by harnessing the trade opportunities offered by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), pursuant to Article 3(e) of the Agreement Establishing the AfCFTA.

through the commitment contained in the Declaration Ext/Assembly/AU/Decl.1(XIII), adopted at the 13th Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union in December 2020. This declaration expanded inclusivity within the AfCFTA by supporting youth, women, SMEs, and integrating informal cross-border traders into the formal economy through the implementation of the Simplified Trade Regime.

Likewise, the decision (Assembly/AU/Dec.831(XXXV)) of the 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, held in February 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, included the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade within the scope of the AfCFTA Agreement. This inclusion has enabled the agreement to address the challenges faced by women and youth across the continent and to define actions to foster their regional and continental integration.

The protocol explicitly recognizes the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment as essential drivers of sustainable development. It acts as a catalyst for change, offering a unique opportunity to advance women's rights, entrepreneurship, labor rights, and equal pay within a broader framework for fair and inclusive growth.

The protocol and the ministerial regulation for preferential market access for women and youth propose an innovative and sustainable approach to inclusivity in trade agreements. They provide specific provisions to strengthen women's participation in trade, improve their competitiveness in the intra-African market, and create wealth. One of the cornerstones of women's empowerment is the protection of their rights as entrepreneurs.

By eliminating not only tariff barriers but also non-tariff barriers to trade and by fostering a conducive business environment, the agreement allows women to take control of their economic destiny, thereby creating jobs and contributing to the overall development of their communities and nations.

As we look to the future, it is vital to tackle the threat of elite capture, which could undermine the AfCFTA's promise of equality.

Consequently, AfCFTA member states must develop policies to ensure structural, sustainable, and inclusive transformation, support agricultural transformation, build the capacities of women and youth in various sectors, promote the simplified trade regime, ensure occupational health and safety, provide social protection, eliminate sexual and verbal harassment and gender-based violence, and combat corruption—particularly extortion at borders, as stipulated in Article 11 of the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade. ►

The protocol and the ministerial regulation for preferential market access for women and youth propose an innovative and sustainable approach to the inclusiveness of trade agreements and include specific provisions aimed at strengthening women's participation in trade in order to improve their competitiveness in the intra-African market, thus creating wealth, as one of the cornerstones of women's empowerment is guaranteeing their rights as entrepreneurs.



Thus, the AfCFTA can serve as a vehicle for significant income redistribution that empowers women and addresses historical inequalities. According to a UN and AfCFTA Secretariat report, AfCFTA implementation could, for example, increase women's wages by 10.5%, thereby reducing poverty.

This approach is not only morally right—it is economically sound. Empowered women contribute significantly to sustainable development and wealth creation.

With the AfCFTA, Africa stands on the threshold of a new era. It is therefore incumbent upon leaders, policymakers, and activists to champion women's empowerment as a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive growth.

By aligning the goals of the AfCFTA with this protocol, we can pave the way for a future in which prosperity is truly accessible to all, regardless of gender.

The time to act is now, and the path to a brighter and more equitable future lies in the empowerment of women and youth across the African continent. ●



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