

AFRICA PROSPERITY DIALOGUES 2026

EMPOWERING SMES, WOMEN &
YOUTH IN AFRICA'S SINGLE MARKET:
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Contents

AFRICA'S PROSPERITY MUST GO GLOBAL: SMES, WOMEN, AND YOUTH AT THE HEART OF AFCFTA	6
EMPOWERING AFRICA'S SMES, WOMEN AND YOUTH TO TRADE AND THRIVE	10
AFCFTA'S TRUE TEST: PUTTING SMES, WOMEN, AND YOUTH AT THE CENTER	12
FINANCING AFRICA'S TRANSFORMATION: SMES—THE BUILDERS OF A PROSPEROUS AFRICA	14
WE ARE NOT CAPITAL-POOR; WE ARE MARKET-SHALLOW AND SYSTEM-BROKEN	16
AFRICA BUSINESS COUNCIL'S SINGLE MARKET ARCHITECTS: WEAVING A BORDERLESS FUTURE FOR AFRICA'S ENTREPRENEURS	18
THE URGENT CALL FOR EMPOWERING SMES, WOMEN & YOUTH IN AFRICA'S SINGLE MARKET AGENDA.	20
A BORDERLESS AFRICA: THE MISSING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR EMPOWERING SMES, WOMEN AND YOUTH IN AFRICA	23
AFRICA'S PROSPERITY JOURNEY: TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE WORLD'S LARGEST SINGLE MARKET OF OVER 1.5 BILLION PEOPLE CONTINUES...	28
THE AFRICA PROSPERITY NETWORK	31
PROFILES OF ADVISORY COUNCIL	32
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	34
MAKE AFRICA BORDERLESS NOW!	35
LET'S MAKE AFRICA BORDERLESS NOW!	39
CROSS-BORDER COMMERCE, THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN	42
A CREATIVE AFRICAN YOUTH IN THE ERA OF INTRA-CONTINENTAL TRADE THROUGH THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA	45
WHY SO FEW AFRICAN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES SUCCEED IN SUSTAINABLE INTRA-CONTINENTAL TRADE	50
YOUTH CAREER MENTORSHIP: A NECESSARY PATHWAY FOR AFRICA'S HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT	52
A LETTER TO THE FUTURE THE AFRICAN SYMPHONY WE STRIVE TO COMPOSE	54
INFRASTRUCTURE; THE SPINE OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA'S PROMISE	58
DIGITAL TRADE AS THE FUTURE OF INTRA-AFRICAN COMMERCE	62
THE URGENCY OF A BORDERLESS CONTINENT FOR AFRICANS TO TRADE	64
THE HIGH ECONOMIC COST OF AFRICA'S FRAGMENTED SKIES	66
HARMONISING STANDARDS FOR AFRICA'S SINGLE MARKET	69
TRUST AND POLITICAL COURAGE; THE KEYS TO UNLOCKING AFRICA'S HUMAN CAPITAL	73
THE AFRICAN COURT OF JUSTICE AS THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA'S JUDICIAL ANCHOR	75
AFRICA'S STRATEGIC PUSH FOR A SINGLE UNHINDERED MARKET	77
LEVERAGING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA ; THE TRADE AMBASSADORS IN A BORDERLESS ECONOMY	79
AFRICA PROSPERITY NETWORK, THE SCULPTOR OF A BORDERLESS CONTINENTAL ECONOMY	83
AFRICA AT THE AI INFLECTION POINT: FROM CATCH UP TO STRATEGIC LEAP	87
THE REAL TEST OF AFCFTA: INTEGRATING HER FRAGMENTED MARKETS	89
PURSUIT OF A BORDERLESS DREAM, IN SPITE OF THE NIGHTMARE OF RACIAL SCARS	92

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Africa's Prosperity Must Go Global: SMEs, Women, and Youth at the Heart of AfCFTA.

By H.E. John Dramani Mahama, President of the Republic of Ghana

Africa stands at a historic crossroads. SMEs account for more than 80% of employment, yet fewer than 20% engage in cross-border trade. Women lead nearly 30% of registered businesses but face systemic barriers. Youth, who make up 60% of our population, are innovating daily but struggle to scale. These figures are not just statistics; they are the untapped engines of Africa's prosperity.

At the Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) in Accra last year, I reminded leaders that AfCFTA is not merely about free trade; it is about creating an environment that supports Africa's industries and businesses. This year, as we convene APD 2026 under the theme "Empowering SMEs, Women & Youth in Africa's Single Market: Innovate. Collaborate. Trade," I reaffirm that Africa's prosperity must not only be continental, it must be global.

SMEs are the backbone of Africa's economy. According to UNECA, AfCFTA could increase intra-African trade by 52%. Ghana's SMEs in agribusiness, textiles, and fintech have shown that when integrated into regional value chains, they create jobs at scale and drive industrialisation. But, the next step is global competitiveness. Our SMEs must not only trade across African borders, they must export to the world. AfCFTA must be the launchpad for Africa's global brands.

Women entrepreneurs are Africa's most resilient innovators, yet they remain locked out of finance and networks. Closing gender gaps could add trillions to global GDP, but this requires bold action. That is why I have consistently championed the creation of a Women's Development Bank (WDB) in Ghana. This institution will provide low-interest loans, financial literacy, and tailored business support to women entrepreneurs. It is designed to dismantle systemic barriers, unlock economic potential, and empower women as leaders and nation-builders. Women's economic empowerment is often framed as a social good, but it is fundamentally an economic strategy. For AfCFTA to deliver on its promise, inclusion, particularly of women, must be non-negotiable.

Africa's youth are our greatest asset. With 60% of our population under 25, we hold the world's largest youth dividend. In Ghana, I have made it clear that agriculture must be the engine that harnesses this energy. My vision is to move our agriculture sector from subsistence to a powerhouse, modernised, mechanised, and globally competitive sector. By investing in irrigation, storage, processing, and digital platforms, and by providing mentorship and capital, we will empower young farmers and agripreneurs to scale their enterprises. AfCFTA must be the ecosystem that allows Ghana's agriculture to flourish across the continent and into global markets.

Critics often contend that Africa's integration agenda is

overly ambitious, citing infrastructure gaps and political complexities. These concerns are legitimate, but they are not insurmountable. Ghana's role as host of the AfCFTA Secretariat in Accra demonstrates our unwavering commitment to continental integration. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) is already transforming cross-border trade by reducing currency barriers and transaction costs. The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is lowering the cost of movement and strengthening connectivity. At the same time, digital platforms are enabling small and medium-sized enterprises to reach customers far beyond national borders. Integration succeeds not by chance, but by collective political will, sustained investment, and deliberate action and Africa is moving in that direction.

The strategic imperative before us is unmistakable: the AfCFTA must succeed; fully, inclusively, and competitively on the global stage. This demands deliberate action.

Governments must align policies and dismantle the barriers that fragment our markets. Financial institutions must move beyond one-size-fits-all financing and design instruments that unlock capital for SMEs, women, and youth. Private investors must recognise Africa's entrepreneurs not as risks to be avoided, but as partners in value, creation while civil society continues to hold us – leaders and institutions alike – accountable. Africa's single market is more than an economic framework; it is a promise of shared prosperity. Yet that promise will remain unfulfilled unless SMEs, women, and young people are empowered not merely to participate, but to lead.

As President of Ghana, I call on African leaders, businesses, and citizens to move decisively from aspiration to action. We must innovate boldly, collaborate intentionally, and trade seamlessly across our borders. The AfCFTA must not remain a declaration agreed in conference halls; it must become a lived reality that expands opportunity for our African people. This is how we take Africa global; by building competitive brands, resilient industries, and world-class innovations that can stand confidently on the international stage.

Africa's future will not be shaped by promises alone. It will be built by our entrepreneurs, powered by our women, and driven by our youth. The moment to act is not tomorrow. It is now.

This op-ed by H.E. John Dramani Mahama, President of the Republic Ghana, draws on extracts from his speeches and public addresses delivered at key platforms including the Africa Prosperity Dialogues 2025, engagements with young entrepreneurs, and policy statements on Africa's industrialisation and women's empowerment.



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Empowering Africa's SMEs, Women and Youth to Trade and Thrive

By Dr Sidi Ould Tah, President, African Development Bank Group

Africa is, at its core, an entrepreneurial continent; innovative, resourceful, and primed to create solutions wherever gaps exist. More than 90 percent of its businesses are micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Collectively they account for over 80 percent of employment across the continent.

Every day, millions of Africans rise with extraordinary ambition and confidence and dedicate themselves to their work, leveraging the tools available to them – SMS, the internet, social media, point-of-sale terminals, and more – to build businesses, create jobs, and generate real economic value that sustains households and entire communities.

They do this despite formidable challenges. Giving up is rarely an option. Instead, while doing their very best, with boundless tenacity and indomitable spirit, they also look to governments, financial institutions, and development partners for the support that can enable them scale: securing access to affordable credit, providing reliable electricity, assisting with processes to formalise their businesses enhancing facilitation of cross-border opportunities, and providing more transparent, less onerous tax systems.

Often, it turns out, even modest interventions can go a very long way.

The African MSME landscape is overwhelmingly young and female – yet these very demographics face the steepest obstacles. Africa is the world's youngest continent, with half its population under 20 and nearly two-thirds under 35. By 2030, two out of every five young people in the world will be African – a clear signal that Africa's future will shape the world's future, and that the 21st century can indeed belong to Africa.

Against this backdrop, we have no choice but to convert this demographic reality into an economic advantage for our young people, the continent, and the global economy. The alternative is unthinkable as hundreds of millions of frustrated and unemployed youths pose far-reaching implications for continental and global peace security.

It is for this reason that the focus of the 2026 Africa Prosperity Dialogues on the intersection of youth, women, and SMEs is both timely and necessary. The Dialogues recognise a simple truth: Africa's growth must be driven by the engines it already possesses in abundance – MSMEs, youth, and women. And these engines must

operate at full capacity to generate all the benefits that are available from being the world's largest free trade area in terms of number of participating countries. Operating at full capacity means investing in skills and education, with a focus on science technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) knowledge and digital skills preparing our youth to flourish in this rapidly evolving Fourth Industrial Revolution.

At the African Development Bank Group, these are all priorities we are pursuing with urgency and purpose. Guided by our Four Cardinal Points strategic vision emphasising a "4S" approach of Synergy, Scale, Speed, and Sustainability. It is principally designed to unleash Africa's full potential.

The first Cardinal Point is unlocking Africa's full capacity to mobilise and deploy capital – through both traditional and innovative financial models – and tapping underutilised sources of financing such as pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, and domestic savings.

The second is rebuilding Africa's financial sovereignty by reforming and consolidating financial systems. As capital is unlocked, we must also strengthen the frameworks that manage that capital – lowering risk, reducing borrowing costs, and ensuring Africans have greater control over how their resources are invested. Anchored to this strategic vision is the New African Financial Architecture (NAFA), a coordinated, private-sector-led ecosystem designed to support Africa finance its own development.

The third Cardinal Point focuses on turning the continent's burgeoning demographic into an economic dividend. As I have noted above, Africa's youth, women, and MSMEs are not challenges to be managed; they are engines of growth to be unleashed. We must move millions of African MSMEs out of the informal sector, tapping into the benefits of formalisation, which allows them to access finance and social protection while fostering a culture of domestic resource mobilisation.

By removing barriers and providing the appropriate catalysts, we empower them to flourish – and when they thrive, the continent thrives.

The fourth Cardinal Point is building resilient infrastructure and driving value addition. The Africa we envision rests on modern durable transport, power networks, strong digital connectivity, robust education and health systems. All designed to withstand environmental threats. It also

The African MSME landscape is overwhelmingly young and female



means processing and manufacturing more of what we produce, rather than exporting raw materials. For example, the African Development Bank's African Economic Outlook projects that investing in local battery processing and manufacturing hubs could generate \$32 billion in additional exports annually, add \$24 billion to GDP, and create 2.3 million jobs.

Together, these four Cardinal Points are aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

They also align with the ambition of the Africa Prosperity Network to build a vibrant and self-sustaining continental market under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework – one of the surest pathways to enduring prosperity. We already know that intra-African trade remains below 20 percent – the lowest of any continent; and that by trading more with one another and integrating our markets through the African Continental Free Trade Area, we can expand opportunity, build resilience, and loosen the grip of poverty on millions of our people.

The African Development Bank Group looks forward to participating actively in the 2026 Africa Prosperity Dialogues and deepening collaboration with partners across the continent. On a more positive note in December 2025, the African Development Fund's 17th replenishment (ADF-17) secured a record \$11 billion to empower Africa's 37 most vulnerable nations through 2028. This cycle marks a strategic evolution toward a "co-investment" platform, prioritising youth, women SMEs, and human capital as the essential pillars for the continent's demographic and economic transformation.

We must all do more. Under the umbrella of our envisioned new financial architecture, there is space for all who are committed to Africa's progress. This year's Africa Prosperity Dialogues can mark the beginning of a new chapter of cooperation and bold execution; one that delivers tangible socio-economic benefits to tens of millions of individuals, households and MSMEs, across Africa.

AfCFTA's True Test: Putting SMEs, Women, and Youth at the Center

By H.E. Wamkele Mene - Secretary General, AfCFTA

In my speeches across Africa, I have repeated one truth: “The AfCFTA will not be judged by the agreements signed in Addis Ababa or Accra, but by its impact on the ground.” The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the world’s largest free trade area by membership, covering 54 or so countries and over 1.5 billion citizens. Yet its success will not be measured in communiqués or declarations, it will be measured by whether it delivers prosperity for Africa’s people.

The foundational imperative is clear: our single market must be inclusive, owned, and driven by Africa’s core economic agents; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), women, and youth. Without them, AfCFTA risks becoming an elite project. With them, it can transform Africa into a hub of innovation, productivity, and shared prosperity.

SMEs account for more than 80% of employment across Africa, yet fewer than 20% engage in cross-border trade. Women run about 30% of registered businesses but face disproportionate barriers to capital and markets. Youth, who make up more than 60% of our population, are innovating daily but lack the support to scale.

As I said at the African Union Youth Town Hall: “Africa’s youth are not just the future; they are the present.” These numbers are not distant data points, they are a responsibility we cannot ignore. AfCFTA must dismantle systemic barriers and create pathways for inclusive participation.

At the UN Economic Commission for Africa, I stressed: “AfCFTA is not an elite project; it must be owned by the people.” SMEs, women, and youth are the backbone of our economies, yet systemic barriers lock them out of opportunities. Supporting these groups is not benevolence; it is the key to Africa’s competitiveness.

When women are fully engaged and youth are given room to scale, Africa can lead in innovation and productivity. Empowering these groups is not charity; it is the smartest investment Africa can make.

The Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) 2026, themed “Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa’s Single Market: Innovate. Collaborate. Trade,” embodies this urgency. As I noted at the Africa Prosperity Dialogues in

Accra, we must move beyond rhetoric to execution. APD 2026 will convene leaders and entrepreneurs in executive roundtables, deal-making hubs, and masterclasses to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

We are no longer speaking in abstractions. Tools such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) are already cutting our dependence on external currencies. Pitch arenas and deal rooms are giving SMEs direct access to investors. Masterclasses are equipping entrepreneurs with the know-how to navigate AfCFTA rules of origin and to build businesses that can scale. This is how vision becomes execution.

Some say Africa’s integration agenda is too ambitious, weighed down by infrastructure gaps and fragmented regulations. I have always countered that claim with evidence: PAPSS is transforming cross-border payments, the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is opening our skies, and digital platforms are connecting SMEs with customers across the continent. These are not promises—they are proof that integration is already underway. The challenge is not whether AfCFTA can succeed, but whether it will succeed inclusively.

At APD 2026, a “Make Africa Borderless Now!” campaign will be launched. As I have said, a young entrepreneur in Accra should be able to pitch in Nairobi, hire talent from Dakar, and serve customers in Johannesburg without navigating a maze of visas and permits. Borderless is not a dream, it is the enabling condition for Africa’s single market to work for those who need it most.

Africa is rich in entrepreneurs, ideas, and ambition. What holds us back are borders that no longer reflect the realities of our people. AfCFTA will only deliver on its promise when SMEs, women, and youth are at the center of its success, that is the true test of our single market. The era of declarations is over; this is the moment for execution. It is time to innovate, to collaborate, and to trade without barriers.

This op-ed by H.E. Wamkele Mene, Secretary General of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat, draws on extracts of his speeches on issues focusing on the focus areas of APD 2026.





Financing Africa's Transformation: SMEs—The Builders of a Prosperous Africa Innovate, Collaborate, and Trade for Inclusive Arab–African Prosperity

**By H.E. Abdullah KH Almusaibeh, President of the Arab Bank
for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA)**

Anchored in our vision “to be the lead platform for Arab–African economic cooperation for development,” the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) continues to position itself as a catalytic financier, convener, and strategic partner in Africa’s transformation journey. As the continent advances toward deeper economic integration through Africa’s Single Market—amid rapid demographic growth, accelerating technological change, climate pressures, and global uncertainty—BADEA remains firmly convinced of one fundamental truth: Africa will be built by viable, resilient, and competitive Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Across Africa, SMEs constitute the backbone of economic activity. They dominate the business landscape, absorb the majority of the labour force, and serve as vital connectors between local production systems and domestic, regional, and international markets. Their unique ability to combine economic productivity with social inclusion gives SMEs a decisive advantage in delivering shared prosperity. For women and youth in particular, SMEs are not merely businesses—they are pathways to dignity, opportunity, and meaningful participation in Africa’s single market.

Recognising this central role, BADEA has placed SMEs at the heart of its 2030 Strategy. Our approach is grounded in the belief that SME development must be systemic, scalable, and sustainable. BADEA therefore operates both directly with SMEs and indirectly through a strong network of international financial institutions, multilateral development banks, and national development finance institutions. By providing financing and risk-sharing instruments to these institutions, BADEA enables them to expand outreach and scale up support to SMEs across multiple sectors and value chains.

This operating model allows BADEA to reach enterprises across the continent—from East Africa, including countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda, to West Africa in Ghana and Nigeria, and across parts of Southern Africa. These country references are illustrative and not exhaustive, reflecting the breadth of BADEA’s engagement rather than its limits. While national contexts differ, the objective remains consistent: empowering local

enterprises to innovate, collaborate, and trade as the foundation of resilient and inclusive economies.

We describe this approach as the BADEA SMEs Bridge Initiative—a unifying platform that connects finance, knowledge, technology, and partnerships to African entrepreneurs. This bridge links Arab–African cooperation with local innovation, public finance with private initiative, and traditional banking with emerging digital and trade-enabling solutions.

BADEA firmly believes that artificial intelligence and digital technologies represent the leading frontier in supporting SMEs in Africa. These tools are transforming how businesses access finance, manage risk, improve productivity, and reach regional and global markets. Digital platforms, fintech solutions, alternative data for credit assessment, and AI-enabled business models are reducing long-standing barriers—particularly for women- and youth-led SMEs.

In 2022, BADEA launched a call to establish a Pan-African Coalition for SMEs Development, aimed at fostering coordinated and complementary support across the continent. This initiative brings together development partners, financial institutions, regulators, foundations, academia, and the private sector to move beyond fragmented interventions toward a harmonised, impact-driven approach.

In this context, I wish to congratulate the Africa Prosperity Network (APN) for selecting “Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa’s Single Market: Innovate, Collaborate, and Trade” as the theme of the 2026 Africa Prosperity Dialogues. This theme resonates deeply with BADEA’s mission and strategic priorities and captures the essence of Africa’s development opportunity.

BADEA firmly believes that the true measure of development lies in the strength of enterprises and the people they empower. Through sustained Arab–African cooperation, innovation, and partnerships, BADEA will continue to stand alongside Africa’s entrepreneurs—bridging opportunity, unlocking potential, and building a prosperous Africa from the ground up.

SMEs are not merely businesses—they are pathways to dignity, opportunity, and meaningful participation in Africa’s single market.

We are not capital-poor; we are market-shallow and system-broken

By Amine IDRISSE ADOUM, Director of Economy, Infrastructure, Industrialisation, Trade and Regional Integration, AUDA-NEPAD

What we say at the Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) 2026 must echo through AU Summits, Regional Economic Community (REC) ministerials, central bank committees, capital-market regulators' meetings, investor forums, and every global platform where our continent's future is debated—from Davos to the G20 to the UN General Assembly. Because what holds us back is not a shortage of priorities. It is a broken operating system: we still finance Africa like a fragmented consumer market, not like an integrated continent of producers.

For years, we have repeated the phrase “financing gap” as if it were a diagnosis. It is often a distraction. When we aggregate our pensions, insurance assets, sovereign wealth funds, banking pools and other public savings vehicles, we are already sitting on well over USD 2 trillion in domestic capital—before we even count diaspora resources or the vast savings and investment cycles in the informal economy. So the real question is not “where is the money?” The real question is: why can't our money find our factories?

The answer is uncomfortable—but liberating: our money is not missing; it is trapped. It is parked in short-term government securities and deposits not because our asset managers lack patriotism, but because our markets lack depth. We have underbuilt the mechanisms that convert savings into investment: long-tenor instruments, credible local-currency yield curves, liquid bond markets, bankable project pipelines, credit enhancement, predictable settlement systems, and—crucially—a regional investment space where capital can diversify and scale. In other words, we are not capital-poor; we are market-shallow and intermediation-poor. We have the fuel, but we have not built a powerful enough engine—and we have not connected it across borders.

That is why Africa's most urgent reform agenda is not another declaration. It is financial depth. We need capital markets that can price risk properly, mobilise long-term savings, and finance industry. We need central banks and regulators to move from “guardians of stability” to “architects of depth”: modernise payment and settlement rails, build benchmark yield curves, enable long-tenor local-currency instruments, strengthen collateral and insolvency frameworks, and harmonise rules across regions so investors can scale beyond national silos. Without these reforms, our institutional capital will continue to behave rationally—and unproductively—because there will be no safe, investable route into productive assets. And without cross-border interoperability, domestic financing will remain too small, too expensive, and too short-term to industrialise a continent.

This is also why we must stop treating “borderless Africa” as poetry. Borderless Africa is the financing strategy. Capital cannot power industrial corridors if it is fenced in by regulatory islands. AfCFTA will not deliver if it remains a legal framework without an integrated investment

space. Trade must become predictable so cashflows become bankable; payments must become interoperable so commerce becomes scalable; and markets must become connected so savings can move into production. A continent of makers cannot be built on 54 disconnected financial systems.

Here is the good news: the African development and financing community is already shifting from talk to mechanisms. The African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD), Afreximbank, African Development Bank (AfDB), regional development banks, Africa50, Africa Finance Corporation (AFC), national development banks and other African Development Finance Institutions (DFIs)—working through cooperation platforms such as the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI, also known as the “Africa Club”) —are building the enabling architecture that turns priorities into investable assets.

The Luanda Financing Summit offered a clear signal: we can move from speeches about “gaps” to building balance-sheet solutions. Through AAMFI, we launched a dedicated infrastructure financing facility anchored by an initial USD 1.5 billion commitment—an African leverage platform designed to de-risk and crowd in much larger pools of domestic institutional capital. But AAMFI is not the story by itself; it is the coordination layer. The scale comes when our DFIs act as a system: aligning pipelines, co-financing, guarantees, project preparation and risk tools to create assets that African pension funds and insurers can buy—at the right tenor, in the right currency, with risk structured professionally.

Finance, however, needs destinations. That is why our continental platforms matter. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa - Priority Action Plan 2 (PIDA-PAP2) is not “a list of roads”—it is the physical internet of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): corridors, ports, rail, digital backbones, and border efficiency that make trade real. The Continental Power Systems Master Plan is the other half: we cannot industrialise in the dark. A borderless energy market—where power can be generated where it is cheapest and traded where it is needed—is how we lower production costs and make African manufacturing competitive. And if infrastructure is the hardware, PAIDA is the software: a deliberate push to build regional value chains, industrial clusters and processing capacity so we stop exporting jobs and importing finished goods.

But there is a silent killer that keeps undermining our market-access promises: quality infrastructure. We often say we did not fully exploit the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) because we lacked competitiveness. The deeper truth is technical: we lacked the standards, labs, accreditation, certification, metrology and market surveillance to meet demanding requirements consistently at scale. Tariffs were never the



only barrier; compliance was. If we do not invest in quality infrastructure and harmonise standards across regions, AfCFTA will also underdeliver—because non-tariff barriers will replace tariffs as the real wall. A maker continent is built on trust, and trust is built on standards.

We should also confront the largest balance sheet we keep ignoring: the informal economy. We treat it as a governance problem, when it is also a capital-formation opportunity. Millions of Africans save, trade, lend and reinvest daily outside formal channels. The goal is not to harass them into paperwork; it is to build pathways—digital payments, identity, credit histories, simple investment vehicles, interoperable settlement—that make cashflows legible and investable. Deep capital markets do not only mobilise pensions and insurers; they can also unlock informal savings and enterprise growth by connecting everyday commerce to formal finance.

So here is the proposition we should carry from APD 2026 to every AU Summit and every global forum: we will not industrialise by chasing external money while our

own capital stays idle. We will industrialise when we complete the reforms that create financial depth and when we finish building a borderless financial machine that connects our savings to productive assets. That machine is not abstract: it is being built by the African development and financing community—AUDA-NEPAD, Afreximbank, AfDB, regional development banks and other African DFIs—coordinating through AAMFI and allied platforms; powered by continental pipelines such as PIDA-PAP2 and the Continental Power Systems Master Plan; guided by PAIDA in a truly borderless AfCFTA market; and anchored by a unified quality infrastructure ecosystem that makes “Made in Africa” competitive and tradable.

We already have entrepreneurs. We already have demand. We certainly have capital. What we need—urgently—is the discipline to build depth, integrate markets, and complete the architecture that turns our money into factories. That is how we stop being described as a consumer continent—and finally become what we already claim to be: a continent of makers.

Africa Business Council's Single Market Architects: Weaving a Borderless Future for Africa's Entrepreneurs

By Dr Amany Asfour, President – Africa Business Council, Egypt

Amina's story begins in a sunlit workshop in Nouakchott. Here, she and her team transform vibrant African textiles into elegant handbags. For years, her world was confined. Sending a shipment to a neighbouring country meant daunting paperwork, prohibitive transfer fees, and logistical puzzles. Her ambition, like that of countless small business owners across our continent, was constrained by borders.

Today, a new chapter is being written. Amina is preparing her first bulk order for a boutique in Douala. This simple act represents a profound shift. It is made possible by the African Continental Free Trade Area, the framework for the world's largest single market by membership. Yet its ultimate success will not be found in legal texts. It will be measured in the changed fortunes of the Aminas of Africa, the young tech innovators in Kigali, and the small enterprises that form our economic bedrock. This is precisely where the mission of the Africa Business Council (AfBC) finds its purpose.

Africa Business Council on empowerment

Established by the African Union to be the premier voice of the continent's private sector, our mandate is to turn this promise into prosperity. At the heart of our vision is a competitive, innovative, and borderless Africa where trade and investment flourish. We exist to champion the voices and interests of African businesses, with a dedicated focus on the engines of growth: small and medium enterprises, women, and youth.

These groups are not just beneficiaries of integration; they are its essential architects. Consider the landscape. Small and medium enterprises provide over 80% of Africa's employment, but fewer than one in five trade across borders. Women run a third of registered businesses but face disproportionate hurdles. Our youth, brimming with digital ingenuity, often lack the ecosystem to scale their solutions. This is more than an inequality gap. It is the single largest inefficiency within our emerging market.

Our work is therefore built on a triad of empowerment. We strengthen the private sector through targeted capacity building. We advocate for policies that create enabling frameworks for inclusion and we promote product development under the "Made in Africa" brand to enhance competitiveness. To make this concrete, we operate through dedicated clusters for women entrepreneurs, youth and start-ups, and small business development. These clusters transform broad vision into specific action, from securing better procurement policies to fostering digital inclusion.

African Congress for Women Entrepreneurs

Take our flagship African Congress for Women Entrepreneurs, our annual gathering that stands as the cornerstone of our agenda. It raises awareness of trading opportunities under the new continental agreements. It advocates for simple digital payment systems tailored to women led businesses. It builds capacity for branding and meeting quality standards. Crucially, it calls for practical reforms, such as reserving a significant portion of public procurement for women owned enterprises. Through this congress, we amplify the voice of women in sectors from agriculture and mining to renewable energy and the digital economy.

For our young innovators, the "Hunting of Africa's Unicorns" initiative accelerates tech enabled start-ups in critical fields like agritech, healthtech, and fintech. By connecting them with investors at continental forums and linking them to incubators, we are helping to redefine youth entrepreneurship as a powerful vehicle for job creation and digital trade.

This programme of empowerment is inextricably linked to the physical and policy pillars of the single market. Our advocacy for a visa free Africa and a single African passport is about enabling Amina travel to her buyer. But that mobility is hollow without economic fluidity. This is why we champion seamless cross border mobile money interoperability. A payment must be as easy as a plane ticket.

We push for one continental standard for products. This allows a woman-owned cosmetics company in Morocco to sell in Senegal without costly retesting. We advocate for the mutual recognition of professional skills across Africa, so a certified engineer from Botswana can contribute to a project in Tanzania. Our support for the AfCFTA's digital trade protocol aims to create a trusted, continent wide marketplace.

An intentional and collaborative action

These efforts require robust foundations. The continental infrastructure corridors we champion are the arteries of trade, but small businesses are the lifeblood. Their success ensures these investments are fully utilised. A functioning African Court of Justice would offer smaller enterprises a fair path to dispute resolution. A unified African voice in global negotiations will secure terms that protect our growing industries.

Our call is for intentional and collaborative action. The single market must be consciously designed for its primary users. We need practical toolkits that demystify rules of origin for first time exporters. We must



democratise access to trade finance through innovative digital platforms. Investing in digital literacy and STEM education for women and girls is critical to close the gender divide. We must foster partnerships that connect large corporations with small suppliers in vital value chains.

Amina's story is a glimpse of the future we are building. It is a future where her handbags, and millions of products like them, move across Africa with ease. It is a future where a young developer's application solves local problems on a continental scale. The framework is agreed. The task now is to ensure every policy, every road, and every digital connection serves the people who will bring this single market to life.

The Africa Business Council is dedicated to this task. We invite every partner, from government to financier, to join us in this essential endeavour. Together, we can ensure that Africa's single market is celebrated not just for the free movement of goods, but for the unleashed potential of its people.

A Call to Collaborate

As Africa advances its Single Market under AfCFTA, AfBC remains committed to empowering the doers, builders, and disruptors—women, youth, and SMEs—through innovation, collaboration, and trade. Together, we are shaping a future where every African entrepreneur thrives.

For more information: www.africabusinesscouncil.org

The Urgent Call for Empowering SMEs, Women & Youth in Africa's Single Market Agenda.

By H.E. Dr. Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma, Chair of Advisory Council, Africa Prosperity Network

Africa's prosperity will not be decided in lofty declarations; it will be built by the millions of entrepreneurs, women, and young innovators who power our economies every day. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the largest free trade area in the world by membership, represents a historic opportunity. Yet its ultimate success will not be measured by treaties signed or summits held, but by its impact on the ground. AfCFTA must be inclusive, owned, and driven by its core economic agents: Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), women, and youth.

SMEs are the backbone of Africa's economy, accounting for more than 80% of employment. Yet fewer than 20% engage in cross-border trade. Women lead nearly 30% of registered businesses but face disproportionate barriers to finance, markets, and networks. Youth, who make up over 60% of Africa's population, are innovating daily but struggle to scale their ideas into sustainable enterprises. These figures are not abstract, they represent untapped potential. If AfCFTA is to deliver prosperity, it must dismantle systemic barriers and create pathways for inclusive participation.

The Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) 2026, themed "Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa's Single Market: Innovate. Collaborate. Trade," is designed to move beyond rhetoric. Now in its fourth year, APD has evolved from a dialogue platform into a decisive "Boardroom of Africa." It convenes political leaders, business titans, and entrepreneurs to translate AfCFTA's promise into tangible reality.

Through executive roundtables, deal-making hubs, and masterclasses, APD 2026 is building an ecosystem of execution. CEOs, ministers, and institutional leaders will address bottlenecks in finance, infrastructure, and policy harmonisation. Entrepreneurs will pitch directly to investors in curated arenas, while financial institutions showcase tailored products for SMEs, women, and youth. Practical workshops will equip participants to navigate AfCFTA rules of origin, access the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), and build investable business models. This is how we move from vision to execution.

The strategic imperative is clear: scaling our core agents. SMEs are the engine of Africa's economy, but without access to finance, technology, and regional markets, they remain locked out of AfCFTA's opportunities. Women entrepreneurs, despite their resilience, face structural barriers that limit their growth. Youth, brimming with creativity, often lack mentorship, capital, and platforms to scale.

Empowering these groups is not charity, it is smart economics. Closing gender gaps in labour markets could add trillions to global GDP. Africa's youth dividend, if harnessed, could transform the continent into a hub of innovation and productivity. SMEs, when integrated into regional value chains, can drive industrialisation and create jobs at scale. AfCFTA's success depends on unlocking this potential.

Consider the story of FreshFarm Africa, a youth-led agrotech start-up in Kenya. By leveraging mobile platforms, it connects smallholder farmers to regional buyers. With proper financing and access to AfCFTA markets, ventures like this could scale across borders, transforming agriculture and creating thousands of jobs. Or take SheTrades Ghana, a women-led cooperative exporting textile. With harmonised trade rules and digital payment systems, such enterprises could expand into new markets, showcasing Africa's creativity to the world. These are the real faces of AfCFTA's promise.

Critics argue that Africa's integration agenda is too ambitious given infrastructure deficits, fragmented regulations, and political complexities. They caution that lofty visions may falter under the weight of reality. These concerns are valid, but they are not insurmountable.

Africa has already demonstrated that progress is possible. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) is revolutionising cross-border payments, reducing reliance on external currencies. The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is opening skies to competition and lowering costs. Digital platforms are enabling SMEs to reach customers across borders. These are not theoretical achievements; they are proof that integration works when driven by collective will.

The challenge is not whether AfCFTA can succeed, but whether it will succeed inclusively. If SMEs, women, and youth are sidelined, the single market risks becoming an elite project, disconnected from the realities of ordinary Africans. Inclusivity is not optional, it is the definitive pathway to optimising intra-African trade and tackling youth unemployment.

The "Make Africa Borderless Now!" campaign, to be launched at APD 2026, embodies this urgency. Visa-free travel, interoperable mobile money, and seamless air transport are not luxuries; they are imperatives for a truly borderless market. For too long, Africans have faced greater difficulty traveling within their own continent than abroad. This must change.

Imagine a young Ghanaian entrepreneur seamlessly exporting fashion products to Kenya, paid instantly



through mobile money, and traveling visa-free to meet partners in Rwanda. Imagine a Nigerian SME accessing markets in Senegal without prohibitive tariffs or bureaucratic delays. Imagine women-led cooperatives in Malawi scaling their agribusinesses through regional value chains. These are the tangible realities AfCFTA must deliver.

As someone who has fought for women's empowerment and continental integration, I know Africa stands at a historic crossroads. The question is not whether AfCFTA will succeed, but whether it will succeed inclusively. The answer lies in our collective ownership. Governments must harmonise policies and remove barriers. Financial institutions must design products tailored to SMEs,

women, and youth. Private investors must see Africa's entrepreneurs not as risks but as opportunities. Civil society must hold leaders accountable to deliver on promises.

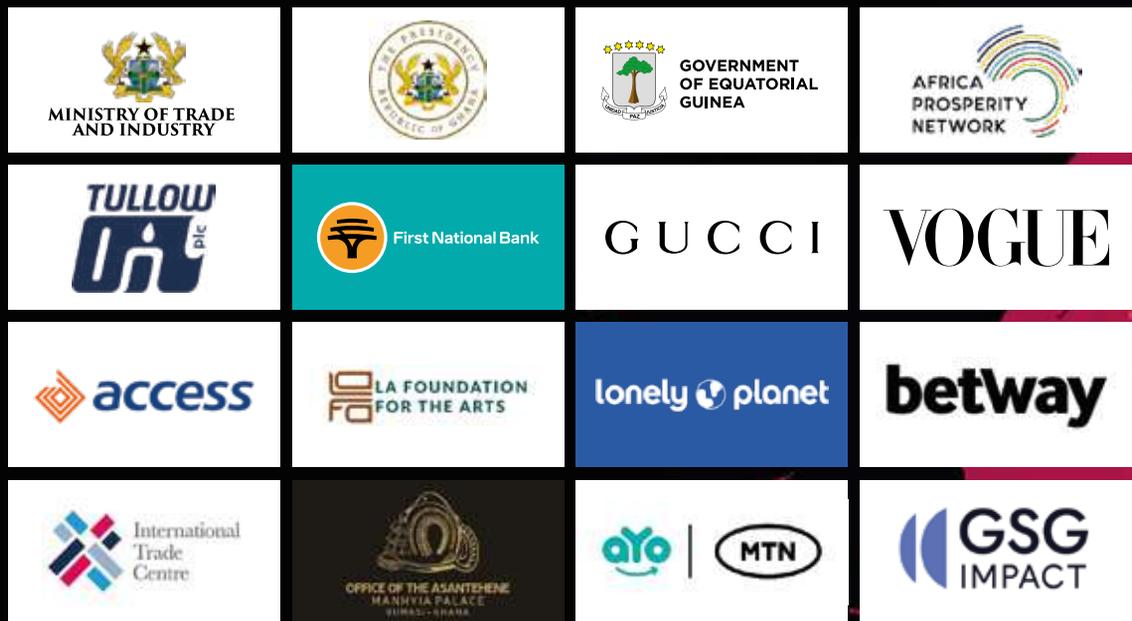
Africa's single market is more than an economic arrangement, it is a vision of shared prosperity. But prosperity will remain elusive unless SMEs, women, and youth are empowered to lead. AfCFTA must be inclusive, practical, and people-centered. It will succeed only when Africa's entrepreneurs, women, and youth succeed. Let us innovate, collaborate, and trade together. Let us ensure that Africa's single market is not only a vision of leaders but a lived reality for our 1.5 billion citizens.



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A Borderless Africa: The Missing Infrastructure for Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa

By Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko

In addressing the 80th United Nations General Assembly in 2025, Ghana's President, John Dramani Mahama, captured a defining truth of our time: "By 2050, one-third of all young people aged 15 to 24 will be residing on the African continent. So you see, the future is Africa."

The more urgent question is two-fold: how are we building that future today and how are we preparing Africa's youth for that future?

Consider this simple scenario. Jumoke, a young fashion designer in Lagos, reimagines traditional Nigerian textiles, Yoruba Aso Oke, Igbo Akwete, and Fulani Mudukare, into contemporary, high-fashion pieces. Njoki in Nairobi discovers Jumoke's designs online and places an order for her wedding. What should be a straightforward intra-African transaction quickly becomes complicated. Beyond production timelines, they must navigate fragmented payment systems, high shipping costs, multiple border checks, and unpredictable delays.

Two Africans attempting to trade with each other encounter barriers created by borders drawn over a century ago, borders that continue to fragment Africa's economic life long after colonialism formally ended.

The idea of a borderless Africa is not new. Kwame Nkrumah warned that Africa must "unite or perish." Julius Nyerere called Africa's borders artificial and senseless. Wole Soyinka described them as scars on the continent's face. Yet Africa continues to operate economic systems that undermine its most powerful engines of growth: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), women, and youth.

Across the continent, SMEs form the backbone of African economies. Women and young people dominate informal and cross-border trade, agribusiness, creative industries, digital services, and light manufacturing. Yet they face the highest barriers when moving goods, accessing markets, hiring talent, or receiving payments across borders.

Visa restrictions delay deals. Multiple standards raise compliance costs. Disconnected payment systems trap value outside Africa. Cumbersome customs procedures punish small traders far more than multinational firms. African entrepreneurs are effectively being asked to compete globally while confined to more than fifty fragmented national markets.

This contradiction sits at the heart of the Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) 2026 theme: "Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa's Single Market: Innovate. Collaborate. Trade."

Innovation needs scale. **Collaboration** depends on mobility and trust. **Trade** requires the seamless movement of people, goods, services, capital, and ideas. Without addressing borders as a structural constraint, empowerment risks becoming little more than a slogan.

The Integration Paradox

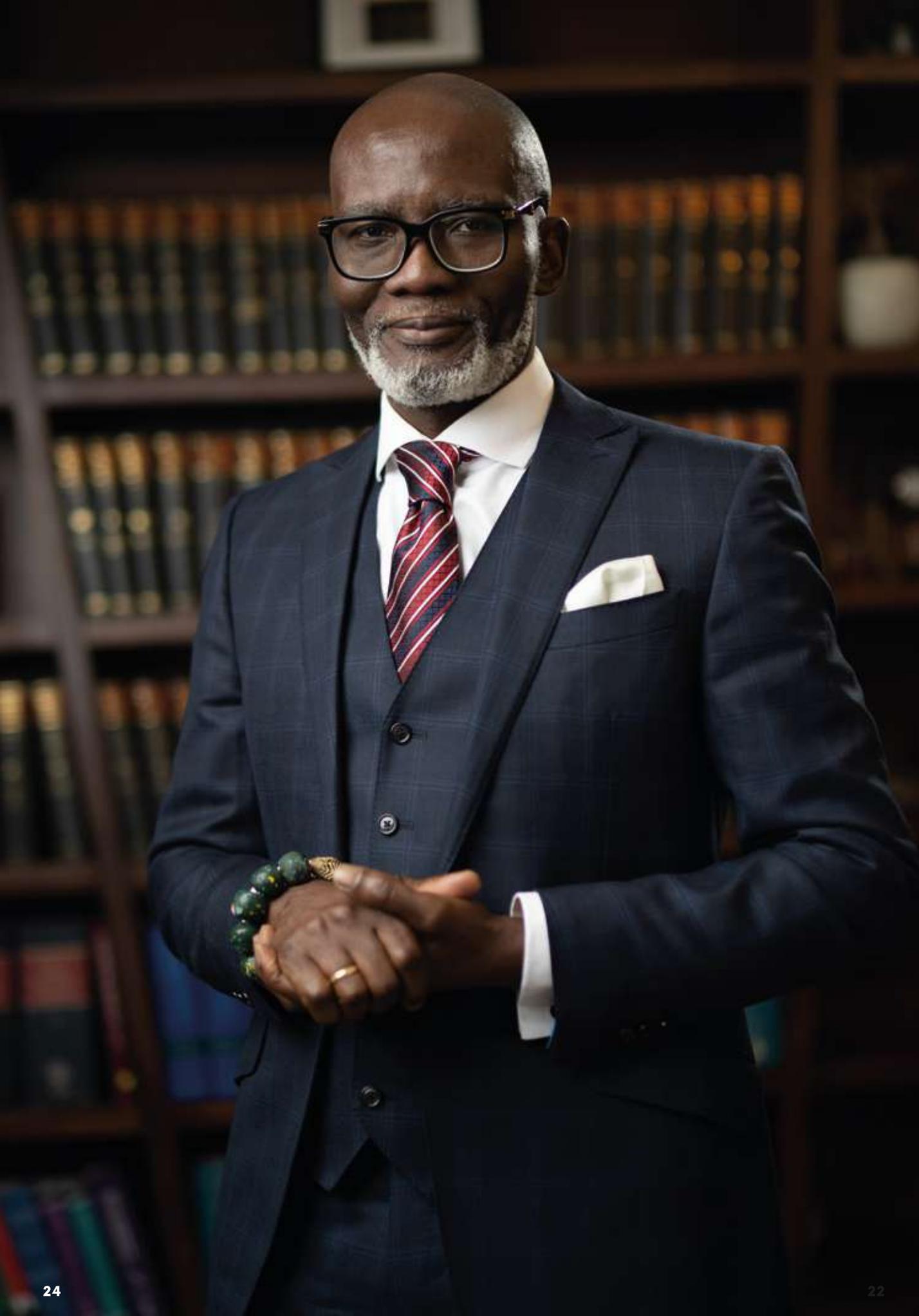
Africa is not short of treaties. It is short of implementation. Just two months before the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was adopted in Kigali in March 2018, African leaders met in Addis Ababa to adopt the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment. The sequencing was intentional. **Leaders recognised that trade integration without human mobility is incomplete.**

Yet the outcome has been paradoxical. While AfCFTA entered into force in January 2021, the Free Movement Protocol, which emanates from the Abuja Treaty of 1991, has been effectively abandoned. Only four countries have ratified it, the last being Niger in 2019, a country whose AU membership is now suspended. Africa's flagship integration project is being asked to function with one of its most critical pillars missing.

How can a continental market work when people remain trapped behind visas, permits, arbitrary border checks, and fragmented regulatory regimes? A single market that excludes Africans themselves is structurally self-defeating. **We must see a borderless Africa not as an abstract ideal. It is the logical future direction of a modern, digital, entrepreneurial, transformational and prosperous Africa.**

For SMEs, visa-free travel is not a luxury, it is market access. A tech founder in Dakar should be able to pitch in Rabat, incorporate in Kigali, hire talent in Lagos, manufacture in Addis Ababa, and serve customers in Johannesburg. A woman-led agribusiness in Benue State, Nigeria, should export processed goods across West and Central Africa without repeated testing, conflicting standards, and opaque delays.

Until Africa aligns trade liberalisation with human mobility, the promise of a single market of 1.5 billion people will remain aspirational rather than operational.



Innovation, one pillar of the APD 2026 theme, is increasingly digital. Africa's youth are building platforms in fintech, e-commerce, creative content, logistics, health, and education. But digital innovation cannot scale if digital markets remain nationally siloed.

The relevance of enabling Africans to buy and sell across borders using mobile money wallets is enormous. Imagine a fashion designer in Cotonou advertising on Instagram. A buyer in Cairo places an order, pays in Egyptian pounds, and the seller receives payment instantly in CFA francs, without correspondent banks, dollar dependency, or value leakage. With open skies under the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), delivery follows within days.

This is why implementing the Yamoussoukro Decision, the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, and continent-wide mobile money interoperability is foundational. When payments move seamlessly in local currencies, SMEs retain value, reduce costs, and reinvest locally. When African demand meets African supply at scale, investors follow, financing logistics, warehousing, and transport networks to facilitate enhanced intra-African trade.

This is how Africa builds its own Amazon-scale platforms, rooted in African consumers, producers, and payments. This is how jobs and industrial depth are created. This is how the future can be Africa.

Encouragingly, political consensus exists. At the Sixth AU Mid-Year Coordination Meeting in Accra in July 2024, Regional Economic Communities, the African Union Commission, and stakeholders unanimously adopted a report, emerging from consultations organised by the Africa Prosperity Network (APN), which called for:

- continent-wide mobile money interoperability by 2027; and
- adoption of PAPSS across all AU Member States.

The direction is clear. Execution remains.

Collaboration, the second pillar, cannot thrive when borders trap skills, services, and inputs. African value chains are inherently continental. SMEs must co-create ideas, link suppliers and buyers, share intelligence, pool demand, and close deals across borders.

Mutual recognition of qualifications enables firms to deploy talent continent-wide. Open skies connect African cities directly. Infrastructure corridors transform borders from bottlenecks into bridges. When these barriers fall, collaboration becomes continuous and African enterprises can organise into value chains capable of serving our single market of 1.5 billion consumers.

Trade, the third pillar, reveals the true cost of borders. Intra-African trade remains low not fundamentally

because of weak supply, but because friction multiplies at borders. Harmonised standards, unified customs systems, and predictable rules are essential.

Africa's integration challenge is not vision, it is discipline that comes from political will. This is why Article 18 of the AU Constitutive Act, providing for an African Court of Justice, must finally be implemented.

A single market cannot function on voluntary compliance. AfCFTA obligations and free movement commitments are routinely delayed without consequence. A continental court would provide legal certainty, enforce compliance, and transform integration from aspiration into binding reality.

Such a court would strengthen rather than weaken African sovereignty, reduce reliance on external jurisdictions, and provide citizens and businesses meaningful recourse. **A market of 1.5 billion people needs a neutral referee with ultimate authority.**

Fragmented, Africa remains a price-taker. Integrated, Africa becomes a value-addition producer with the power to make the rules and determine its destiny. Empowerment cannot happen within borders designed for another century by others. Africa does not lack ambition or creativity; it lacks borders that serve its people.

Pan-Africanism: From Elite Rhetoric to People Power

For over 100 years, Pan-Africanism has too long remained an elite conversation. What has been missing is mass demand. This is why APD 2026 will launch the Make Africa Borderless Now! Movement. Africa does not need more communiqués. It needs urgency and popular ownership. The roadmap to integration was agreed as far back as 1991 under the Abuja Treaty.

We believe mobilising 10 million signatures across all six regions of Africa, including Global Africa, is both achievable and necessary because integration now affects daily life: jobs, prices, mobility, payments, visas, and opportunity.

When citizens, SMEs, women, youth, and the diaspora speak with one voice, integration becomes unavoidable.

Fragmented, Africa remains a price-taker. Integrated, Africa becomes a value-addition producer with the power to make the rules and determine its destiny. Empowerment cannot happen within borders designed for another century by others. Africa does not lack ambition or creativity; it lacks borders that serve its people.

A borderless Africa is a decision to be made now. We intend, by the use of technology, to mobilise over 10 million signatures and present them to our leaders at the 40th AU Summit in 2027. Africa's future will not be delivered by another summit. It will be claimed by her people, whose ask is simply that their leaders implement what they have already agreed on.

The author is the Founder and Executive Chairman of the Africa Prosperity Network.

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At Trustur AI,

We believe that borders are beyond just lines on a map; they also exist as gaps in trust, information, and opportunity that stifle our continent's most potential.

We believe that an African entrepreneur should be defined by their reputation, not their location. That is why we are committed to utilizing Artificial Intelligence, Digital Identity, and Financial Services to enable a doctor in Accra, a lawyer in Nairobi, or a trader in Lagos to carry their credibility across borders instantly, turning strangers into trusted partners.

We believe that knowledge is a force multiplier for trade. We ensure that the opaque laws, hidden protocols, and complex standards that fragment our nations are available and adapted to each person through Trustur AI Deep Intelligence. By digitizing and democratizing the continent's legal and commercial DNA, we are tearing down the walls of uncertainty that keep our SMEs small.

We believe that capital should follow potential, not just collateral. The youth and women of Africa are creditworthy not because they have assets today, but because they are the bedrock of our economies. We have changed this by applying alternate credit evaluations and innovative collateral to unlock credit for the millions of people that traditional banking has ignored.

We believe that the new Pan-Africanism is not signed in ink but coded in our DNA. We are manifesting that DNA through technology that connects our people, our systems of governance and our commerce.

We believe that a borderless Africa is not a distant dream to be negotiated, but a digital reality that we are building today—one verified identity, one informed decision, and one seamless transaction at a time.



Trustur AI

By **Oswald Wedam Anonadaga**
Founder & CEO of FloodGates International and Trustur AI
Adjudged No. 1 Tech 4 Democracy Innovator in Africa and top 5 Worldwide
Winner of the African Union Global Africa Startup Award.



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Africa's Prosperity Journey: Towards Achieving the World's Largest Single Market of over 1.5 Billion People Continues...

By Sidig Eltoum - CEO, Africa Prosperity Network

*"It always seems impossible until it is done."
- Nelson Mandela*

The very idea of a 1.5-billion-person market seems daunting, yet Mandela's words remind us that transformative change is possible through unwavering commitment. Today, the Africa Prosperity Dialogue (APD) carries forward this legacy as a conscious journey of advocacy and action towards a single, breath-taking goal: unifying Africans into the world's largest integrated market. This was the vision that gave birth to the Africa Prosperity Network (APN) and its flagship convening, APD. APN was founded with a clear and urgent mandate to translate Africa's collective aspirations into practical, measurable outcomes. Conceived as a pan-African, non-profit platform, APN is firmly anchored in the African Union's Agenda 2063, working on the ground to advance a prosperous, integrated, and self-reliant continent.

At the centre of APN's mission is accelerating Africa's continental trade and economic integration. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the world's largest market by population, with 1.2 billion people, and is set to create millions of jobs, lift up to 30 million out of extreme poverty, and raise incomes of millions more. More than a trade agreement, AfCFTA is a structural transformation, industrialisation, and economic sovereignty. From the outset, APN recognised that policy ambition alone would not deliver these outcomes. Africa needs structured dialogues, trusted partnerships, political will, and decisive execution.

This conviction gave rise to the Africa Prosperity Dialogues. Today, APD is firmly established as the continent's premier annual convening on trade, investment, and economic integration. It was deliberately designed not as another conference, but as a results-driven platform where leaders align priorities, unlock capital, and drive implementation.

The journey began in January 2023 in Ghana with the inaugural Dialogues, convened under the theme "From Ambition to Action – Delivering Prosperity Through Continental Trade." Leaders from government, business, and the continental secretariat came together to move integration from paper to practice. Participants

committed to accelerating ratification of the AU Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, investing in trade-enabling infrastructure and digitalisation, and strengthening support for MSMEs, women, and youth entrepreneurs. These commitments were captured in the Peduase Compact 2023, signalling a shared resolve to move from rhetoric to results. A key outcome was the adoption of the APD Action Compact, subsequently endorsed by the African Union, affirming the central role of the private sector in driving implementation. The dialogue helped reposition continental trade integration from a policy framework into an actionable economic project aligned with Agenda 2063.

APD 2024 built on this momentum under the theme "Delivering Prosperity in Africa: Produce, Add Value, Trade." The focus shifted decisively toward industrialisation, regional value chains, and value addition. The goal was clear: move Africa beyond the export of raw materials toward competitive, value-added goods. Technology, innovation, logistics, and efficient payment systems featured prominently, reinforcing the importance of trade facilitation and accelerating continental systems such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS). The resulting Accra Compact 2025 outlined clear steps to bridge Africa's infrastructure gap and unlock the full promise of market integration. These outcomes were consolidated in the Peduase Compact 2024 and presented at the African Union Summit, affirming APD's growing influence as a policy-shaping platform.

In 2025, the Dialogues convened again in Accra under the theme "Delivering Africa's Single Market through Infrastructure: Invest. Connect. Integrate." This edition



addressed one of the continent's most binding constraints: infrastructure. Discussions focused on financing and delivering transport corridors, energy systems, and digital networks at scale, while exploring how to mobilise public-private partnerships and diaspora capital. A particularly significant outcome was the introduction of the Africa Heritage Fund for Infrastructure, also known as the "One-Dollar-A-Day" Fund, designed to mobilise domestic and diaspora capital to support long-term infrastructure development. In advancing this initiative, APN aligned a broad coalition of stakeholders, with AUDA-NEPAD emerging as a key strategic partner.

Beyond the Dialogues, APN continues to deepen Africa's continental and global engagement. Through the Global Africa Forum, held annually during the UN General Assembly, the Network mobilises the African diaspora around skills, capital, and advocacy. In 2024, APN's Mid-Year Interoperability Symposium played a catalytic role in securing African Union-wide adoption of a framework for cross-border mobile money interoperability, alongside the development and pilot testing of the Digital Trade Protocol and cross-border payments between Ghana and Nigeria. This marked a milestone for financial inclusion and intra-African commerce. In July 2025, the Malabo Leadership Breakfast Meeting convened senior policymakers and business leaders, resulting in renewed commitments to regulatory harmonisation, trade facilitation, free-movement reforms, and scaled digital trade systems.

Africa's economic integration, however, cannot succeed in isolation from the broader realities of peace, stability, and sovereignty. Sustainable integration depends on African ownership of standards, institutions, and implementation pathways. Through African-led dialogue, shared rules, and collective action, the continent is not merely building a single market; it is laying the foundations for a stable, resilient, and peaceful future shaped by African priorities and values.

At its core, APN is a catalyst that bridges policy and practice and drives the structural shifts Africa needs. As the continental integration agenda and Agenda 2063 move from vision to implementation, the Network remains focused on delivery. Africa's prosperity must not only be imagined; it must be realised.

Looking ahead, APD 2026 marks a decisive next chapter. As the fourth edition of the Dialogues, convened under the patronage of the President of Ghana, it will focus squarely on the economic actors that will determine the success of Africa's single market: small and medium enterprises, women, and youth.

Held under the theme "Empowering SMEs, Women and Youth in Africa's Single Market: Innovate. Collaborate.

Trade.", APD 2026 is designed to move beyond dialogue into execution. The programme is intentionally action-oriented, featuring high-level executive roundtables, closed-door stakeholder sessions, and deal-making platforms where presidents, ministers, CEOs, regulators, and institutional leaders come together to unlock finance, harmonise regulations, and ease trade.

APD is designed to promote collective ownership and accelerate the delivery of a single, borderless market for our over 1.5 billion African citizens. APD 2026 will also function as a continental deal nexus. Pitch arenas for high-growth SMEs and start-ups, private deal rooms connecting entrepreneurs with investors, and a finance marketplace showcasing tailored products for women-led and youth-led enterprises will be central features.

Across the first two days, the main plenary will spotlight real success stories while examining challenges and future prospects for entrepreneurs trading across borders. This will culminate in a Presidential and Business Leaders Dialogue on the final day. Running alongside the plenaries will be *Projet Afrique*, a dynamic exhibition showcasing African businesses, products, and services—making success visible, tangible, and replicable.

A series of thematic Breakfast Meetings will complement the main programme, convening senior policymakers, regulators, and industry leaders around priority sectors and cross-cutting issues critical to implementation. Each session will be anchored in a clear action agenda, with outcomes distilled into practical recommendations and commitments feeding directly into APD 2026 deliverables.

A defining moment of APD 2026 will be the launch of the Make Africa Borderless Now! Movement. Coordinated by APN's Africa Without Borders Desk, this people-driven digital campaign will mobilise ten million signatures over one year, culminating in a petition to African Heads of State at the 40th African Union Summit in February 2027. The call is clear: visa-free travel, full implementation of the Single African Air Transport Market, and operationalisation of the Digital Trade Protocol, including mobile money interoperability.

APD 2026 offers clear value to all stakeholders. Sponsors and partners gain strategic positioning at the forefront of Africa's economic transformation. Entrepreneurs gain access to finance, skills, and markets. Thought leaders gain a platform to shape one of the most consequential economic conversations of this decade.

Together, through APN and APD, Africa's single market is being built—one brick at a time—moving steadily from ambition and commitment to measurable action and lasting impact.

The Africa Prosperity Network

The Africa Prosperity Network (APN) is a not-for-profit organisation committed to mobilising private sector leadership for the collective progress and shared prosperity of Africa and, by extension, Global Africa. APN's Africa Prosperity Dialogues (APD) provide a trusted convening platform for finding and sharing results-oriented solutions to the challenges facing the African continent and securing broad commitment to Africa's economic integration.

Our vision is to be the leading network driving Africa's economic transformation and shared prosperity, championing the creation of the world's largest single market and advancing Africa's competitiveness in global markets and for the dignity and shared prosperity of Africans.

Our mission is to bring together Africa's most influential leaders and stakeholders, from both the private and public sectors, from the continent and beyond, in pursuit of that all-important goal: realising the "Africa We Want", as outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. We see the 21st century as prime for Africa's success. Through impactful dialogues, strategic partnerships and advocacy efforts, we aim to drive tangible progress towards the establishment of an integrated Africa, one that allows the free movement of people, goods, services, cultures and ideas.

Profiles of Advisory Council



**DR NKOSAZANA CLARICE
DLAMINI ZUMA, SOUTH AFRICA.**

Dr Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini Zuma was appointed as Minister responsible for Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities on 6 March 2023 in South Africa. She served as Minister for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs from 30 May 2019 to 6 March 2023 and Minister of The Presidency from 27 February 2018 to 25 May 2019. Dr Dlamini Zuma was elected as the first woman to lead the African Union Commission on 15 July 2012 and served until 30 January 2017.



AMBASSADOR (DR) AMINA MOHAMED, KENYA

Ambassador Dr Amina Mohamed has had a distinguished career in the Public Service spanning over thirty-five years. She served in three Government Ministerial portfolios and was Cabinet Secretary at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; Education, Science and Technology; and Sports, Culture and Heritage. She was also Permanent Secretary for Justice, National Cohesion and Constitutional Affairs, ASG/Deputy Executive Director for the UNEP. Before that, she was Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the UN, WTO and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Switzerland.



**MADAM PATRICIA POKU DIABY,
CÔTE D'IVOIRE & GHANA**

Madam Patricia Poku Diaby is currently Ghana's richest woman. She is also among the ten richest persons in Ghana. She is an astute businesswoman with operations in both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, a cocoa merchant and the CEO of Plot Enterprise Ghana Limited. Madam Patricia Poku Diaby is the founder and chairperson for the board of directors of two cocoa-sourcing companies in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.



MR JOSHUA SIAW, UNITED KINGDOM

Mr. Joshua Siaw is a distinguished legal professional and Partner/Director at White & Case LLP's Africa Practice Division. He is known for his exceptional legal acumen, leadership, and dedication to advancing the legal landscape in Africa. Mr. Joshua Siaw's contributions have been instrumental in positioning White & Case LLP as a prominent player in the African legal sphere. His career spans various sectors, providing counsel on complex legal issues.

Profiles of Advisory Council



DR EUGENE OWUSU, GHANA

Dr Eugene Owusu is a prominent International Policy and Development Management expert with over 25 years of experience, primarily with the United Nations, with a focus on Africa's complex political, development, and humanitarian challenges. He served as the UN Assistant Secretary-General, Deputy Special Representative, UN Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator, and UNDP Resident Representative, impacting diverse development initiatives. He currently serves as the Special Advisor to the President of Ghana on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



**DR CESAR MBA ABOGO,
EQUATORIAL GUINEA & MOZAMBIQUE**

Dr Cesar Mba Abogo is an accomplished development expert and Country Manager at the African Development Bank (AfDB) in Mozambique, recognized for his dedication to fostering socio-economic progress and sustainable growth. He served as Minister of Finance, Economy, and Planning in the Republic of Equatorial Guinea from April 2019 to October 2020.



MS CHRISTAL M. JACKSON, UNITED STATES

Christal M. Jackson is a venture partner, consultant to individuals, corporations, and organisations and executive coach, while maintaining her commitment to helping improve education, health, and economic opportunities for communities of colour. She is currently the Chairperson for the Africa-America Institute.



DR AMANY ASFOUR, EGYPT

Dr Amany Asfour is an Egyptian economist and businesswoman. Appointed in 2021 as the President of the African Business Council (AfBC), Dr. Asfour leads the council; an independent private-sector institution of the African Union. She is also the President of the African Alliance for Women Empowerment (AFRAWE), the Egyptian Businesswomen Association (EBWA), and the Founder and Honorary President of Business and Professional Women-Egypt (BPW-Egypt).

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The unified Roar of 10 million Africans

The Colonial Division and the Urgency of Now

In 1885, European powers gathered in Berlin to partition Africa without a single African voice. The borders they drew with rulers across rivers, deserts, and communities were designed for extraction and control, not prosperity. Decades later, newly independent states chose to preserve these colonial lines. That choice created modern Africa's central contradiction: political independence without economic might; sovereignty without scale; and a continent of fragmented potential.

Today, these artificial borders stifle a market of over 1.5 billion people. They restrict the movement of talent and goods, multiply costs, trap capital and restrict the job market. As Africa's population surges toward 2.1 billion by 2040 to host the world's largest workforce, we face a decisive choice:

Will we grow divided and constrained, or integrated and empowered? Building a genuine single market is the most transformative project of this century, a direct path to unlocking industrialisation, competitive continental brands, and dignified prosperity for all.

A People-Powered Movement for Implementation

That is why the Africa Prosperity Network, along with its partners, decided to launch the "Make Africa Borderless Now!" campaign in 2026. It is a historic, grassroots movement, which seeks to take the issue of Africa's economic integration from the elitist confines of summits and treaties to be owned and driven by the people. It aims to transform, with greater urgency, the imperative of integration from a leaders' aspiration into a people-driven demand for action. Our bold goal is to mobilise, within 12 months, over 10 million signatures from Africans and the global diaspora, presenting this mandate directly to Heads of State at the 40th African Union Summit in February 2027.

Inspired by the success of the Jubilee 2000 debt relief movement, which secured 24 million signatures in the late 1990s, we believe in the power of unified public will to turn long-agreed treaties into tangible reality. This manifesto, and the movement it fuels, exists to close the gap between Africa's visionary agreements and their urgent implementation.

Security Through Integration: Dispelling the Myths

A common fear is that free movement weakens security and invites uncontrolled migration. We argue the opposite: a borderless Africa is a more secure, better-governed Africa. To put security into perspective, countries like China and India, each, have populations comparable to Africa's 1.5 billion people and yet have robust security systems that serve to enable free enterprise and consolidate their collective commercial power, while increasing their business competitiveness in the global economy.

Our current patchwork of 54 or 55 separate border systems is itself a security weakness. Criminals exploit gaps between disconnected databases. We propose replacing the illusion of control offered by cumbersome visas with modern, integrated biometric systems. The call is for a common African Union biometric passport or digital ID. Under this model, movement is free but identification is strict and verified at ports of entry. This enables states to consolidate data, share intelligence effectively, and monitor movement in real-time.

Sovereignty is not surrendered; it is exercised smarter.

Evidence from integrated markets shows mobility follows economic opportunity, not chaos. As jobs and investment spread across a unified market, pressure on any single nation eases. **True security in the 21st century comes from smart integration and data-driven governance, not from colonial-era barriers that only create the façade of control.**

The Engine of Integration: Unleashing African Enterprise

Africa's future will be written by its enterprises. From the SMEs that form our economic backbone to the women- and youth-led businesses driving innovation, all face the same core challenge: not a lack of ambition, but the fragmentation of small, disconnected markets.

Enterprises are hamstrung when borders block movement, payments fail to flow, and standards multiply costs. A single, integrated African market is the essential platform on which an SME can grow into a regional champion, a woman entrepreneur can scale her business with dignity, and an African corporation can emerge as a global competitor. Every major world brand was first built on a large, integrated home market. **To build our own champions, we must first unite our home.**

Building a genuine single market is the most transformative project of this century, a direct path to unlocking industrialisation, competitive continental brands, and dignified prosperity for all.

The 12 Action Priorities: A Practical Blueprint for a Borderless Continent

The blueprint for integration already exists in signed treaties and protocols. These twelve action priorities represent the unfinished business of African unity, now claimed by its people.

1. Abolish Visas for Africans in Africa

Africa cannot integrate if its entrepreneurs cannot move. Visa restrictions raise costs, delay deals, and stifle opportunity. Abolishing visas for Africans travelling within Africa treats mobility as essential economic infrastructure, enabling businesses to explore markets, establish partnerships, and deploy talent freely across the continent.

2. Open Africa's Skies Now

Closed skies keep Africa expensive and disconnected. Fully implementing the Yamoussoukro Decision and the Single African Air Transport Market will slash airfares, connect cities directly, and turbocharge trade, tourism, and logistics, expanding markets and creating jobs.

3. Launch One African Biometric Passport & Digital ID

Enterprises need speed, trust, and certainty. A single or common African biometric passport and interoperable digital ID will simplify travel and business establishment, support secure digital services, ensure security, and lower verification costs, turning seamless movement into a driver of secure economic activity.

4. Activate the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol

With African enterprise increasingly digital, we must activate the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol to create one continental digital market. This enables businesses to sell services and content across borders, scale without physical relocation, and compete globally from an African base.

5. Make Cross-Border Payments Seamless Across Africa

Intra-African trade requires frictionless finance. The full operationalisation of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) and continent-wide mobile-money interoperability will reduce transaction costs, keep value circulating within Africa, and save billions lost annually to foreign currency conversion.

6. Unlock African Talent Through Mutual Skills Recognition

African enterprises need skills, which are readily available among Africans at home and beyond. Mutual recognition of professional and vocational qualifications will allow firms to recruit continent-wide, deploy staff across markets, and build the specialised, competitive teams needed for global success.

7. Harmonise Standards to Create One African Market

Multiple national standards force businesses to treat Africa as 55 or so separate markets. Harmonising regulations ensures goods approved in one country can be sold across the continent, unlocking manufacturing, agro-processing, and light industry, and enabling enterprises to scale into true continental brands.

8. Establish One African Customs Union

The AfCFTA cannot reach its potential without a customs union. The Abuja Treaty's 2028 deadline for this must be honoured. A digitised, unified customs system will reduce delays, boost industrialisation and cross-border trade, lower costs for SMEs, and attract global manufacturers to set up operations in Africa.

9. Build Continental Infrastructure That Connects Africa

Enterprises cannot scale on disconnected infrastructure. We must invest jointly in roads, rail, ports, energy, and digital networks. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam shows what is collectively possible. Innovative financing, such as the proposed One-Dollar-a-Day African Infrastructure Fund, can mobilise citizen savings, pension funds, and private capital into bankable projects that physically unite the continent.

10. Enforce Integration Through the African Court of Justice

Markets require rules, and rules require enforcement. Operationalising the supranational African Court of Justice, as provided for in the AU Constitutive Act, will provide a huge incentive for investors because of the certainty and protection for enterprises against arbitrary barriers. It will ensure that the single market rules and regulations have to be applied and uniformly so across member states.

11. Put SMEs, Women, and Youth at the Centre of Trade

Women and youth-led SMEs dominate African trade yet face the highest barriers. Full implementation of the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade is essential to ensure access to finance, simplified procedures, safe mobility, and true continental market access for our most dynamic entrepreneurs.

12. Negotiate as One Africa on the Global Stage

Fragmented Africa is a price-taker; integrated Africa is a rule-maker. Negotiating as one bloc on the big issues, such as trade, digital governance, and climate action, establishes Africa's global stature, enhancing our efforts towards self-determination and socio-economic development.

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Let's Make Africa Borderless Now!



As it unveils its ambitious "Make Africa Borderless Now!" movement, the Africa Prosperity Network aims to attract a formal demand from millions of Africans all around the continent and its diaspora. The demand is to implement the various treaties requisite for a true single market. This is for trade, investment, work and tourism.

The 2026 edition of the Africa Prosperity Dialogues is the fourth in an annual series. It was begun by the Africa Prosperity Network in 2023. Every edition since then has strived to expand the envelope. This is with regards to the efforts to widen even further the scope and sheer intensity of the collective effort. The effort is to achieve pan-continental market integration.

But the 2026 edition is easily the most ambitious yet. It is transforming this annual event from potentially transformative dialogues to a truly pan-African movement. This movement is of the continent's citizens. It ranges from people living at the communal grassroots to key stakeholders in cross border trade and investment all around Africa.

This movement is the people-driven "Make Africa Borderless Now" campaign. It advocates for the full implementation of existing African Union protocols. The goal is to achieve a truly integrated and borderless continent. This is for the free movement of people, goods, capital, and services.

Its formal launch on a continental stage is at the Africa Prosperity Dialogues 2026. This is in Accra, Ghana, from 4 to 6 February 2026. It reflects the overarching objective to transform the socio-economic integration of Africa. It moves from an aspiration of leaders into a concrete reality driven by citizen demand. The focus is on removing physical, financial, and digital barriers.

The campaign is officially led by the Africa Prosperity Network itself. It works in collaboration with major pan-African institutions. These include the African Continental Free Trade Agreement Secretariat, the African Development Bank, and the African Union Development Agency - New Partnership for Africa's Development. Others are the African Export-Import Bank, Africa Financial Corporation, Africa Business Council, the Pan-African Youth Organisation, and the Office of the President of Ghana, among others.

The key people behind the initiative include Her Excellency Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini Zuma. She is

chairperson of the network's advisory council. Another is Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko, founder and executive chairman of the Africa Prosperity Network. One of the leading ambassadors for the movement's campaign is Professor PLO Lumumba. He is a renowned Kenyan lawyer, activist and author.

12 Pillars for Make Africa Borderless Now! Specifically designed as a people-powered initiative, the movement aims to gather over 10 million signatures. These are from across the continent and the diaspora. They will demand action from their leaders.

The campaign's blueprint is built upon 12 core pillars. It comprises a practical plan. It is grounded in existing African Union treaties and protocols. But it is pushed forward with people-powered urgency for implementation.

They include three pillars aimed at making Africans citizens of a united continent. They are:

- Visa-free travel across Africa
- Open Skies to liberalise air routes
- A continent-wide biometric passport and digital African ID.

Four pillars are aimed at facilitating trade and investment within the African single market, and between that market and the rest of the world. These are:

- A single African customs union
- Harmonised standards and a continent-wide commercial law ecosystem
- Seamless cross-border digital payments
- Full activation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Digital Trade Protocol.

Five pillars provide the underpinnings on which a single pan African market can operate and indeed thrive. These are:

- Trans-African infrastructure and logistics corridors
- An African Court of Justice to enforce a true single market
- Women and youth at the centre of continental prosperity
- Recognise African skills across Africa
- One African voice in global negotiations.

"All of these echo long-agreed frameworks," notes Otchere-Darko. They range "from the Abuja Treaty (1991) to the Yamoussoukro Decision (1999) to the Free Movement Protocol (2018). But they have waited decades for action."

Europe and America are keeping Africans out

The campaign will comprise pressure from Africans all around the continent. They will pressure their respective sovereign governments. The goal is to implement multilateral agreements that they have already willingly signed up for. What has changed though is the intensity of the imperatives. These are driving the need for the implementation of these various agreements.

“Never has the urgency been clearer,” Otchere-Darko warns. “In February 2025, the African Union Commission and the African Development Bank jointly urged African governments to remove visa restrictions. They warned of the economic self-harm caused by internal barriers.

“Meanwhile, in Europe and America, all efforts are being made to keep Africans out. These nations’ tightening immigration policies threaten academic, business, and cultural exchanges. They serve as a stark reminder of what we need to do. If Africa does not build its own internal freedom of movement, someone else will dictate and stifle our progress for us.”

To be sure, if the campaign could succeed in persuading the various African sovereign governments to actually implement the treaties they have already signed up to, the direly needed single pan African economic zone would become a solid reality.

Gaps risk engendering a paper tiger

Despite broad ratification, implementation gaps abound. Many countries have delayed depositing instruments of ratification or domesticating the agreement into national law. Only a fraction of member states are actively trading under the African Continental Free Trade Area. This is the flagship continental trade agreement. It is designed to create a single market for goods and services across the African Union’s 54 or so member states. It facilitates the free movement of goods, services, capital and eventually people.

The gaps risk making the agreement as much of a paper tiger as it is a trade and investment treaty. It is abided by its 50-plus signatory nations so far. Some core operational elements are still under development or not fully tested. These include the dispute settlement mechanism and finalised rules of origin. Meanwhile, logistics and customs harmonisation shortcomings remain high. Non-tariff barriers remain high too. This undermines the effective free movement of goods.

The dynamics behind these shortcomings are multi-faceted. Many governments fear competition for local industries and tariff revenue losses. This slows implementation. Weak national capacity and lack of harmonised regulations reduce investor confidence and market predictability. This is under agreement rules. The variance in member states’ readiness exacerbates economic divides rather than bridging them.

Historical deadline failures

Yet without full tariff liberalisation and customs efficiency, the agreement’s potential to boost intra-continental trade is limited. But the failure to implement key treaties goes back much further than the agreement itself.

There is the treaty establishing the African Economic Community. This is the Abuja Treaty. It was adopted in 1991 and entered into force in 1994. It lays out a six-stage blueprint for full economic integration. This ranges from regional community strengthening to a continental customs union, common market, and ultimately a pan-African monetary union.

But many planned stages have not been achieved by the scheduled deadlines. These are especially the deeper integration steps. They include a common market, monetary union, and independent institutions like an African Central Bank. Thus, the treaty remains more of a framework vision than a binding implementation pathway.

Without completion of the steps envisioned, market integration remains superficial. These steps include a common external tariff and currency. However, the innovative Pan African Payments and Settlements System offers potential. It can minimise currency inconvertibility and exchange rate risks.

The system itself is a cross-border payment infrastructure. It is designed to allow businesses to settle transactions within Africa in local currencies. This reduces dependence on United States dollars and Euros. It lowers costs and financial risks. It was launched in January 2022 by the African Union and the African Export-Import Bank. But adoption among commercial banks and businesses has been slower than expected. Wide implementation across all African Union member states remains incomplete.

The consequent persistent currency fragmentation increases transaction costs. It reduces the competitiveness of intra-African trade. It thus effectively hampers efficient cross-border investment and business scaling.

Another treaty predating the agreement that needs to be implemented is the Single African Air Transport Market. Based on the Yamoussoukro Decision of 1999, the market was launched in 2018. It aimed to create a single continental air transport market. It would liberalise passenger and cargo services.

However, nearly seven years later, full participation and compliance across all African Union members are far from complete. Not all countries have removed restrictions on air traffic rights or ownership. The consequent high aviation costs and limited connectivity restrict business travel, logistics and tourism links. These are vital for integrated markets.

Then there is the Constitutive Act (2000). It provides the legal foundation of the African Union and commits to economic and policy harmonisation. And there is Agenda 2063, adopted in 2013. This is a 50-year socio-economic transformation blueprint with integration as a core pillar.

But despite reporting mechanisms with regards to both, concrete outcomes lag behind many targets. These targets are actually aspirational rather than enforceable.

Without binding enforcement mechanisms, or accountability incentives, member states vary widely in performance.

Added to all these is the African Union Free Movement of Persons Protocol. It was adopted in 2018. It aims to allow Africans to live, work, and travel freely across the continent. This would boost integration and trade, complementing the agreement. It involves progressive implementation in three phases. These are entry and visa-free, right of residence, and right of establishment to work and settle.

This phase is designed to create a unified Africa with open borders for people, capital, goods, and services. It would boost intra-African trade, investment, and employment by facilitating labour mobility. But its implementation is slow due to security concerns and differing national priorities. Only some nations have ratified it, despite its role in enabling labour mobility and skills development.

European passports beat African passports in Africa

Indeed, as of late 2025, only four African countries had fully ratified the African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. These are Mali, Niger, Rwanda, and São Tomé and Príncipe. This is despite over 30 signing it. Fifteen ratifications are needed for the protocol to enter into force. While many nations support the goal, actual ratification faces hurdles. Some countries offer visa-free access as steps toward greater mobility. Hurdles include security concerns and economic worries. Concerns over managing migration flows, maintaining security, public order, and potential strains on resources hinder full adoption.

This is proving problematic for investors, entrepreneurs, business managers and their employees. Their needs and responsibilities require them to hop across borders from one country to another around Africa.

"As an investor and someone who really wants to make Africa great, I have to apply for 35 different visas on my passport," complains Aliko Dangote. He is the richest man on the continent and has invested huge amounts in productive enterprises all around Africa.

As an investor and someone who really wants to make Africa great, I have to apply for 35 different visas on my passport" complains Aliko Dangote, the richest man on the continent and who has invested huge amounts in productive enterprises all around Africa. 'I do not have the time to go and drop my passport in embassies to get a visa. The most annoying thing is that if you are treating everyone the same, then I can understand. But I can assure you that Patrick (Smith, the Editor-in-Chief of the Africa Report magazine – Editor's Note) does not need 35 visas as he travels around Africa on a French passport rather than a Nigerian passport. Which means he has freer movement than myself in Africa."

"I do not have the time to go and drop my passport in embassies to get a visa. The most annoying thing is that if you are treating everyone the same, then I can understand. But I can assure you that Patrick does not need 35 visas as he travels around Africa on a French passport rather than a Nigerian passport. This means he has freer movement than myself in Africa." Patrick Smith is the editor-in-chief of the Africa Report magazine.

The *Make Africa Borderless Now!* campaign seeks to collect a critical mass of signatories from across the continent. This is in the form of a petition. It persuades agreement signatory countries to implement key treaties and protocols. These are requisite for the success of a pan-African single market. This is with regards to trade, investment, work and tourism.

"The petition is simply about asking African leaders to gather the political will. They must implement treaties and protocols they themselves have adopted and agreed to implement but are being slow. Our goal is to send a strong delegation to the African Union. We will present 10 million signatures and say, 'Your people want a borderless Africa, simply by implementing what you

have already agreed to do," explains Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko.

"If over 80% of employment and business activities in Africa come from small and medium-sized enterprises, then the best way to empower them is to implement the treaties and protocols that our heads of state have already signed at the African Union level. What small and medium-sized enterprises, women and young entrepreneurs want is simple. It is the freedom to move and trade across our borders," he stresses.

In support of the initiative Sidig Eltoum, chief executive of the Africa Prosperity Network, explains a point. "The focus is on removing the physical, financial, and digital barriers that hold back the continent's primary job creators, small and medium-sized enterprises. By doing so, we offer a new, exciting world of opportunities for a continent. It has 60% of its citizens under the age of 25."

Cross-border commerce, the role of the African Woman



Intra African trade is driven largely by heavily fragmented women traders. They move goods across borders whether formally or informally. But they have to navigate an array of formidable obstacles. To ensure they are empowered, an African Continental Free Trade Area Protocol on Women and Youth in trade is being implemented. This will strengthen their participation in the ongoing evolution of a pan-continental single market. They will reap better benefits.

Across bustling border towns, commerce is largely driven by women. These range from Afiao on the Ghana and Togo border to Kasumbalesa on the border between Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From transporting fresh produce on motorbikes to negotiating sales of textiles and crafts, women have for decades been the backbone of Africa's historical, informal cross-border trade. This is a vital engine of local economies. But as ambitious continental integration under the African Continental Free Trade Area expands intra-African commerce, these women and their contributions are finally being recognised. They are not just participants in trade but indispensable actors. Their empowerment could catalyse inclusive growth.

Economic analysts consistently note a point. Women transporting goods across neighbouring borders sustain both rural livelihoods and urban markets. They constitute a majority of informal cross-border traders in Africa. Some 70 to 80% of such informal intra-African trade is conducted by women. This is according to the International Trade Centre. This number is disproportionately high. They are estimated to own a much lesser 40% of all the small and medium sized enterprises on the continent. Importantly, for many of them, such cross border trade accounts for up to 90% of all their income.

All this has a significant effect on the volumes and values of all intra-African trade. The Brookings Institute reckons that when both formal and informal trade are added together, the proportion of intra-African trade could reach 40%. This is as a proportion of the total trade of its member states. It is rather than the official level of 14.9% as at 2023.

Yet this role women traders play has long been undervalued by formal policy frameworks. Women in this sector face disproportionate challenges compared with male traders. The most obvious one is their limited access to finance. Women entrepreneurs face an estimated 42

billion US dollars financing gap. This is exacerbated by difficulties in accessing loans. These are due to lack of collateral, stringent requirements, traditional lending biases, and limited financial literacy.

There are debilitating non-tariff and legal hurdles too. Informality often means inconsistent regulatory treatment at borders. It means exposure to harassment, bribe demands, and ambiguous rules. Women are least equipped to navigate these. At the Ghana and Togo border, for instance, a policy brief by the International Trade Union Confederation-Africa recounts women selling fruits, vegetables and consumer goods. They are often subjected to extortion and harassment by officials from both countries. These costs erode slim profit margins and threaten livelihoods.

Lack of adequate education and information pose problems as well. Without accessible trade information in local languages and formats they can act on, women are less able to understand rules of origin, tariffs, and strategic market opportunities.

There are also socio-cultural constraints. In many communities, entrenched gender norms restrict women's mobility, property ownership, access to digital platforms, and leadership roles in business associations.

Added to all these are the constraints arising from poor infrastructure and digital exclusion. Inadequate transport, storage, and lack of internet access compound women's barriers to efficient and profitable trade.

Despite these immense obstacles, women traders remain resilient. For many families, their trade income supports education, housing and community wellbeing. This is a social contribution often overlooked in macroeconomic narratives.

The agreement's innovative Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade

Recognising that trade agreements are not gender neutral, African Union leaders adopted the agreement's Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade in February 2024. It was a historical first time that a protocol integrated affirmative action and targeted measures into a continental trade framework. Bringing women and the youth into the Protocol's purview is crucial. This is not just because of women's pivotal role in Africa's cross border trade. It is because women and the youth aged below 30 years make up 80% of Africa's population.

Unlike previous trade accords that touch on gender only indirectly, this Protocol is a legally grounded instrument. It is specifically designed to ensure that women and youth can benefit meaningfully from intra-African trade. Its objectives include supporting and enhancing women's and youth's participation in intra-African trade. They include boosting their access to finance, market information, and trade opportunities. They include promoting their inclusion in value chains and capacity building. They include formalising and simplifying mechanisms for small-scale cross-border traders. They include protecting them against harassment and related practices. They include ensuring digital trade inclusion and intellectual property support.

All of these aim to embed inclusive socio-economic development and gender equality into the agreement's implementation. Though still in the early days of implementation and pending full ratification by many state parties, signs of progress are already emerging.

Several African national trade ministries have publicly reaffirmed their commitment to the Protocol. They assert that women and youth should benefit fully from the agreement's integration efforts. They make up a significant share of micro, small and medium enterprises. This signals political will for inclusive reform. Importantly, the Protocol obligates signatory states to work with financial institutions. They must design tailored lending products, guarantees and business development services. Women traders can access these more easily. Such measures are already influencing discussions among banks and finance ministries in various African countries. They are structuring micro-financing schemes and literacy programmes.

A Committee on Women and Youth in Trade was established under the Protocol. It is mandated to monitor implementation, advise on preferential market access regulations, and link with other agreement policy bodies. These are on digital trade, intellectual property, and competition. This is opening doors for holistic support structures for women traders.

The Protocol is also facilitating increased dialogue and awareness campaigns. In many member states, national-level stakeholder dialogues and sensitisation workshops have commenced. They disseminate information about the Protocol, engage women's associations, and build capacity for future trade opportunities. These engagements help to bridge knowledge gaps. These have historically excluded women from formal trade networks.

The very fact of the Protocol's existence has catalysed new discussions. These are within chambers of commerce, border management authorities and civil society coalitions. They are about streamlining

procedures for small-scale traders. These have up till now formed a core barrier for women crossing borders with low-value consignments.

"The protocol sends a strong message that women's voices matter in shaping Africa's trade future. But implementation will require more than words. We need accountability mechanisms that ensure these commitments translate into real support on the ground," says Rose Omamo. She is deputy president of the International Trade Union Confederation-Africa. She advocates for clear enforcement and representation mechanisms in the Protocol's application.

Trade experts also caution about ongoing gaps. For instance, many women traders still lack awareness of agreement benefits. Institutional capacity to support implementation remains weak in some countries. Furthermore, without sustained investment in infrastructure, digital tools, and education, even well-intentioned protocols may not reach the grassroots.

Inclusive trade outcomes are not incidental. They must be intentionally engineered."

These early dialogues and pilot engagements have, however, created optimism. The Protocol, properly resourced and mainstreamed into national plans, can become a model for

gender-responsive trade policy, globally.

Prospects for inclusive growth going forward

As the agreement continues to evolve, the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade offers a blueprint for gender-inclusive continental integration. But there are several key priorities requisite for sustained progress.

The first one is the swift ratification of the Protocol. Domestic legislation is needed to support it in the various sovereign jurisdictions. The Protocol must be ratified and embedded in national laws. Its provisions will then have binding force.

Second is the strengthening of border facilitation regimes. Simplified trade procedures, one-stop border posts, and trade information desks can dramatically reduce harassment and administrative costs for women traders.

Third is the introduction of targeted financial instruments. Dedicated funding streams, digital payment solutions, and risk mitigation products tailored to women are essential. They help scale businesses beyond small-scale trade.

A data-driven policy is also needed. Gender-disaggregated trade data is critical for monitoring outcomes and adjusting interventions. This ensures equitable opportunities are realised.

With Africa's population projected to grow rapidly and youth entrepreneurs becoming increasingly prominent in regional value chains, empowering women traders is not



just equitable. It is economically strategic. As one policy advocate puts it, "Inclusive trade outcomes are not incidental. They must be intentionally engineered."

Women have long been the unsung drivers of Africa's cross-border trade. They sustain economies in visible markets and invisible corridors alike. Through the agreement's Women and Youth in Trade Protocol of 2024, their role is finally being framed within a continental strategy. It aims to unlock their full potential while dismantling longstanding structural barriers.

Progress to date, while still in early stages, shows promise. National commitments are emerging. Institutional mechanisms are taking shape. More women are being invited into policy dialogues that shape their futures. The strides made notwithstanding, the journey from promise to tangible success requires persistent investment. This is in access to finance, trade facilitation, digital inclusion, and gender-responsive infrastructure.

If Africa can realise the full potential of its women traders under the agreement, it will not only deepen intra-African trade. It will also build a more prosperous and equitable continent for all.

A creative African youth in the era of intra-continental trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area



As the African Continental Free Trade Area moves from promise toward measurable impact, a new generation of young Africans is rising at the forefront of intra-African trade and investment. With unprecedented access to a 1.5 billion-strong integrated market, innovative technologies, and modern management and marketing strategies, youth-led enterprises are not just participating in trade. They are reshaping cross-border supply and value chains across the continent.

The sheer importance of Africa's youth as a pivotal resource for the continent's socio-economic growth and development cannot be understated. Over 60% of Africa's population are below 25 years old. This translates into about 800,000 youths. But those of working age only make up a fraction of this.

The size of Africa's youthful population is a double edged sword. The human resource potential is accompanied by a shortage of economic opportunities.

The agreement's Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade underscores a deliberate effort to include young entrepreneurs in Africa's economic transformation. The International Labour Organisation puts Africa's youth unemployment rate at 11.2% as of 2024. But as is often with the law of averages, the numbers vary widely from one country to another. In Djibouti for example, as of 2022, youth unemployment was estimated at a staggering 80%. Even in South Africa, the most advanced economy on the continent, it stood at 45% by the second half of 2024.

These alarming figures do not tell the whole story. 60% of African youth work in agriculture, mainly subsistence farming. Less than 20% are employed in the formal wage sector. But beyond treaties and negotiations, real change is starting to happen on the ground. Young Africans begin building enterprises that span borders. They are harnessing digital platforms, modern management techniques, and designing cutting-edge marketing strategies. They compete in the complex African business ecosystem and beyond.

Game changer, Tech, Management, Creative Marketing

Across the young enterprises engaging in cross-border economic activity, certain common threads stand out. They are emerging through the entrepreneurial efforts of Africa's youth.

One is that digital platforms are proving to be veritable trade enablers. Business models powered by digital tools are enabling young Africans to transcend borders. These

tools include mobile money, e-commerce platforms, SaaS platforms, and verification systems. They reduce transaction costs, streamline compliance, and enhance market visibility. This makes it possible for young firms to operate continent-wide with agility.

Digital platforms not only help firms manage cross-border logistics. They also generate critical market intelligence. This enables better pricing strategies, customer segmentation, and competitive positioning.

Another thread is the deployment of modern techniques. These make management lean, upwardly scalable and data-driven. Young African enterprises often adopt lean management principles. They emphasise rapid iteration, real-time performance tracking, and data-driven decision making. These techniques are borrowed from the global tech sector. They afford African start-ups the flexibility they need. They can test markets across regions quickly and efficiently.

Such management practices allow these businesses to pivot, enter new markets, and refine offerings. This is based on real customer feedback. It is a stark contrast to traditional trade models bound by slow bureaucratic processes.

Africa's new generation of entrepreneurs and managers are adopting innovative marketing strategies too. They seek to reach pan-African audiences and markets. Youth-led firms are leveraging social media, storytelling, and influencer networks. They build pan-African brands. By using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, they engage diverse audiences across different cultures and languages. This is a form of digital word-of-mouth that transcends borders. It builds loyal customer bases across countries.

These modern marketing techniques help young brands to tell African stories in African voices. They make products relevant to the continent's diverse consumers.

Impacts beyond business growth

The impact of youth-led engagement in the agreement goes well beyond individual business success.

For one thing, it is creating jobs and developing skills. Youth-driven enterprises are creating employment opportunities and developing new skillsets. These are in digital literacy, logistics management, and international customer service. These capacities are crucial for Africa's future workforce.

For another, it is fostering Africa's integration and economic diversification. By participating in cross-border trade, youth enterprises help diversify Africa's trade

structure. It has historically been dominated by raw commodity exports. Their activities add resilience and value to intra-African trade flows. This is especially in services, tech, and creative sectors.

Thirdly, youth-led engagement is facilitating policy engagement and capacity building. Initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area Young Entrepreneurs Federation show that the youth are not passive beneficiaries but active architects. The federation aims to onboard tens of thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises onto the MANSA platform for trade and networking. This is a digital repository and due diligence tool developed by the African Export-Import Bank.

Stakeholders emphasise that awareness and capacity building remain crucial. Training on export readiness, digital trade compliance, and market entry strategies play a pivotal role. These are supported by the International Trade Centre and regional trade councils. They prepare youth-led firms for intra-African commerce.

The policies and their potential

The deliberate supportive policies under the agreement are laying the groundwork for even greater youth involvement. These include particularly the Women and Youth in Trade Protocol and the Digital Trade Protocol. These frameworks aim to reduce non-tariff barriers, enhance access to finance, and empower youth and women. They help them formalise and scale their cross-border operations.

Taking advantage of the Digital Trade Protocol, online payment gateways like Paystack have found a new lease of life. They use the Pan African Payments and Settlements Systems. "Paystack is leveraging some of the outputs of the agreement, such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, to facilitate the movement of funds across African countries. This, we strongly believe, will begin to open up intra-African trade and give African businesses the opportunity to expand beyond their borders within the continent," said Felix Darko. He is Paystack's Ghana-based territory manager.

To fully unlock this potential, continued investments are needed. These are in digital infrastructure, affordable financing, and targeted capacity building. This equips the youth with the skills required for export documentation, regulatory compliance, and competitive branding.

As policymakers across Africa progressively improve regulatory harmonisation and strengthen business support ecosystems, the stage is set. A new generation of African entrepreneurs will shape not only continental trade but global supply chains.

"The agreement is not just a trade agreement. It's a chance for African youth to lead the economic agenda of our continent," said an enthused young trade advocate at a recent symposium. At this dynamic intersection of policy, innovation, and youthful ambition, the agreement is proving to be more than a treaty. It is a transformational engine that could redefine entrepreneurship, integration, and prosperity across Africa.

Five models for Africa's new generation entrepreneurs

Africa's youthful entrepreneurs have the potential to reinvent the way intra-continental business opportunities are identified and exploited. They use creativity and emergent digital platforms. These opportunities are generated by the agreement.

Here are five outstanding youth-driven enterprises. They illustrate how the agreement's vision is sparking innovation, integration, and value creation across Africa.

Paystack (Nigeria), Payments that connect markets

Founded by Shola Akinlade and Ezra Olubi, Paystack revolutionised online payments across Africa. It enables seamless digital transactions for businesses of any size. Originally focused on the Nigerian market, Paystack used the agreement's vision of a unified market to expand. It expanded into Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, and Egypt. It enables entrepreneurs to accept cross-border payments effortlessly. The company's success culminated in its acquisition by Stripe. This marked a major milestone for African fintech. It illustrated how digital financial services can underpin intra-continental commerce.

The agreement's policies promise to help companies to scale across African borders with less friction. Highlighting Paystack's expansion strategy, Felix Darko, territory manager, told the Africa Prosperity Network that the

company is currently working on products. These will leverage the agreement and its various structures. They will use the ease of business that it's creating to build products. These products will allow businesses across the continent to start doing business in other African jurisdictions with ease.

Today, Paystack plays a pivotal role in lowering barriers for small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups across Africa. It helps them tap into digital finance and create scalable cross-border value chains.

Twiga Foods (Kenya), Digitising agricultural supply chains

Twiga Foods connects smallholder farmers with urban markets using mobile technology. By digitising supply logistics and aggregate demand across regions, Twiga has improved efficiency for both farmers and urban retailers. With the agreement facilitating trade across borders, Twiga expanded operations into Tanzania and Uganda. This demonstrates how tech-enabled platforms can forge cross-border supply chains in agricultural sectors. They reduce wastage, and improve food accessibility.

Twiga's use of data analytics optimises inventory and distribution. Mobile connectivity allows even remote producers to integrate into regional markets. This illustrates technology's power to democratise trade.

Afriwork (Ethiopia), Cross-border talent and small and medium-sized enterprise ecosystem

Afriwork is a Human Resource-technology platform broadening access to jobs and services across east Africa. It was founded by young Ethiopian tech entrepreneurs Semegn Tadesse and Mikyas Atskemariam. It connects employers and jobseekers across borders. This enables small and medium-sized enterprises to scale through talent acquisition and freelance networks. With over 300,000 jobseekers registered and tens of thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises engaged, Afriwork not only boosts employment. It also strengthens the human capital supply chain across borders. It helps youth firms to find the skills they need to expand under the agreement's integrated market.

Seamfix (Nigeria), Enabling cross-border digital identity and payments

Seamfix builds digital identity and verification solutions. It was co-founded by Chimezie Emewulu and Chibuzor Onwurah. Recognising that secure verification is vital for cross-border trade and digital payments, the company has partnered with the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System. This strengthens payment compliance across Africa. This partnership ensures that businesses can participate in cross-border transactions securely. This is especially for youth-led small and medium-sized enterprises. It fosters trust and efficiency in regional commerce.

Seamfix's growth into multiple African countries shows how digital solutions can remove frictions. These previously kept many youth enterprises bound to local markets.

MRN Designs (South Africa), Sustainable value chains through creative innovation

South African entrepreneur Margaret Nešemare's MRN Designs exemplifies creative, culturally rooted value chain innovation. The enterprise produces eco-friendly accessories from reclaimed materials. It sees the agreement as a gateway to scale sustainably across borders. While facing challenges related to logistics and digital trade infrastructure, the company's vision reflects a point. Modern branding, e-commerce, and digital marketing strategies can help youth innovators. They can push African culture and sustainable goods into regional and global markets.

"Digitising our product lines and formalising our supply channels across Africa is key to our future," Nešemare explains during a panel on youth trade.

MRN Designs highlights how cross-border value chains need not be limited to commodities. Creative industries can also thrive under integrated trade frameworks.





TEN YEARS OF MEASURING PROGRESS

The Africa Visa Openness Index @10

The Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI) measures the extent to which African countries are open to visitors from other African countries. It analyzes each country's visa requirements to show which African countries most facilitate travel to their territory.

For each country, the AVOI calculates the number of African countries whose citizens must obtain a visa before travelling there, the number of countries whose citizens may obtain a visa upon arrival, and the number of countries whose citizens can enter visa-free. Each country is then assigned an AVOI score and ranked accordingly.

First published in 2016, the AVOI also tracks changes in countries' scores over time. It does the same for the eight AU-recognised RECs. The report analyses these trends in light of other developments in Africa and in the world. 2025 marked the tenth consecutive year the AVOI has tracked Africa's visa policies. This edition marks an important milestone, by offering an opportunity to shine a light on notable developments while reflecting on where progress has stagnated.

This 10th edition shows a combined visa openness score of 0.448 - significantly lower than the three previous years and on par with 2021.

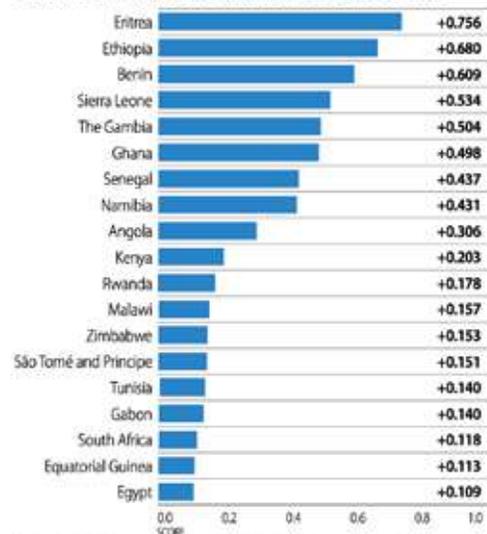
Unpacking the data in the 10th edition, allows a more nuanced assessment of where visa openness has progressed, regressed, or where technological interventions have shifted the visa application process away from the destination (visa-on-arrival) to the departure country (e-Visa / Electronic Travel Authorisation - ETA) - which impacts a country's score.

In tracking visa openness across Africa, AVOI has applied a consistent methodology through the past ten years, ensuring a high level of comparability in measuring each country's visa policy with respect to citizens of every other African country.

This year, Rwanda and The Gambia retain their top ranking, while Benin moves to 4th place following the recent introduction of a visa for citizens of five countries.

Kenya became the third-most visa-free country, following recent updates to its ETA system which now exempts citizens from 52 African countries from these processes.

Countries that increased* their AVOI score, 2016–2025



*19 countries that increased their score less than 0.100 are not shown: Botswana, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eswatini, Guinea, Lesotho, Libya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia

During 2025, twenty countries made changes to their visa policy regime that affected citizens of one or more African country. This resulted in 11 countries scoring higher, and nine lower. Meanwhile, 34 countries made no changes and maintained their overall score. There has been a small increase in the number of travel scenarios that are now visa-free (814, up from 803 in 2024) - accounting for 28.2% of intra-African travel scenarios - reaching their highest ever level.



A full and detailed report can be accessed by visiting: www.visaopenness.org or scanning the QR Code on the Cover image (Left).

Why so few African small and medium-sized enterprises succeed in sustainable intra-continental trade



Small and medium-sized enterprises are supposed to be the fulcrum by which the African Continental Free Trade Area can change Africa's economic trajectory towards inclusive growth. But this will only happen if the continent's small and medium-sized enterprises are freed of the bonds that are holding them back.

When the African Continental Free Trade Agreement was designed, its architects declared the intent. It was to create a pan-continental single market for trade and investment that would support the participation of small and medium sized enterprises in particular. For some public policy commentators, this was confusing. There is a widely held but misguided conventional wisdom that international trade and investment is primarily for large corporations. This is largely because, with their financial muscle and potential to meet huge demand across multiple markets, they also have globally accepted and respected product and service quality certification.

But the fact is that just like Germany's Mittelstand, which comprises millions of small and medium-sized enterprises that form the backbone of that country's economy, small and medium-sized enterprises are the bedrock of Africa's economies. They make up over 90% of all registered businesses. According to both the African Development Bank and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, they contribute about 50% of Africa's gross domestic product. They provide around 80% of employment on the continent.

Instructively, their growth correlates strongly with poverty reduction. This is especially among youth and women entrepreneurs.

Despite their vast numbers and importance, only a small minority engage in and sustain cross-border trade. Surveys suggest that less than 20% of small and medium-sized enterprises in Africa have ever attempted to export beyond their home borders. Among those that do, a significant proportion fail to sustain that trade over the long term. This paradox reveals structural weaknesses in Africa's trade, finance, and logistics systems. Small and medium-sized enterprises drive jobs and growth but cannot fully participate in intra-African commerce. These weaknesses demand urgent attention.

Cross-border payment challenges

For a small or medium-sized enterprise aiming to sell goods or services to another African country, one of the

first hurdles is cross-border payments. This is a fundamental building block of international commerce. Unlike regions with shared currency systems or deep financial integration, **Africa's payments landscape is highly fragmented. It comprises dozens of currencies, hundreds of banks, and a multitude of mobile wallet providers that operate within disparate regulatory systems.**

This fragmentation imposes real challenges. Cross-border payment costs often range between 7 and 8% of the payment value, far above the 3% global target set by the Group of 20.

Africa's small and medium-sized enterprises are caught between vast market opportunity and a market that remains largely closed by invisible barriers. These are not tariffs, but transactions, trust, and transport."

Settlement for payments is inordinately slow too. Traditional bank transfers can take between three to seven business days, which ties up essential working capital. There is the likelihood of currency conversion losses too for small and medium-sized enterprises. Multiple conversions erode profitability and introduce exchange-rate risks. An example is Ghanaian cedi to United States dollars and then to Kenyan shillings.

According to trade organisations and banks, **cross-border payment inefficiencies can add up to 20 to 25% to the cost of trade logistics.** This is before goods ever reach their destination. Gordon Yeboah, a small-scale international trader in Accra describes the hard reality. **"By the time we pay transaction fees and wait for funds to clear, we've lost both revenue and reputation with our partners abroad."**

Innovations like the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System promise real-time, local-currency transactions. But adoption remains low and uneven due to the lack of information, especially among small, informal sector firms who form the most important economic group across the continent.

Inadequate access to trade finance

Inadequate access to finance is another persistent bottleneck. Trade finance is chronically underprovided in Africa. It is the specialised funding that supports exporting and importing activities. The African Development Bank estimates a trade finance gap exceeding 120 billion US dollars annually. Adding systemic barriers, this figure could rise to as high as 420 billion US dollars. This disproportionately harms small and medium-sized enterprises. They lack collateral, credit histories, and risk-mitigating tools required by traditional banks.

Empirical studies in east Africa show that roughly 20% of small and medium-sized enterprise trade finance applications go un-submitted. Firms self-censure out of fear of rejection, while those that do apply fail to secure needed funds. This forces them to rely on expensive working capital instead.

An executive at a multinational bank operating across Africa recently told a trade forum. "We see strong demand from small and medium-sized enterprises for export credit. But without verifiable financials and collateral, banks see excessive risk. The result is a divide where only larger corporations can scale beyond their borders."

Women-led and newer small and medium-sized enterprises often face even steeper odds. Bureaucratic loan processes and uneven application criteria add to the barriers.

Fragmented, slow and costly trade logistics

Once goods are ready to move, logistics quickly become the next choke point. Africa's transportation infrastructure remains underdeveloped relative to the task of moving goods across vast distances. This includes railways, highways, and intermodal freight networks.

Rail network density in many African economies is a fraction of that in Europe. Road networks are often degraded or poorly connected across borders.

For exporting small and medium-sized enterprises, this translates into high transport costs. Logistics consume between 30 and 60% of a product's final value, particularly for firms operating from landlocked countries. These are compounded by long border delays. Customs clearance and documentation processing can average 12 days or more at intra-African borders. Indeed, transit times and costs are unpredictable. The inconsistent enforcement of trade rules, bureaucratic paperwork and incomplete adoption of the agreement's preferential trading provisions add to uncertainty.

It is instructive that it takes roughly up to 18 days to ship cargo from Ghana to Europe. But it takes twice as long to ship the same type of consignment from Ghana to Kenya.

Many small and medium-sized enterprise owners in Africa lament a point. They seek to leverage Africa's preferential trading terms, and even though tariffs are reduced under the agreement, the paperwork and border delays mean customers often cancel orders. **"Sometimes it takes longer to clear border formalities than it does to make the product"** laments the export manager of one small sized producer of chocolate in Accra.

These delays not only erode margins but also undermine competitiveness, as they are in markets where timing is essential, especially for perishable and fashion goods. They unfairly cast doubts over a small or medium-sized enterprise's capacity to deliver on its supply contracts.

Inordinate small & medium-sized enterprise failure rates

The data paints a stark picture of the disparity between Africa's potential and actual small and medium-sized enterprise performance. Intra-African trade accounts for

only around 15 to 16% of Africa's total merchandise trade. This compares to over 60% within Europe or Asia.

Small and medium-sized enterprises account for the majority of Africa's jobs. Paradoxically, they also represent the majority of business failures. Across the continent, overall small and medium-sized enterprise failure rates can exceed 50%. Some economies (including Ethiopia and Rwanda) report up to 75% failure among small firms, according to AfronomicsLaw. This reflects the fragility of Africa's small and medium-sized enterprises. In Nigeria alone, over 1.9 million small and medium-sized enterprises have closed down since 2017, due to harsh economic operating conditions. Nigeria is one of the continent's biggest economies.

Intra-continental trade attempts are even more precarious. Research indicates that close to 90% of indigenous small and medium-sized enterprises that attempt to export within Africa ultimately struggle. They struggle to sustain trading beyond three years, mostly citing payment difficulties, logistics, and institutional barriers as core reasons.

As one policy analyst observes, "Africa's small and medium-sized enterprises are caught between vast market opportunity and a market that remains largely closed by invisible barriers. These are not tariffs, but transactions, trust, and transport."

What needs to be done, policy, infrastructure and innovation

Despite the challenges, the fate of Africa's small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in intra African trade is not inevitable. The agreement provides a platform for harmonising regulations, reducing tariffs, and promoting digital trade infrastructure. Early estimates suggest intra-African trade could rise significantly under full implementation.

But several key policy and business actions need to be taken. This is for this potential to become concrete reality.

One is the scaling up of digital payment interoperability. This requires expanding the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and linking mobile money ecosystems to formal trade systems. Another is the expansion of trade finance facilities through blended finance, export credit agencies, and digital risk-sharing platforms tailored to small and medium-sized enterprises.

A third requirement is the upgrading of logistics infrastructure. This includes one-stop border posts, harmonised customs procedures, and integrated transport corridors. The fourth is capacity building, which aims at empowering small and medium-sized enterprises with export readiness programmes, market intelligence, and regulatory compliance support.

The lobby by small and medium-sized enterprise owners and managers has a clear message; they aspire to sustainably be part of cross border supply and value chains in Africa. They need predictable costs, not unpredictable obstacles. They need targeted support from governments, regional blocs, and partners.

If they can be provided with those improved dynamics they could change the calculus for small cross-border firms.

Youth Career Mentorship: a Necessary Pathway for Africa's Human Capital Development

By Nana Adjoa Hackman, Managing Partner at Africa Legal Associates and Founder & Executive Chairperson at Drive to Inspire - Africa

The theme for the 2026 edition of the Africa Prosperity Dialogues, "Empowering SMEs, Women & Youth in Africa's Single Market: Innovate, Collaborate, Trade" encapsulates an important part of the continuing discussion on how to accelerate the attainment of complete integration for Africa and put us on a steady path to meeting Agenda 2063, due to its focus on youth, women and SMEs.

To put it simply, trade in Africa is heavily dominated by youth and women, with the two demographics also being largely responsible for the SME sector, particularly at the informal level. Many in these two groups however remain vulnerable and their play on the economic front is usually at the small and informal level. A critical challenge for Africa remains how to equip and prepare them to take advantage of and benefit fully from the AfCFTA and contribute meaningfully to Africa's prosperity agenda. This is why Drive to Inspire – Africa (DTI-A), in keeping with its focus on the empowerment of African youth, especially girls and young women, designed and organised the NextUp Youth Breakfast Meeting, as part of the Africa Prosperity Network's suite of events for APD 2026.

NextUp reinforces DTI-A's dedication to the empowerment of African youth, inspiring them to maximise their potential and equipping them through education and mentorship, with the needed skills to enhance employability, and prepare them for entrepreneurship and leadership. This maiden edition of NextUp features panel conversations on AI, emerging technology, innovation, the creative economy and entrepreneurship.

Overall, NextUp represents an ideal; that African youth are next up for global leadership, growth and economic opportunities and recognition on the world stage, resulting in positive outcomes for the continent. At DTI-A, we strongly believe that this ideal can be realised if a vast majority of African youth can be nurtured, guided and equipped with the knowledge and skills that build their confidence and resilience and prepare them to harness the myriads of opportunities that Africa is blessed with.

Africa, as we know, is home to the world's youngest population. According to the United Nations, over 60 percent of the continent's population is under the age of 25, making Africa's youth the most significant driver of its future development. Indeed, statistics show that as of 2025, Africa had more than 420 million young people under the age of 25. How well young people are prepared for education, work, and leadership will therefore play a decisive role in shaping Africa's long-term economic and social outcomes.

Beyond paying for their tuition, accommodation expenses and providing needed tools for their studies, each student on the programme is enrolled on the organisation's mentorship programme and assisted to secure internships during the course of their studies.

While investments in formal education remain critical, education alone is no longer sufficient. According to the World Bank's Human Capital Project, launched in 2018, human capital development goes beyond schooling to include skills, experience, health, and guidance that enable individuals to remain productive and adaptable in changing economies.

Human capital development is therefore not simply about producing graduates; it is about

equipping young people with the exposure, networks, and practical guidance required to translate potential into productivity and impact. Indeed, one key observation from our DTI-A outreach programmes and events is that for many young Africans, the challenge is not a lack of ambition but a lack of access to information, role models, and career guidance. This is where structured youth career mentorship becomes critical in addressing the above and other human capital related challenges discussed below.

1. Bridging the Gap Between Education and the World of Work

Across Africa, there is a growing mismatch between education systems and labour market realities. The International Labour Organisation's Global Employment Trends for Youth Report (2024), reveals that many young people in Africa complete secondary or tertiary education without the skills demanded by employers, contributing to persistent youth unemployment and underemployment across the continent.

The World Bank has also observed in its Development

Report 2018: Learning to Realise Education's Promise, that many education systems are struggling to keep pace with emerging sectors such as technology, renewable energy, the creative economy, and social enterprise. As a result, young graduates often enter the workforce without a clear understanding of career pathways or workplace expectations.

Through career mentorship, institutions like DTI-A are helping to bridge this gap by connecting young people with professionals who provide real-world insights that formal curricula often cannot. This exposes young Africans to career possibilities, industry trends, and practical career guidance, demystifying success and supporting smoother transitions from education into meaningful work. DTI-A's mentorship programme by the end of the year 2025, had expanded from a local effort started in Ghana, to a continental network of mentors and mentees from 12 countries in Africa, namely: Nigeria, Botswana, Liberia, Ethiopia, Zambia, Uganda, Rwanda, The Gambia, Kenya, Namibia, DRC and Ghana, with a few mentors joining from the USA as well. Through such efforts, more young people across Africa are finding guidance, support and a community that believes in them.

2. Building Soft Skills and Long-Term Career Resilience

Beyond technical knowledge, Africa's future workforce requires strong soft skills such as communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and leadership. These competencies are among the most in-demand skills in today's rapidly evolving global labour market.

These skills are best developed through experience, feedback, and guidance rather than classroom instruction alone, and structured career guidance and mentorship have been found to significantly improve young people's confidence, employability, and ability to navigate career uncertainty. Recognising this, DTI-A connects young Africans with experienced professionals who provide guidance, encouragement, and practical insights aligned with their personal and professional aspirations through structured mentorship programmes, workshops and seminars on personal and professional development, outreach initiatives, and career-focused engagements.

With each mentorship cycle attracting over 200 applications from young people across Africa, the strong demand for DTI-A's programmes highlights the growing desire among young Africans for the guidance and opportunity created from these accessible platforms for learning, dialogue, acquisition of soft skills and exposure to career pathways.

DTI-A's approach recognises that mentorship is not a one-off conversation, but a sustained relationship that supports growth over time. By combining career guidance with leadership development, skills training, and exposure to networks and real-world opportunities, the organisation equips young people to make intentional, informed decisions about their futures. These activities are designed to bridge the gap between education and employment, improve career readiness, and build confidence among young people navigating increasingly competitive environments.

In an era marked by technological disruption and economic volatility, mentorship supports long-term

career resilience, the ability to continuously learn, pivot when necessary, and remain relevant. This resilience is essential for sustainable human capital development across the continent.

3. Tackling Inequality

Access to quality mentorship and career guidance is often determined by socioeconomic background. Young people from underserved communities are significantly less likely to have exposure to professionals, internships, or career networks. To help tackle the inequality issue,

DTI-A launched a scholarship programme in 2024 for brilliant young women from underprivileged backgrounds, supporting them through tertiary education in science, engineering, technology, business and humanities courses. This ensures that they receive the guidance and exposure that they ordinarily would not have available to them. With intentional interventions, such as the above, the inequality gap can be reduced, increasing the continent's ability to harness its full talent pool.

By providing support through education and mentorship for the less privileged members of Africa's population, they gain the skills and confidence to compete better with other youth not only in their respective countries, but at the regional level as well. Reducing inequality and increasing the competitiveness of our youth, is critical especially at a time when there are strong calls for the barriers that divide us to be brought down, making the dream of a borderless Africa a reality.

4. Strengthening the Informal Job Sector

Per available statistics, only about 20% of youth in sub-Saharan Africa are employed in the formal sector, with an estimated 85% of youth being in the informal sector of the economy. It is estimated that the informal sector in Africa contributes between 30 to 70% of the continent's GDP. Given that a huge chunk of our youthful population will find themselves in informal jobs due to the limited size of the formal sector, equipping our youth with the skills, education and confidence that fuels creativity, innovation and enterprise is non-negotiable. Developing entrepreneurs requires both formal and informal training. Indeed, many believe that entrepreneurs are made and not taught, once again, making the case for mentorship.

Looking Ahead

As Africa positions itself within the global economy, investing in youth career mentorship is no longer optional, it is strategic. Youth empowerment and skills development are central to Africa's economic transformation and long-term competitiveness.

Organisations like DTI-A demonstrate what is possible when mentorship is intentional, inclusive, and aligned with real-world opportunities. DTI-A's work extends beyond individual outcomes. By strengthening the skills, confidence, and employability of young people, the organisation contributes directly to Africa's broader human capital development agenda. Each young person who gains clarity, capability, and direction represents progress toward a more productive, innovative, and competitive workforce for the continent.

Africa's greatest resource is its youth. Unlocking that resource begins with guidance, belief, and access, and career mentorship provides all three.

A Letter to the Future

The African Symphony We Strive To Compose

By Godlove Lartey Asirifi - Chief Research Officer, APN

To the future of Africa,
If you are reading this, I hope our struggles are as distant as the tales of transatlantic voyages, memories of a painful past; acknowledged but no longer felt. I write this from a time of fractures, a time when the map of our continent is a web of scars left by hands that did not love her. We are the generation that decided to stitch our wounds and build a resilient future from the scars.

This is a letter scripted from a time of both profound promise and familiar peril to the generations we nurture, and to the generations yet to see the light of day. Casting my mind back to the colonial and sovereign days, I see the sun set on a continent pulsating with the energy of a billion dreams, still wearing the scars from wounds of borders we did not carve out. You will inherit the land of our forefathers, the land of no passports, where the great river Niger, the Nile, and the Congo are not boundaries, but connectors of kingdoms and commerce, and lifeline to our kin. You see, our ancestors understood this truth: that the strength of the whole is infinitely greater than the sum of its parts.

They stood for community, for the shared shade of the baobab tree, for the collective harvest. It is this ancestral wisdom that we must now summon for our greatest undertaking: the full and final unification of our economies through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In his speech at the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa in 1963, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah profoundly said that, *"We must unite now or perish. ... Africa must unite or break up into a thousand petty states, each weak and powerless, each the scene of constant political turmoil and intrigue."*

In his vision, Nkrumah believed that economic integration without political union was putting the cart before the horse. He believed that a united Africa, with its vast population and resources, would not just be a defensive bloc but a positive, influential global power capable of promoting peace and a new, more equitable world order. For him, political will was the necessary engine to drive and enforce economic integration.

The need for integration (agenda 2063) has emerged as the culmination of a deliberate, continent-wide introspection leading to the 50th anniversary of the

African Union (AU) in 2013. This period of reflection has forced a critical assessment of the post-colonial era, acknowledging that while the political liberation championed by the AU was largely achieved, its broader dreams of economic integration, prosperity, and global influence remain elusive. The agenda was therefore conceived as a direct response to this mixed legacy: a self-defined, homegrown blueprint to break the cycles of dependency and fragmentation. It was forged through an unprecedented participatory process, capturing the aspirations of African governments, civil society, and, most importantly, its youth, culminating in a strategic framework for the *"Africa We Want"* over the next half-century.

Together, we weave a continental symphony of value creation, retaining our wealth, amplifying our strength, and transforming our collective \$3.4 trillion promise into a global powerhouse of prosperity and pride.

In recognising that a vision without a mechanism for implementation would remain a mere dream, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was strategically initiated as the primary engine to drive Agenda 2063's economic ambitions. It represents the most tangible and ambitious attempt to operationalise the continent's integration goals by systematically dismantling the colonial-era economic model of trading solely with the outside world.

Creating a single continental market for goods and services, facilitating the movement of people and capital, and paving the way for a Customs Union, the AfCFTA directly tackles the barriers that have long stifled intra-African trade, industrialisation, and endogenous economic development. Thus, the AfCFTA is far more than a trade agreement; it is the practical vessel for achieving the Pan-African ideal.

To number our days to prosperity, the existential priorities for the AfCFTA includes: fostering deeper economic integration through policy reforms that improve the business environment, enhancing regional value chains, and achieving free movement of goods, services, and people. This involves eliminating trade barriers, harmonisation of regulations, promoting fair competition, and investing in infrastructure to boost intra-African trade, increase industrialisation, create jobs, and improve food security. A key underlying priority is the development of human capital and technical expertise in areas like science, technology, and innovation to drive sustainable growth and competitiveness.

The Algebra of Our Ancestry

There is power in unity as the old adage foretold: "together we stand, divided we fall". This echoes the famous Ghanaian Akan proverb that states, "A lone broomstick succumbs to the slightest pressure, but bound together, they become unbreakable". This highlights the core importance of integration.

J. Fred Weston, a highly influential financial economist and professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management formally developed and popularised the concept of synergy in finance, particularly in the context of firm combinations (mergers and acquisitions). In the cold language of finance, he framed the concept called 'synergy', representing the value created when firms combine. Mathematically, this is expressed simply as: $V(AB) > V(A) + V(B)$. This simply means that the value of the combined entity (AB) is greater than the value of the two separate entities (A and B) alone. In this synergy the combined company can generate more sales than the two companies could separately, reduce its operational costs and create financial benefits.

Translating this to Africa's national identity. Imagine each of our 54 or so nations as a solitary firm, Firm A, Firm B, Firm C, and so on. For decades, we have operated in isolation, producing what we can and selling mostly beyond our shores. Our individual value has been limited by our small-scale production, fragmented markets, and redundant efforts.

Imagine a single sapling in a storm. It is vulnerable, easily bent, or broken. Now imagine a dense, interconnected forest. The same storm may rage, but the forest stands firm, its roots intertwined, creating a resilient ecosystem. This is the power of integration for Africa. Currently, intra-African trade stands at a paltry 15-18%, compared to 67% in Europe and 58% in Asia. This means when demand for our cocoa, cobalt, or crude oil falls in Europe or Asia, our mono-economies suffer immediately.

The AfCFTA is our continent's strategic merger to create a single market of over 1.5 billion people with a combined GDP of over \$3.4 trillion. This internal mass is our primary shock absorber that initiates the mechanism to achieve:

The African Synergy Equation

$$V(\text{Integrated_Africa}) = \Sigma[V(\text{Country}_n) + \Delta V(\text{Trade}) + \Delta V(\text{Scale}) + \Delta V(\text{Innovation})]$$

Where:

- $\Sigma V(\text{Country}_n)$ is the sum of our individual, isolated economic values.
- $\Delta V(\text{Trade})$ is the value created by eliminating tariffs and barriers, allowing goods to flow freely.
- $\Delta V(\text{Scale})$ is the value unlocked by accessing a unified market of 1.5 billion people, enabling mass production and lower costs.
- $\Delta V(\text{Innovation})$ is the value sparked by the cross-pollination of ideas, talent, and technology across borders.

Our goal is not merely to add our economies together, but to engineer a geometric leap in value where $V(\text{Africa_Integrated}) \gg \Sigma V(\text{Country}_n)$. This is the algebra of prosperity. This is the maths our ancestors practiced intuitively. The foundational vision of the AfCFTA as our continent's strategic merger, we believe in a practically powerful, tangible manifestation of this unity.

In illustration, a sun-drenched cranberry farm in Ghana, a crop strategically developed to leverage specific agro-ecological zones, produces a bountiful harvest that is then loaded onto modern, fuel-efficient trucks manufactured in Morocco's burgeoning industrial parks, representing a triumph of African heavy industry.

These trucks, powered by refined petroleum products from the massive Dangote refinery in Nigeria, a beacon of African energy sovereignty, begin their journey south, traversing a network of seamless corridors and revitalised railways that stitch the continent from Accra to Cape Town into a single, fluid economic artery.

On arrival in South Africa, the cranberries are transformed in advanced processing facilities into premium Cranberry juice named "Africana Sip", a process that adds immense value and creates skilled jobs, embodying the shift from raw material exporter to finished goods producer.

This final product, "Made in Africa," is then marketed and distributed to the vast internal market of over 1.5 billion Africans, fostering intra-continental trade and taste, while also being exported to over 5 billion consumers globally, branding Africa as a reliable and quality-driven source of consumable goods.

From Ghana's fertile soil to South Africa's humming factories, powered by Nigeria's fuel and carried on Moroccan wheels, this is the living rhythm of a reawakened Africa. It is the manifestation of our forefathers' dream: a continent no longer confined by artificial borders but united by shared purpose and productivity. Here, one nation's harvest feeds another's industry; one people's innovation fuels another's progress. Together, we weave a continental symphony of value creation, retaining our wealth, amplifying our strength, and transforming our collective \$3.4 trillion promise into a global powerhouse of prosperity and pride.

Building in Unity through the Cracks.

We are not blind to the challenges. The very issues that have held us back are now the raw materials for our transformation. Let us reframe them not as obstacles, but as opportunities:

The persistent infrastructure deficit across Africa, characterised by crumbling roads, congested ports, and unstable power grids, should be reframed not as an insurmountable obstacle but as the continent's most compelling investment project. This is a multi-trillion-dollar opportunity waiting for capital and execution.

Championing a continent-wide master plan that integrates modern railways, efficient highways, and robust fibre optic networks, we would do more than simply connect markets; we would kindle a virtuous cycle of employment. Such ambitious projects would create millions of jobs directly and indirectly, spurring massive growth in foundational industries from cement and steel manufacturing to telecommunications and renewable energy, thereby laying the physical backbone for a unified economic powerhouse.

Simultaneously, we must confront the stifling reality of border bureaucracy, where endless paperwork, costly

delays, and corrosive corruption have long crippled intra-African trade. The AfCFTA presents a direct solution, turning this historical weakness into a strategic opportunity for technological leapfrogging.

Fully embracing and implementing its provisions for simplified customs procedures, digital trade platforms, and single-window systems, we can architect a seamless, paperless, and transparent continental trading system. This would not only drastically reduce transit times and costs but also position Africa as a global leader in efficient, digitised logistics, creating a trading environment that could become the envy of emerging markets worldwide.

Furthermore, we must break the "monoculture curse" that has seen Africa remain an exporter of raw materials and an importer of finished goods. A dynamic that exports jobs and caps our economic potential. This structural imbalance represents our most profound opportunity for transformation: the deliberate construction of regional value chains.

Imagine a paradigm where Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana cultivate the world's finest cocoa, Senegal and Botswana provide the milk for confectionery, Nigeria and South Africa provide the sophisticated packaging and branding, while Kenya and Egypt manufacture the specialised processing machinery. An integrated African market would then consume the premium chocolate, retaining the entire value chain within our borders. This is the practical pathway to industrialisation, moving our economies up the global value ladder.

To fuel this economic renaissance, we must address the human capital behind it. The "Brain Drain" that has seen our best and brightest seek opportunities abroad for decades is estimated at around 70,000 annually (AU). These figures indicate a significant loss of human capital, with the African Development Bank Group noting that 13% of Africa's skilled workers reside outside the continent.

The creation of a vibrant, integrated continental economy is the key to converting this drain into a dynamic "brain circulation" and ultimately a "brain gain." The same AfCFTA protocols that facilitate the movement of goods must be fully leveraged to enable the movement of people, services, and skills. Recognising professional qualifications across borders and fostering an environment of innovation and opportunity, we can empower our doctors, engineers, software developers, and artists to build their legacies and thrive right here at home, ensuring Africa's future is built by its own unparalleled talent.

A Unified Action

The vision is clear, the framework has been established, and the time for deliberation is over; now, we must embark on a unified and uncompromising course of action.

To our governments, this is a call for courageous leadership and tangible commitment. The journey begins with building trust, as the current deficit among African nations is a fundamental barrier, stifling the mobility,

harmonisation, and integrated activities essential for growth. This trust will be forged through action: by moving beyond symbolic signatures to the full ratification and domestic implementation of AfCFTA agreements, harmonising trade laws, and digitising customs procedures.

Governments must champion smart specialisation, allowing each nation to focus on its comparative advantage. This must be backed by strategic investment in the very connectors that bind us, for a road that ends at a border is a road to nowhere, and a revolution in education that pivots from rote learning to nurturing critical thinkers, scientists, and innovators who will sustain our future competitiveness.

To our private sector, this moment demands a radical shift in mindset and strategy. Your market is no longer confined to your national borders; it is a continent of over 1.5 billion people. You must therefore think and act

Pan-African: conducting research in Accra, sourcing materials from Nairobi, and forging partnerships in Cairo.

This expansive vision must be matched by a fierce advocacy for policy consistency, providing governments with the data and

testimonials needed to cut the red tape that hinders your growth. Most critically, you must be the primary agents of industrialisation by moving beyond digging and shipping to refining, manufacturing, and branding. Champion the regional value chains that will define Africa's economic future, and be willing to build with other Africans, encouraging continent-wide alliances and collaborations to leverage our collective strength and scale up together.

Ultimately, this grand project of integration cannot be solely a top-down endeavour; it must be energised and sustained by its citizens, academia, and civil society. You are the guardians of this vision. Your role is to hold leaders accountable at every turn, making the AfCFTA a living, breathing demand in the public discourse. You must actively collaborate across borders, forging academic partnerships, creating continental professional associations, and building cultural bridges because integration is as much a social project as an economic one.

Finally, you must consciously embrace a continental identity, celebrating the rich diversity of our nations while uniting under the common purpose of our shared prosperity. It is through this multi-faceted, unwavering effort that we will transform a blueprint for a single market into the lived reality for generations to come.

We, this generation, must not be remembered as those who inherited a vision of unity and delivered division. We must be the ones who merged our markets, harmonised our policies, and humanised our prosperity.

When the future reads this, may it say of us, they did not just dream Africa, they built her.

It is the least we owe you and the most we can offer.

In service and solidarity.
The Africa Prosperity Network



Drive to Inspire

A f r i c a

Drive to Inspire — Africa (DTI-A)

is a pan-African youth-focused organisation committed to developing human capital by equipping young people with the clarity, skills, mentorship, and exposure they need to thrive in education, work, and leadership. Across Africa, young people are ambitious and capable, but many lack access to guidance, networks, and practical opportunities. DTI-A exists to bridge this gap.

Our Programmes and knowledge sharing platforms include:

- Mentorships
- Internships
- Scholarships
- Career Guidance &
- Monthly Personal Development Webinars



OUR IMPACT

DTI-A's programmes reach over 20,000 young people across Africa each year, contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals by advancing quality education, gender equality, decent work, reduced inequalities and building partnerships.

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Together we can achieve so much more. You can sponsor scholarships for young people across Africa, provide internship opportunities, or volunteer as a mentor or counselor. If you are an institution, partner with DTI-A to help a young African attain their dreams.

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Infrastructure; the spine of the African Continental Free Trade Area's promise



Enterprises cannot scale up on disconnected trade-supportive infrastructure. Africa must invest jointly in roads, rail, ports, energy and logistics corridors. This is investment in the competitiveness of African enterprise.

Five years after the African Continental Free Trade Area commenced trading, a hard truth is becoming increasingly evident. It commenced in January 2021. Policymakers and businesses alike see that trade liberalisation delivers only limited results. This is even within a regime that offers preferential terms, but without adequate trade-enabling infrastructure. Tariff schedules, rules of origin and customs protocols can lower legal barriers, but to move across the continent at competitive cost and speed, goods and services still require physical pathways including roads, railways, ports, airports, logistics hubs and border facilities. Without them, the ambitious effort to bring together 54 or so African countries into a single market will remain a laudable but ultimately unattained dream. The market has more than 1.5 billion people with a combined gross domestic product exceeding 3.4 trillion US dollars.

As Wamkele Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat, has repeatedly observed, "The agreement is not just a trade agreement. It is a development project. And infrastructure is the backbone of that development."

Actually, Africa's infrastructure deficit is universally acknowledged and well documented. But its implications for cross-border trade are particularly stark. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), transport costs in Africa are 30 to 40% higher than the global average. In some landlocked countries, logistics costs account for up to 75% of the final price of traded goods.

The state of Africa's cross border trade infrastructure

Africa has an extensive road network but it is fragmented and inefficient. Road transport accounts for over 80% of intra-African freight. Yet only about 25% of Africa's roads are paved. Far fewer meet modern axle-load and safety standards. While the Trans-African Highway network has made progress, many critical cross-border links remain incomplete or are poorly maintained. It was envisaged to span over 56,000 kilometres.

Truck delays at borders often exceed the actual driving time between cities. A journey from Lagos to Abidjan, for example, can take several days. This is not because of distance, but due to roadblocks, congestion and border delays.

A regional logistics operator in west Africa sums it up

bluntly. **"The agreement has reduced tariffs on paper, but the road from factory to customer still feels like crossing multiple economic borders."**

Railways offer the most cost-effective option for bulk and long-distance trade. Yet Africa's rail network is both limited and fragmented. It has differing gauges inherited from colonial-era designs. Cross-border rail connectivity is the exception rather than the norm.

While countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco and Egypt have invested heavily in modern standard-gauge rail, most networks still terminate at national borders. This undermines the agreement's vision of seamless continental trade.

The continent's sea ports are improving but remain under-connected. African ports handle over 90% of the continent's trade by volume. Recent years have seen major investments in deep-sea ports. These include Lekki in Nigeria, Lamu in Kenya, Tanger Med in Morocco, both Tema and Takoradi in Ghana, and Doraleh in Djibouti.

However, port efficiency alone is insufficient. In many cases, poor road and rail connections to the hinterland negate port productivity gains. This results in congestion, high dwell times and elevated logistics costs.

Air transport is critical for trading in services, and for high-value goods and business mobility. Africa remains the least connected aviation region globally, with limited direct routes between African cities and high airfares, driven by restrictive bilateral agreements.

The Single African Air Transport Market, aligned with agreement objectives, has begun to address this. But implementation remains uneven.

The infrastructure strategy best suited for seamless agreement trade

To unlock the agreement's full potential, Africa requires integrated, interoperable and intermodal transport infrastructure. This treats borders as connectors rather than choke points.

Intermodal transport offers the most cost effective and economically viable pathway for continental trade. It combines sea, rail, road and air. Among these, maritime-to-rail or road corridors anchored on strategic seaports are emerging as the most impactful model.

An African Development Bank transport economist explains. **"No African country can afford to build everything everywhere. The key is to invest in hubs and**

corridors that serve multiple countries and markets.”

To this end, the strategy of using seaports as regional maritime hubs connected to inland markets is gaining traction under the agreement. This model mirrors successful trade corridors in Europe and Asia. It offers scale economies critical for Africa.

Under this approach deep-sea ports serve as maritime entry and exit points. Rail and high-capacity road corridors connect ports to inland logistics hubs. Inland dry ports and inland container depots extend port services into landlocked countries. Integrated customs and digital systems enable cargo to move across borders with minimal stoppages.

Several examples are emerging across various parts of Africa and are showing how effective this strategy can be. For instance, the Tanger Med port in Morocco has become a global logistics hub. It links Africa, Europe and the Americas while feeding industrial zones inland. Ghana's Tema Port increasingly serves landlocked Sahelian markets through road corridors to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The Djibouti Port functions as Ethiopia's maritime gateway, handling over 90% of its external trade via rail and road. Now, the Lamu Port and the South Sudan to Ethiopia Transport Corridor aims to open a new trade artery for east Africa.

Projects completed, ongoing and planned

Across the continent, several agreement-relevant infrastructure projects are shaping future trade flow. One is the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor Highway in west Africa. It is currently under development to serve over 75 million people and facilitate the Economic Community of West African States-agreement trade.

In east Africa there is the Mombasa–Nairobi–Naivasha Standard Gauge Railway and its proposed regional extensions. In the southern half of Africa's spine there is the North–South Corridor. This links Durban in South Africa to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. Added to these are the continent's central corridor upgrades, connecting Dar es Salaam to Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Meanwhile there are new port developments in Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Mozambique. They are designed for larger vessels and faster turnaround of ships.

It is important to realise that cross border trade and investment infrastructure in Africa supports the domestic socio-economic fortunes of the countries and their respective populaces. This is where they originate, where they terminate and everywhere in between. For instance a highway that stretches from Abidjan to Lagos benefits the domestic jurisdictions of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin Republic, and Nigeria. Similarly a railway that stretches from Egypt to Tanzania would benefit not only those two countries but Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya too. An airline running the route from Algiers to Johannesburg could make transit stops in west, central, east and southern Africa. It would offload passengers and take on new ones.

These passengers might otherwise have to travel to Europe as a transit stop just to reach another destination within their own continent. And a cargo ship running the western coast line of Africa could haul goods across the 15 countries in between. This could be from Dakar, Senegal, to Cape Town in South Africa. It would use their respective seaports, and thus eliminate the burdensome, time consuming and expensive delays at the road border posts from one country to the next.

But border constraints are the hidden trade barrier

Despite the slow progress being made, even with infrastructure in place, Africa's borders remain a major constraint to agreement trade.

Key challenges at the border points between Africa's countries are myriad. They include multiple agencies with overlapping mandates. They include manual documentation and limited data sharing. They include poorly designed border facilities. They include the charging of informal fees and rent-seeking behaviour by the customs and immigration officials of most African countries. These officials are at the respective border posts they are assigned to.

According to the World Bank, border delays can add 20 to 30% to total transport costs on some African corridors.

Governments and regional economic communities are addressing this. Among the solutions being pursued are the establishment of One-Stop Border Posts. These include the ones at Chirundu on the Zambia–Zimbabwe border and at Noepe on the Ghana–Togo border. Also, digital customs systems and cargo tracking are being introduced. Mutual recognition of standards and transit guarantees are also being introduced. Importantly, at the same time, agreement Protocols on Trade Facilitation are being aligned with World Trade Organisation commitments.

Africa is finally coming to terms with modern thinking in the global trading community. This asserts that the future of borders is not more buildings, but better systems.

The cost of closing Africa's infrastructure gap, and how it can be met

The African Development Bank estimates Africa's overall infrastructure financing gap at 68 to 108 billion US dollars annually. Transport accounts for a substantial share. Specifically for cross-border trade-enabling infrastructure, analysts estimate a requirement of 130 to 170 billion US dollars over the next decade.

While significant, these costs must be weighed against the projected gains. The World Bank estimates the agreement could lift 30 million Africans out of extreme poverty. It could increase intra-African trade by over 50% by 2035. This is provided infrastructure bottlenecks are addressed.

To achieve this, Africa's huge physical trade-supportive infrastructure needs will have to be financed though. But

no single source can fund Africa's agreement infrastructure agenda. A blended approach is essential.

While it has become generally accepted that a large proportion of the requisite financing will have to come in the form of private capital, public investment will have to lead the way. This is despite the severe fiscal constraints that most Africans are having to contend with. Governments must prioritise cross-border corridors in national development plans and budgets.

But they should be able to supplement their own financing efforts with development finance from multilateral institutions. These include the African Development Bank, Africa Finance Corporation, the African Export-Import Bank and regional development banks. All can play catalytic roles. This is especially in providing medium to long term debt finance for infrastructural development.

Beyond these sources however, private capital is direly needed. It is feasible through public-private partnerships for projects that provide direct financial returns on investment. The key to unlocking such capital however, apart from the competitiveness of the potential returns on investment is the regulatory framework. African governments could dampen economic viability due to concerns over the public interest. An example is imposing uneconomic tariff restrictions on a service delivered through the use of such infrastructure. This is because the public regard the tariffs on what it deems to be public services as too high to be comfortably afforded. Besides, credible guarantees have to be provided against public appropriation of projects financed in part with private capital. This is a real possibility in Africa following a change of political administration.

Ports, rail concessions, logistics parks and toll roads are increasingly attractive to private investors. This is when such regulatory risks are managed.

Local-currency and regional infrastructure bonds issued by sovereign governments and its institutions and agencies can mobilise domestic capital pools too. Preferably such bonds should be ring-fenced. This ensures the proceeds are used for the economically viable projects they were originally meant for. They should be credit rated prior to issuance.

Interestingly, there is growing support for agreement-linked Infrastructure Funds. These align trade policy with capital mobilisation.

As an African Export-Import Bank executive puts it, "The agreement gives investors what they have always asked for—scale. Infrastructure finance must now follow that scale."

Indeed, infrastructure to be used for cross border purposes offers bigger markets and more diversified risk profiles. This includes roads, railways and energy projects

that serve more than one country. They offer more than projects aimed at a single sovereign jurisdiction.

To be sure, the size of the financing gap of some 100 billion US dollars a year is not as big as it looks at first glance. Remittances from Africans in the diaspora alone is around that. Africa has resources, albeit fragmented. When mobilised together they can do more. The proposed one US dollar a day Africa Infrastructure Fund can also mobilise citizens, pension funds, sovereign wealth funds, development finance institutions and private capital. It mobilises them into bankable, revenue-generating projects.

Building the roads to African prosperity

The African Continental Free Trade Area has laid the legal and policy foundations for Africa's economic integration. But without modern, connected and efficient physical infrastructure, its promise will remain constrained.

The challenge ahead is not merely to build more roads, rails and ports. It is to build them strategically. They must be across borders, across modes, and around trade corridors that serve the continent as a whole. Infrastructure, in this sense, becomes Africa's most important trade policy instrument.

As Africa moves from agreement to execution, the message from businesses is clear. Integration will be driven not just by treaties, but by trucks that move faster, trains that cross borders, ports that connect hinterlands, and borders that enable trade rather than obstruct it.



The one-dollar-a-day vision

A people-powered solution to Africa's infrastructure funding gap

By Eric Otoo

Africa's infrastructure deficit, estimated at more than \$100bn annually, remains a critical barrier to continental integration and prosperity. While governments and development partners have made efforts, progress under Agenda 2063 remains slow, with only 15% of targets achieved in the past decade. To accelerate development, we propose the African Heritage Fund, a crowdfunded, citizen-driven financing mechanism that empowers Africans to invest directly in their continent's future.

The idea emerged from a submission made at the Africa Prosperity Dialogues in 2025 by Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma. As chair of the African Union commission, she oversaw the launch of Agenda 2063. She suggested Africa could seek to close its infrastructure funding deficit by creating a fund to which its more than 350 million-strong middle class could contribute as little as a dollar a day, potentially raising about \$20bn a year.

The fund's ambitious goal is to help fill Africa's massive infrastructure funding gap, which is frustrating the process of building a united, connected and industrialised Africa. It aims to do this one dollar at a time, by Africans, for Africa.

A collective investment for Africa's future

The African Heritage Fund will operate as a hybrid investment vehicle, envisioning three complementary funding streams within its framework.

The first and primary stream is crowdfunding. This is the core pan-African strategy to mobilise capital from the

continent's 350 million middle- and working-class individuals, as well as its 200 million-strong global diaspora, which remits about \$100bn to the continent annually. This structure creates an endogenous funding mechanism distinct from traditional debt or foreign investment, based on a participatory ownership model.

The second is a commercial fund that will raise financing from investors on commercially negotiated terms. For example, the fund may issue bonds to these investors.

The third, separate stream is a social fund, which will mainly come from grants and donations to help make the commercial fund more viable. For instance, middle-class and diasporan Africans may donate periodically to support infrastructure and industrial development. Technology can lower the costs of aggregating these donations through methods such as crowdfunding and mobile money.

Key infrastructure priorities

The African Heritage Fund will finance high-impact, bankable projects that drive integration. Priorities include transport, such as completing key Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa corridors, expanding the single African air transport market and eliminating restrictive aviation taxes. In energy, it will scale up regional power pools and renewable energy grids. For digital and trade infrastructure, it will enhance cross-border digital connectivity and African Continental Free Trade Area-backed trade routes.



Digital Trade as the future of intra-African commerce



Digital trade and mobile money operability has the potential to allow Africa to leapfrog its severe trade infrastructure and services inadequacies.

For decades, Africa's intra-continental trade has remained shockingly low compared with other regions. This is not because African goods are unwanted, but because the very systems that facilitate commerce, including roads, rail links, ports, customs procedures, and payment systems, have lagged far behind the need for them.

Today, with the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area and its Digital Trade Protocol, there is an opportunity to reimagine how African businesses trade with one another. It is not through incremental improvements of old systems, but by leapfrogging directly into the digital era.

Despite the agreement's ambition to create a single market covering over 1.5 billion people and trillions of United States dollars in combined gross domestic product, intra-African trade has remained stubbornly low. It is roughly 15-20% of Africa's total trade. This compares with 70% in Europe and 60% in Asia.

Poor transport infrastructure, multiple fragmented customs regimes, high border costs, and inefficient payment systems are the most familiar traditional barriers, making intra-African commerce costly, opaque, and slow. But while physical infrastructure projects are crucial, they are also capital-intensive and slow to build at sufficient scale. These projects include new highways, rail corridors, and ports.

This is where digital trade and mobile money come in.

Digital trade makes for inclusivity

The agreement's Protocol on Digital Trade was approved by State Party Ministers in February 2024. It is designed to harmonise digital trade rules across the continent, provide common standards, and break down barriers to digital commerce.

At its core, the Protocol aims to enable paperless trade by accepting the legal validity of electronic documents and e-contracts. It aims to make digital payments and settlement systems interoperable across borders and ensures transparency and predictability in digital trade regulations. Going beyond transactions, the Protocol also supports digital innovation, skills development, and infrastructure development across member states.

In setting common rules for digital trade, data flows, e-commerce, and payments, the Protocol seeks to

decentralise and democratise intra-African commerce, while creating a framework where small and medium enterprises can participate on equal footing. They are often excluded from traditional trade corridors.

Mobile Money, Africa's strategic advantage

Africa's digital payments landscape is among its most significant success stories. With over 170 mobile money services across the continent, mobile money has already transformed financial inclusion. It enables millions of previously unbanked people to save, send, and receive money digitally.

However, cross-border interoperability remains limited. Most mobile money services operate as closed systems. They are easily used within a country, but challenging or costly to use across borders. For example, Kenya and Ghana have some of the highest mobile money penetration rates in the world. And yet, moving money from one country's wallet to another's often requires cumbersome processes, requiring reliance on banks, which are slower, more expensive, and less accessible to small traders and informal businesses.

If mobile money networks were interoperable, they could serve as the backbone of Africa's new digital trade ecosystem. This would be not just domestically but across borders.

Imagine an Angolan artisan selling to a buyer in Guinea. They could receive payment instantly via mobile money. They would not need a bank account, foreign exchange conversion desk, or costly remittance service. These are not hypotheticals. They represent a real shift that could greatly reduce the time and cost of cross-border transactions. It would be just as mobile money collapsed the barriers to domestic digital payments.

Why interoperability matters

Cross-border payments in Africa are notoriously costly. They average around 7% of the transaction value. They are heavily reliant on third-country currencies like the US dollar. This dependence strips value from the African economy. Fees and exchange costs accruing to international correspondent banks drain wealth outwards.

Addressing this, the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) was launched in January 2022. The mechanism aims to enable real-time gross settlement in local currencies, while acting as a continental backbone for cross-border payments. It aims to reduce costs and encourage local currency settlements. This is a critical pillar for the Protocol's digital trade ambitions.

However, the system mostly connects banks. This is the formal financial system. Mobile money wallets remain partly outside the system, although much of Africa's daily financial activity happens there.

Recognising this, policymakers have pushed for mobile money interoperability as a way to facilitate trade. This includes Ghana's immediate past vice-president, Dr Mahamudu Bawumia. "Trade payments and relationships are currently hampered by inadequate settlement systems," he notes, urging the development of efficient domestic payment systems and real-time settlement linked to cross-border interoperability.

What the Protocol contains and where it is

The Protocol on Digital Trade is comprehensive in scope. It targets a wide array of digitisation components. These comprise electronic commerce and paperless trade mechanisms, digital identities and authentication, cross-border data flows and data governance. They also include digital payments, like fintech participation, cyber-security and trust frameworks, and emerging technologies and regulatory cooperation.

The Protocol also contains a series of eight supplementary annexes that are under negotiation. These cover digital identities, fintech, cyber-security, data transfers, and rules of origin for digital products. Once the annexes are approved by the African Union Assembly and ratified by at least 22 agreement member states, the Protocol will enter into force. Member countries will then have up to five years to implement the commitments.

Significantly, the Digital Trade Protocol's approval in early 2024 marks a milestone. It marks a milestone in the agreement's march toward modernisation. But the work is just beginning. The annex negotiations and subsequent ratifications remain the largest ongoing process.

According to readiness assessments, countries like Rwanda, Kenya, and Tunisia are ahead in implementing frameworks. These align with the Protocol. This is especially in areas such as electronic transactions and data privacy. Others, particularly in parts of central and southern Africa, still face major gaps.

The potholes along the digital road

Despite the momentum, several significant barriers threaten to slow or dilute the Protocol's impact.

One is the inadequacy of the requisite regulatory capacity and legal frameworks. Many African countries lack comprehensive national laws on data protection, digital signatures, cyber-security, and e-payments. Building such frameworks is expensive, technically challenging, and requires coordinated capacity building. Without them, the Protocol's obligations may remain on paper rather than in practice.

Another is poor broadband penetration. This is coupled with unstable electricity, and uneven internet access. They collectively make digital trade inadequately accessible in many regions. Even where mobile money has taken root, network reliability and mobile connectivity gaps limit cross-border digital activity.

A third is the fragmentation of payments and foreign exchange markets. Despite the Pan-African Payment and

Settlement System's progress, many cross-border payments still require foreign correspondent banks. They rely on the US dollar. This not only adds cost but creates volatility for traders operating in local currencies.

Then there are data governance and sovereignty concerns. The Protocol's default position of free cross-border data flow raises concerns about data governance. Some critics argue that this could allow global tech giants to dominate African digital ecosystems. This compromises data sovereignty and local innovation.

Added to all these are uneven readiness and political will. Not all countries are advancing at the same pace. While some are eager to harmonise digital regulations, others are slower. This is due to competing priorities, limited institutional capacity, or fear of losing control over their domestic digital economies.

Leapfrogging to the Future

If successfully implemented, the Digital Trade Protocol could have ripple effects far beyond commerce. Quantitative projections suggest the internet economy alone could add up to 180 billion US dollars to Africa's gross domestic product shortly. Digital services exports could double by 2040, approaching 74 billion US dollars.

Additionally, improved digital trade and interoperable payments could cut trade costs significantly. This could be up to 20% for goods and 30% for services. It could spur 230 million new jobs by 2030. These are transformative figures for a continent where small traders, informal businesses, and small and medium-sized enterprises make up the majority of economic actors.

Kenyan trade minister Lee Kinyanjui has described regional digital payment innovations as "a game-changer" for small and medium-sized enterprises. According to Lee, these innovations promise transaction costs below 3%, and are a stark contrast to legacy systems.

Africa's challenge is not simply to catch up with the world, but to innovate its way into a new era of trade. The Digital Trade Protocol and mobile money interoperability offer a strategic leap forward, as they bypass some of the traditional barriers that have long constrained intra-African trade.

Rather than waiting decades for physical infrastructure to be completed, digital trade offers instant connectivity, lower costs, and broader inclusion. For Africa's generation of entrepreneurs, artisans, farmers, and digital natives, this could mean trading in real time across borders. They would not ever step into a border post.

Realising this vision demands political will, investment, and coordinated regulatory reform. In this vision, an East African farmer can sell directly to a buyer in West Africa. They receive payment instantly via interoperable mobile money, and clear customs with an e-document.

But if Africa can align its digital and trade ambitions, the pan-African digital market may surpass the limitations of its physical infrastructure altogether. It would create a future where digital trade becomes the backbone of intra-continental prosperity.

The urgency of a borderless continent for Africans to trade



For Africa to become a truly single economic market, Africans need to be allowed to move around the entire continent without undue restraint. To this end the African Union has developed a Free Movement Protocol. It launched an African Union passport and has developed the framework for a pan-continental digital ID. Here is what has been achieved, what is left and what consequently still needs to be done.

A key requirement for Africa to fulfill its vision of an integrated continent is that its over 1.5 billion citizens should be empowered to move freely. This is in socio-economic terms. Africans should move without bureaucratic immigration restrictions imposed by individual sovereign nations. But while this would spur trade, investment, employment, skills transfer and tourism, opening up to significant numbers of non-indigenes was always going to be a hard nut to crack.

The continent is fraught with ethnic suspicions and outright conflicts. There is severe pressure on the availability of public goods and services. Governments are intent on holding on to political power, even when they lack demographic endorsements from their electorates. It is proving to be a tall order.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what the African Union's Agenda 2063 long-term plan seeks to achieve. Adopted in 2018 by the African Union as a flagship project, the African passport and the free movement of persons protocol was baptised with the acronym AU-FMP.

This AU Agenda 2063 flagship project aims to remove restrictions on Africans' ability to travel, work and live within their own continent. The initiative aims at transforming Africa's laws which remain generally restrictive on movement of people despite political commitments to bring down borders. The view is to promote the issuance of visas by member states. This would enhance free movement of all African citizens in all African countries.

The free movement of persons in Africa is expected to deliver several key benefits including boosting intra-Africa trade, commerce and tourism. It also includes facilitating labour mobility and intra-Africa knowledge and skills transfer, promoting pan-African identity, social integration and tourism, improving trans-border infrastructure and shared development, fostering a comprehensive approach to border management, as well as promoting rule of law, human rights, and public health.

But seven years on, it has been ratified by only four countries. These are Mali, Niger, Rwanda and São Tomé & Príncipe. Nevertheless, the continent is witnessing a shift in border openness, led by the popularisation of the protocol by the African Union Commission. More countries are allowing visa-free entry of African nationals through unilateral measures.

Kenya has decided to lift Electronic Travel Authorisation requirements for almost all Africans, and Ghana recently announced visa-free travel for all Africans. It grants visas on arrival. Africa is steadily observing a general openness to the freedom of movement within its five regional economic communities.

The Economic Community of West African States has allowed visa free stay by citizens of its members for decades now. It does this through its Free Movement of Persons Protocol. The East African Community is following suit. It is formally learning from the Economic Community of West African States about strategy. This type of cooperation envisages inter-regional dialogues and synergies. The goal is increasing the movement of Africans within the continent for tourism and skills mobility.

The approach taken by these countries and regions reflects a preference for gradual implementation.

Visa liberalisation sets the stage for subsequent phases of integration. But while this step-by-step strategy aligns with the phased rollout envisioned by the protocol, the rest of the world is not ready to wait until 2063. Implementation needs to be sped up.

This means in a shifting geopolitical landscape, African leaders must look inwards for their pan-continental mobility policies. While a phased approach may be necessary, the existing protocols already anticipate the next phases.

These are the introduction of pan-African biometric passports and digital ID cards. The African Union has already developed an interoperability framework for the issuance of digital IDs. This sets out standards and a vision for how member states can link existing national ID systems. They would link into a common, trusted architecture.

The African Union Passport was first launched in 2016. It continues to be issued in limited, often symbolic, contexts. It is not yet widely used at borders. But both the African Union Passport and digital identity initiatives are part of Agenda 2063's flagship projects. This underscores political commitment at the highest level.

But while this step-by-step strategy aligns with the phased rollout envisioned by the protocol, the rest of the world is not ready to wait until 2063. Implementation needs to be sped up.



Some regional passport initiatives have appeared. These include the Economic Community of West African States passport. Most recently, the breakaway Alliance of Sahel States introduced a common biometric passport for member states. The alliance comprises the currently military ruled Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger Republic. Recognition challenges remain.

Importantly though, several countries have advanced their own biometric digital ID and passport systems. These are national digital IDs and chip-embedded passports, which certainly lay the foundation for future interoperability.

There are several reasons why progress has been slow towards removing the artificial walls that constrict the actualisation of a borderless Africa for its citizens. For one thing, many countries still lack the infrastructure and systems needed for biometric passport issuance. Some use basic traditional passports instead of full biometric chips, thus hindering interoperability.

For another, digital ID deployment is constrained by limited internet connectivity. There is a lack of reliable power, and insufficient identity management infrastructure across rural and remote regions.

Also, many African countries have weak or incomplete legal frameworks for data protection. This means citizens' biometric data could be at risk. Only a minority of countries have robust laws enforced. Foreign vendor dependencies raise concerns about data sovereignty.

There are also public trust issues around digital IDs and biometrics. This is due to fears of misuse, exclusion of disadvantaged groups, and concerns about surveillance that could invade privacy. Disadvantaged groups include people without smartphones or those in rural areas.

Besides this, digital ID systems deployed nationally often are not interoperable across borders. Without shared standards and systems, the idea of a continent-wide ID ecosystem remains an aspiration. Added to all these technical constraints and social reservations is a lack of political will. Some countries retain restrictive visa regimes. Others have reservations about fully opening borders under a unified passport. This is due to security, migration control, and political sovereignty issues. The African Union's long-term blueprint, Agenda 2063,

extends to 2063. The African Union Passport is one of its flagship projects. A continent-wide rollout by 2063 therefore remains the official horizon under this master plan. However there is an increasingly wide belief that it should, and indeed can, be completed within a few years rather than several decades. This is the position of the architects of the Make Africa Borderless Now! movement.

There is good reason for their stance. Some institutional planning documents envision substantial progress on digital identity as early as 2030. This includes the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy 2020–2030, which is part of the continental digital ecosystem goals.

Indeed, several African Union digital mobility and identity roadmaps see incremental steps occurring in the latter 2020s. These steps include visa-waivers, electronic travel authorisations, and digital ID interoperability pilots, and are expected to occur before full passport mutual recognition.

However, without immediate positive action, a pan-continental biometric passport at all African borders is unlikely before the late 2030s or 2040s. This action can be made possible by Africa's citizenry putting pressure on their leaders. The current ratification, infrastructure, and interoperability challenges make it unlikely. Regional integration and mutual digital ID recognition is likely to accelerate in the late 2020s, particularly through regional economic communities and pilot corridors.

The African Union's vision for a biometric passport and digital ID ecosystem is conceptually strong, as it is aligned with wider integration goals. But real-world obstacles are making rapid rollout difficult. These are technical, political, legal, and social obstacles.

Progress is visible at the national and regional levels and through policy frameworks. But full continental interoperability and universal issuance remain medium- to long-term goals. Unless Africans can demand that their leaders greatly accelerate the process. They must do this in collaboration with the digital technology industry which is, indeed, capable of doing so.

The high economic cost of Africa's fragmented skies



For the past decade and a half, Africa has held a vision of unrestrained air connectivity between its member nations through a pan-continental open skies policy. However, actual implementation of key agreements reached in 1999 and 2018 has been sluggish, leaving Africa with a fragmented aviation sector, which is holding back the realisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area it is striving to nurture.

More than six decades after independence, Africa remains one of the least air-connected regions in the world. Even though the African Continental Free Trade Agreement is opening up the continent to free movement of goods and services, travelling by air within Africa remains a tedious, expensive task. The agreement also aims for the free movement of the people that offer, consume and trade them. Indeed, Africa remains one of the most challenging regions for seamless air transport. This is for both people and cargo.

It is the world's second-largest continent by landmass. Despite its vast potential, intra-African air connectivity lags behind other continents due to regulatory barriers, high costs, and underdeveloped infrastructure. While global aviation thrives on open skies agreements and competitive pricing, African air travellers and businesses often face exorbitant fares, lengthy layovers, and inefficient cargo logistics.

Despite the continent's vast geography, rapidly growing population, and rising demand for trade, tourism and investment, flying between African countries is often more expensive, slower and more complicated than flying to Europe, the Middle East or Asia. This persistent fragmentation of Africa's air transport market is imposing a heavy, largely invisible economic cost.

The 1999 Yamoussoukro Declaration and the subsequent African Union's Single African Air Transport Market announced in 2018 were designed to eliminate the bottlenecks. Still, more than 25 years after the 1999 Yamoussoukro Declaration and seven years after the market's launch in 2018, Africa's skies remain only partially open.

A continent flying below its economic potential

Air transport is not merely about mobility. It is a strategic economic enabler. According to the International Air Transport Association, aviation supports about 7.7 million jobs in Africa. It contributes roughly 63 billion US dollars to gross domestic product, equivalent to about 2.6% of the continent's economy. However, this contribution is far

below what Africa's demographics and geography suggest is possible. It is instructive that Africa accounts for only 7% of the global air passenger market despite hosting 20% of the population.

Intra-African air connectivity is especially weak. Data from the African Airlines Association show that less than 20% of Africa's air traffic is intra-African. This compares to over 60% within Europe and North America. Many African capitals are still not connected by direct flights, forcing passengers to transit through non-African hubs such as Paris, Dubai or Istanbul.

"This is an economic paradox," observes Abderahmane Berthé, secretary general of the African Airlines Association. "Africa has the fastest-growing population in the world, yet it has some of the most restrictive air service regimes. That restrictiveness translates directly into higher fares, limited routes and lost economic opportunities."

Indeed, one of the most striking issues in African aviation is the high cost of air travel. According to the International Air Transport Association, flying between African cities is often more expensive than comparable routes in Europe, Asia, or the Americas. For example, a one-way flight from Lagos in Nigeria to Nairobi in Kenya can cost up to 800 US dollars. A similar distance flight in Europe, such as London to Rome, might cost 100 to 300 US dollars. Indeed, a flight from Nairobi to Lagos can cost more than flying from Nairobi to Amsterdam. This is despite Europe being much farther.

Travelers on certain west African short hops pay up to 300 to 400 US dollars for flights between neighbouring capitals. This is versus 120 euros for a 1,000 kilometre European intra-route.

Airfreight within Africa is also disproportionately expensive. Shipping a kilogram of cargo from Johannesburg in South Africa to Accra in Ghana can cost up to 3.50 US dollars. This compares to 1.50 to 2.00 US dollars for similar distances in Asia. That is where the flights are even available.

Unlike Europe or North America, where low-cost carriers and extensive networks facilitate easy movement, African aviation remains fragmented, only a handful of airlines dominate intra-African routes. Most intra-African flights are routed through a few major hubs. This adds hours, sometimes days, to travel time.

A typical intra-African route such as Johannesburg to

The cost of inaction is already high, and rising. The gains from action, by contrast, are waiting at the departure gate.

Dakar may take 14 to 15 hours with two stops. It can sometimes route outside the continent via Istanbul or Paris, and can cost more than 1,000 US dollars.

The economic cost of limited air connectivity manifests across multiple sectors. First is trade. Air cargo accounts for less than 2% of Africa's trade volume, but over 35% of its air cargo is vital for perishable goods such as flowers and seafood. It is also vital for high-value products such as electronics and pharmaceuticals, as well as time-sensitive deliveries.

Africa's air cargo sector struggles with inefficiencies. For example, there is slow customs clearance. Unlike major global hubs like Dubai and Singapore, African airports often lack automated systems, leading to delays. There is also limited freight capacity. Few African airlines operate dedicated cargo planes. Most rely on passenger aircraft belly space. Add to these high handling fees. Both ground handling and warehousing costs are significantly higher than in other regions.

By contrast, intracontinental cargo in Europe or Asia benefits from integrated logistics networks. It benefits from efficient rail connections, standardised customs, and larger, denser markets. African logistics cost burdens remain high. This is due to fragmented air cargo systems, mandatory paperwork with penalties for non-compliance, and limited cold chain or express network penetration.

Second is tourism. Africa receives just 5% of global tourist arrivals, despite its cultural and natural diversity. High airfares and limited direct routes are a major deterrent. The International Air Transport Association estimates that airfares on African routes are 30 to 50% higher than comparable routes elsewhere. The high cost is largely due to market fragmentation, limited competition and excessive taxes and charges. Not surprising, this has a pass along effect on unemployment, as 20% of Africa's tourism related jobs are supported by visitors arriving by air. The figure is only 4% in North America.

Third is investment and services. Business travel underpins cross-border finance, professional services, education and healthcare. Limited connectivity slows deal-making, raises the cost of regional expansion for African firms, and reinforces the continent's dependence on extra-African hubs.

A 2014 study by the International Air Transport Association and the African Development Bank estimated that liberalising air services among just 12 African countries could generate 155,000 new jobs. It could also generate 1.3 billion US dollars in additional gross domestic product annually. Scaling up that impact continent-wide suggests Africa is foregoing several billions of dollars each year. This is by delaying full implementation of open skies.

Yamoussoukro and the Single African Air Transport Market, a vision still grounded

The policy framework for change has existed for decades. The Yamoussoukro Declaration of 1999 committed African states to liberalise air services. It aimed to remove capacity and frequency restrictions, grant fifth freedom rights, and promote fair competition. It was signed up to by 44 African countries and became binding in 2002.

Building on this, the African Union launched the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) in 2018. This was as a flagship project under its Agenda 2063 long term vision for the continent. The market aims to create a unified air transport market across Africa. This is similar to Europe's single aviation market.

To date, over 35 countries have signed up to the market. They are responsible for more than 80% of Africa's air traffic. But like the Yamoussoukro Declaration that preceded it, implementation remains uneven. Many states still protect national carriers. They use restrictive bilateral air service agreements, limited traffic rights and non-transparent licensing.

"The market is not failing because of lack of policy clarity," notes Adefunke Adeyemi, secretary general of the African Civil Aviation Commission. "It is failing because of political caution and fear of competition. The evidence shows liberalisation benefits the wider economy."

What Africa could gain from fully open skies

If fully implemented, the market could be transformational. The International Air Transport Association projects that comprehensive liberalisation of African air transport could double passenger numbers over 20 years. It could generate millions of new jobs, and add 20 to 30 billion US dollars to the continent's gross domestic product in the medium to long term.

An African Union study conducted in 2022 suggests a properly implemented single aviation market could add 4.2 billion US dollars to Africa's gross domestic product and also create 600,000 new jobs, even in the short term. Increased competition would lower fares. The African Union's study reckons by 27% on average. It would expand route networks and encourage the emergence of strong regional hubs within Africa.

Open skies would also support the African Continental Free Trade Area, and enable faster movement of people, goods and services. Manufacturers could integrate regional supply chains. Small and medium-sized enterprises would gain access to new markets without prohibitive travel costs.

For African airlines themselves, consolidation and competition under the market could improve scale, fleet utilisation and profitability. While weaker carriers may exit, stronger and better-managed airlines would emerge. This mirrors the evolution seen in Europe after liberalisation.

Morocco's open skies, a glimpse of what is possible

Morocco offers a compelling African case study. In 2006, the country implemented an open skies agreement with the European Union. It liberalised access to its market. The results were dramatic.

Passenger traffic between Morocco and Europe increased by an annual average of 18% during the first four years. It went on to increase from around 6 million in 2005 to over 25 million before the COVID-19 pandemic. Dozens of new routes were launched. Fares fell sharply. Morocco became one of Africa's leading tourism destinations. The policy generated an additional one billion euros to Morocco's gross domestic product in 2009 alone.

Aviation-supported tourism now contributes over 7% of the country's gross domestic product and sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs. Tourist arrivals had climbed at around 6% per year. Air fares, on average, dropped by about 7%.

"The open skies policy was a catalyst," says a senior official at Morocco's civil aviation authority. "It transformed connectivity, stimulated tourism investment and integrated Morocco more deeply into global and regional value chains."

While Morocco's experience involved Europe, the underlying lesson is highly relevant for Africa. Liberalisation works when it is implemented decisively and consistently.

In December 2025, the Economic Community of West African States announced it was abolishing air transport taxes. It was reducing passenger charges by a whopping 25%. Analysts suggested that the move would engender up to 40% in the reduction of airfares. This groundbreaking policy decision promises to transform west Africa's skies into highways of prosperity. Major aviation reforms began in January 2026.

Lower travel costs will boost cross-border mobility and energise the African Continental Free Trade Area. Entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises will more easily access markets across the region. Obviously, this will enable faster deal-making, wider expansion, and improved competitiveness.

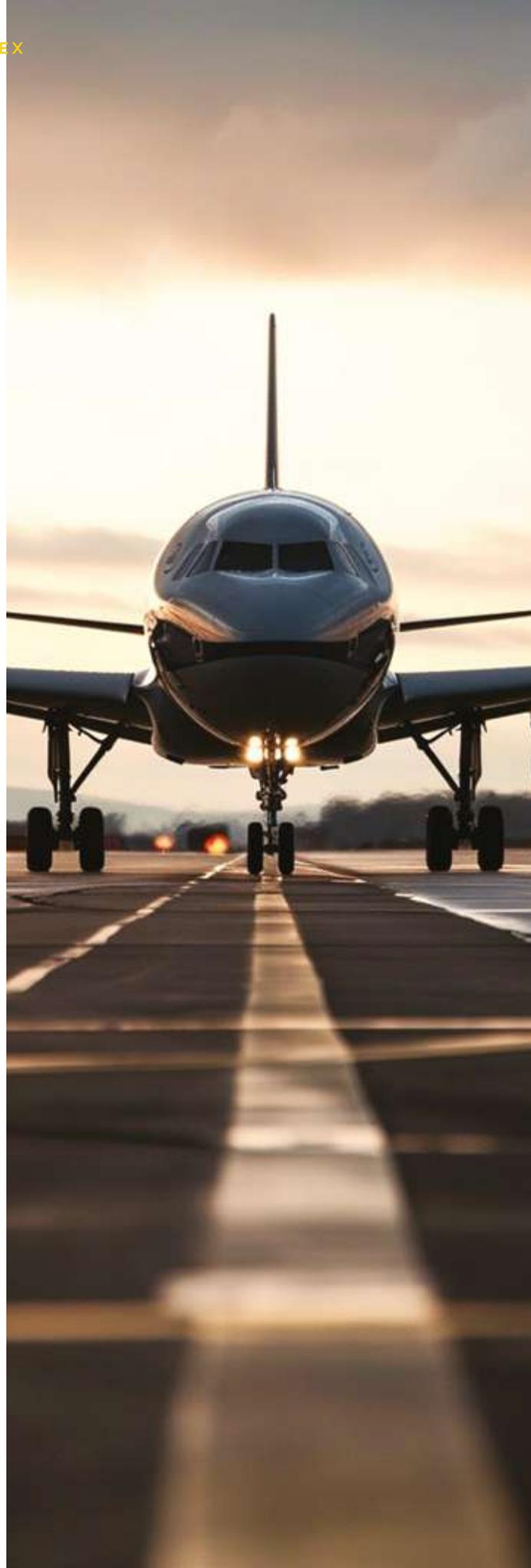
In the meantime, the Economic Community of West African States still remains Africa's best-performing Regional Economic Community in the Africa Visa Openness Index 2025. This was released on 12 December, 2025. Across Africa's regions, we see some steps in the direction of free movement by economies that understand the economic value of free movement of people.

"When people move, business moves," says Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko. He is founder and executive chairman of the Africa Prosperity Network, and an avid activist for a borderless continent. "The more we let people move, the more we create wealth and have a society of dignity."

The runway ahead

Africa stands at a crossroads. The policy vision for open skies is clear. The economic case is compelling. The success stories within and beyond the continent are well documented. What remains is political will and coordinated implementation.

As Agenda 2063 moves from aspiration to execution, fully unlocking Africa's skies may prove one of the fastest and most powerful ways to unlock its broader economic integration. The cost of inaction is already high, and rising. The gains from action, by contrast, are waiting at the departure gate.



Harmonising standards for Africa's single market



One of the difficulties in selling made in Africa goods across several countries is meeting the many different product quality standards and certifications demanded by various members of the African Continental Free Trade Area single market. Harmonisation of those standards is direly needed and efforts to achieve this are now underway.

For decades, African producers have faced a familiar riddle. There is abundant talent, resources, and product innovation, all the same, persistent obstacles stand in the way of turning these into continent-wide market success. Central among these challenges is the fragmented landscape of product and service quality certifications, depicting a maze of national and regional standards, which stand between African businesses and the more than 1.5-billion-person market promised by the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The agreement's launch in January 2021 marked a bold attempt to unify markets across 54 or so member states. It aimed to eliminate tariffs and create a truly continental economic space. But successful trade under the agreement depends as much on harmonised rules of quality as on tariff elimination. To access new markets, producers must demonstrate that their goods and services meet a patchwork of certification requirements. These markets are in Lagos, Kigali or Cairo. The task is proving costly, time-consuming and often bewildering.

A costly legacy of fragmented quality standards

Across Africa, quality standards and certification systems have evolved largely at the national or regional bloc level. They are shaped by historical trade patterns, colonial legacies and domestic regulatory priorities. In East Africa alone, the East African Community oversees a catalogue of over 1,500 standards in addition to predominant country-specific regimes which continue to create inconsistencies.

Overlaying this are standards from international bodies such as the International Organisation for Standardisation, which publishes over 23,000 standards used globally. African companies seeking international credibility often pursue its certification, even so, the sheer number of standards, and varying local interpretations, adds another layer of complexity.

Enterprises must therefore navigate three often overlapping systems.

The first is the national certification regime. This is set by each country's standards body where the enterprise is domiciled. The second is a regional standards and mutual recognition agreement. This exists notably within

economic blocs such as the Economic Community of West African States, the East African Community or the Southern Africa Development Community. Then there are international or sector specific standards. These include those of the International Organisation for Standardisation, Hazards Analyses Critical Control Point for food safety, or industry-specific benchmarks.

For a small or medium sized enterprise producing agricultural products, this can mean securing multiple tests, inspections and marks just to sell identical goods in neighbouring markets. It applies even when the underlying product quality and safety are the same.

The consequences of this fragmented system are real and measurable. A persistent theme in trade intelligence is the burden on businesses. They must secure a standards certificate for each destination market, sometimes requiring different technical documentation, testing procedures and inspections, depending on local rules.

United Nations Development Programme-supported trade missions have revealed a point. **Many micro, small and medium enterprises are unprepared for the diversity and stringency of regulatory demands encountered abroad.** This compliance burden can eclipse other costs.

"Micro, small and medium enterprises must rise to the challenge of regional integration. With the agreement's market of over 1.5 billion people, businesses must meet continental compliance standards to stay competitive," says Dr Edward Ampratwum. He is head of Governance and Inclusive Growth at the United Nations Development Programme's Ghana office.

Beyond administrative burdens, national systems themselves vary widely in maturity. A quality infrastructure index indicates that nearly 40% of the agreement's member countries lack fully developed systems. This leaves businesses in these countries without robust testing labs, accredited certifiers, or clear conformity procedures.

Harmonisation is on the horizon, but is not yet here

Recognising that the fragmentation of standards threatens the agreement's potential, African policymakers and continental bodies are pursuing ambitious harmonisation initiatives. At the continental level, the Pan-African Quality Infrastructure has been established. It aligns standards, measurement, accreditation and conformity assessment across Africa, bringing together the African Organisation for Standardisation, African Accreditation Cooperation,

Intra-Africa Metrology System and other partners. The goal is to create consensus-based frameworks.

Within this framework, the African Organisation for Standardisation Conformity Assessment Programme now promotes harmonised standards and mutual recognition arrangements. This enables certificates issued in one country to be accepted in others. It also facilitates the acceptance of pan-continent certification marks. These include EcoMark Africa and Made in Africa. They signal compliance with agreed benchmarks. The programme also supports self-declaration of conformity options. This lowers costs and speeds up market entry, especially for smaller firms.

These efforts are complemented by the Africa Quality Policy and the African Union's emerging African Technical Regulation Framework, which aim to converge technical regulations and conformity procedures. This is in line with the agreement's annexes on technical barriers to trade.

Despite this progress, the road to full harmonisation remains long. While the African Organisation for Standardisation has developed dozens of harmonised standards in specific sectors, the majority of technical regulations are still implemented nationally and in inconsistent ways. Mutual recognition agreements are growing, allowing certification results to be accepted across borders. But they have only been formalised among a small number of countries, rarely covering all product categories.

How enterprises are navigating challenges

In this complex environment, several African firms have found innovative ways to navigate the certification maze. They leverage agreement opportunities. Here is a selection of five such enterprises that work across various sectors, each offering lessons for others.

Karongi Tea Factory Ltd (Rwanda) is investing in quality systems early

Karongi Tea Factory in Rwanda has prioritised quality management as its gateway to regional markets. By aligning its processing and packaging operations with regional quality specifications, and investing in quality control labs, Karongi has secured certificates. These are recognised in neighbouring East African markets. It has accelerated export growth.

By working closely with standards boards and leveraging the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit's Alliance for Product Quality programmes, Karongi got hands-on support. This helped it understand certification requirements. It is an approach that other agro-processors can emulate.

Aja Limited (Tanzania) is leveraging national recognition tools

Aja Limited, a sisal exporter, has expanded trade within Africa. It uses certification issued by the Tanzania Sisal Board, which is accepted in some other African countries under mutual recognition arrangements. This demonstrates how firms can use national authorities with active regional ties. They can be entry points into wider markets.

The company complements its quality investments with clear documentation and logistics partnerships, a clear reminder that certification success often depends on strong business systems, not just ticked boxes.

Upper Lesape Tigape Farm (Zimbabwe) uses a dual marking strategy

Upper Lesape Tigape Farm has adopted a dual marking approach by securing both its national certification mark and the African Quality Mark under the African Organisation for Standardisation's dual marking scheme. This has enabled the firm to attest to compliance domestically and continentally, and reduced redundant testing while increasing buyers' confidence across markets.

It is a strategy that is becoming more attractive for firms targeting multiple agreement markets. Products carry a recognisable continental mark alongside national certification.

Nigeria's Technology Startups are using digital compliance tools for services

Several Nigerian technology firms have tackled quality requirements. This is particularly in fintech and digital services. They integrate digital compliance and certification workflows directly into their product platforms.

By aligning with International Organisation for Standardisation benchmarks, such as ISO/IEC 27001 for information security, and obtaining globally recognised certification, they have reduced barriers. These barriers exist in markets across west and southern Africa, where data protection and service-quality standards vary.

Although smaller firms still face uneven recognition of digital service certifications in some countries, international benchmarks give them portability and reputation advantages. Regional marks are still developing these advantages.

Ascend Agro Commodities (Ghana) has developed strategic partnerships and mutual recognition agreements

Ascend Agro Commodities, a Ghanaian food exporter, has strategically partnered with accredited certification bodies. These bodies participate in mutual recognition arrangements. By ensuring tests and inspections were conducted by laboratories whose results are recognised beyond Ghana's borders, Ascend has cut certification costs. It avoided repeated testing in every target market.

Their leadership emphasises investing in capacity building and long-term partnerships with certifiers. This is a lesson increasingly validated by industry advocates.

What the way forward looks like

While these case studies highlight creative enterprise responses, systemic change is still needed. It is needed for the agreement's full promise to be realised.

Experts point to several priorities.

One is to accelerate mutual recognition agreements across all major sectors. This ensures certificates issued in

one country are widely accepted. Another is to expand accredited laboratories and testing infrastructure. This is especially in lower-capacity countries where firms struggle to obtain credible results.

A third is the digitisation of certification and conformity processes. This reduces paperwork, speeds up approvals, and improves transparency. Finally, micro, small and medium enterprise-focused support programmes are required. These include training, financial incentives and information portals. They explain compliance requirements for specific markets.

Regulators themselves are candid about the challenge. The African Organisation for Standardisation secretary-general, Hermogene Nsengimana, has noted a point. Harmonised marks like the African Quality Mark are intended precisely to help firms trade in other African countries without barriers. But awareness and capacity remain hurdles.

Though the journey continues, the momentum is unmistakable. Continental frameworks like the Pan-African Quality Infrastructure and initiatives such as the Africa Quality Policy are bringing African nations closer to shared standards. Enterprises are demonstrating that compliance is not just a hurdle but a gateway to scaling upwards. These range from tea processors to tech innovators.

For Africa's private sector, the message is clear. Meeting quality standards is no longer optional. It is the price of admission into the great pan-continental market that the agreement seeks to unleash.





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Trust and Political courage; the keys to unlocking Africa's human capital



...Why mutual recognition of qualifications is central to a borderless continent

While tariffs, rules of origin and logistics corridors have dominated the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) conversation, a quieter but more consequential constraint continues. This conversation is about creating a single market of over 1.5 billion people with a combined gross domestic product exceeding 3.4 trillion US dollars. The constraint that undermines the promise of continental integration is the limited mobility within the continent for Africa's skilled professionals.

Across the continent, skilled professionals hold qualifications earned in reputable African institutions. They possess experience honed in demanding local markets. This includes engineers, accountants, architects, doctors, IT specialists, teachers, lawyers, artisans, among other skilled professionals. Even so, many remain effectively locked within national borders, and their credentials are often not recognised outside their home countries.

Immigration regimes make cross-border recruitment and deployment cumbersome, expensive or outright impossible. As a result, African enterprises struggle to build continent-wide teams. With the AfCFTA's aspiration of seamless economic integration remaining only partially fulfilled, mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications could change this dynamic fundamentally. By allowing African qualifications and experience to be recognised across borders, the continent would unlock its most underutilised asset. This is its people.

The agreement is not only about moving goods and capital more freely. It is also about enabling the movement of skills and expertise, a dynamic that will allow firms to operate and scale up across borders. A Cameroonian construction company expanding into East Africa requires specialised, mobile human capital to succeed. So does a Kenyan fintech operating in West Africa, or a Namibian agribusiness building processing plants across the Sahel.

"Trade liberalisation without skills mobility is like building highways without allowing drivers to cross borders," warns Wamkele Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat. "The success of the agreement depends on firms being able to deploy talent wherever economic opportunity exists on the continent."

Mutual recognition would allow enterprises to recruit

continent-wide. They could assemble specialised teams that reflect Africa's diversity of skills and experiences. This would reduce reliance on non-African expatriates. It would lower operating costs, accelerate knowledge transfer and help African firms compete globally.

The cost of the current fragmentation

Under the current dispensation, Africa's labour market remains among the most fragmented in the world. National immigration policies prioritise domestic labour protection. Professional bodies often restrict recognition to locally trained or licensed practitioners. Even within regional economic communities, recognition frameworks are unevenly implemented.

The drawbacks are substantial. Firms expanding across borders must either retrain locally hired staff, navigate lengthy accreditation processes, or import talent from outside Africa. They import from countries where qualifications are more readily recognised. Projects are delayed, compliance costs rise, and productivity suffers.

For professionals, the impact is equally severe. Skilled Africans are denied opportunities to work elsewhere on the continent, even when shortages exist. A civil engineer trained in Ghana may find it easier to work in Canada than in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. A medical specialist from Senegal may struggle to practice anywhere in the southern African region despite identical training standards.

"This situation leads to a paradox," says Dr Akinwumi Adesina, the immediate past president of the African Development Bank Group. "Africa has both high unemployment among skilled youth and acute skills shortages across critical sectors. The problem is not lack of talent. It is a lack of mobility and recognition."

The result is a misallocation of human resources. This undermines productivity, discourages intra-African investment and weakens the competitiveness of African firms under the agreement.

Why mutual recognition matters for enterprises

For African businesses, mutual recognition of qualifications would be transformative. Firstly, it would enable continent-wide recruitment and allow firms to access the best available talent regardless of nationality. It is particularly critical in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, healthcare, financial services, ICT and manufacturing. These sectors have scarce specialised skills.

Secondly, it would facilitate staff deployment and project

execution. Companies could move engineers, project managers, auditors or IT specialists across borders, and help them to meet their project timelines, ensure quality standards and maintain corporate culture.

Thirdly, it would support the creation of internationally competitive African teams. Exposure to different regulatory environments and markets strengthens innovation and managerial capability. Over time, this would build African multinationals capable of competing not only regionally, but in the global economy.

According to Fatima Denton, director of the United Nations University Institute for Natural Resources in Africa in Accra, "Skills circulation within Africa is essential for building firms that can operate at scale. Mutual recognition is not about replacing local workers. It is about strengthening enterprises through complementary expertise."

Progress toward mutual recognition so far

Recognising these challenges, African institutions and regional economic communities have begun laying the groundwork for mutual recognition frameworks. Progress remains uneven.

At the continental level, the agreement's Protocol on Trade in Services identifies movement of natural persons as a priority area. The protocol encourages state parties to develop mutual recognition agreements for professional qualifications. This is particularly in priority sectors such as business services, communication, transport, financial services and tourism.

Parallel to the agreement, the African Union's Free Movement of Persons Protocol was adopted in 2018. It provides a legal basis for visa-free travel, right of residence and right of establishment. While ratification has been slow, the protocol signals political intent to align labour mobility with economic integration.

Within the regional economic communities, some progress is evident. The East African Community (EAC) has implemented mutual recognition agreements for engineers, accountants and architects. This allows professionals licensed in one member state to practice in others with minimal additional requirements.

While the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long supported free movement of persons, professional recognition remains largely sector-specific and inconsistently applied.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has developed frameworks for harmonising qualifications. But national implementation varies.

Professional bodies themselves are also stepping up. Pan-African organisations such as the African Organisation for Standardisation and sector-specific federations are working to align curricula, licensing standards and ethical codes.

"Trust is built when standards are transparent and comparable," explains Professor Victor Murinde, former director of the African Economic Research Consortium. "Mutual recognition requires not only political agreements but confidence in the quality of training institutions and regulators across countries."

Despite these initiatives, significant barriers remain. National professional associations often fear loss of control or increased competition. Immigration authorities remain cautious. They cite domestic employment pressures. Differences in language, legal systems and educational frameworks complicate harmonisation.

Moreover, many African countries lack robust, digitised qualification verification systems. This makes it difficult to authenticate credentials across borders. Without reliable data-sharing mechanisms, mutual recognition remains vulnerable to fraud and mistrust.

There is also an equity dimension. Smaller or less developed economies worry about a skills drain to larger markets, although evidence from other regions suggests that mobility often leads to skills circulation. Professionals return home with enhanced expertise and networks.

The opportunity created by the single market

The agreement provides a unique opportunity to consolidate and accelerate these fragmented efforts. By embedding mutual recognition firmly within its services negotiations, it can create continent-wide benchmarks. These complement regional economic community-level frameworks.

The agreement's secretariat has already signalled its intent to work closely with education ministries, professional bodies and immigration authorities to develop pilot mutual recognition agreements in priority sectors. Digital credential platforms, continental qualification frameworks and standardised licensing exams are increasingly part of the discussion.

"The agreement is about building a single African market," Mene emphasises. "That market must include skills. Otherwise, we risk integrating goods while fragmenting people."

Ultimately, mutual recognition of qualifications is about more than economic efficiency. It speaks to the broader aspiration of a borderless Africa. Here, identity, opportunity and contribution are not constrained by colonial-era boundaries.

For Africa's youth, skills mobility could be a powerful engine of inclusion, innovation and shared prosperity. This youth is projected to account for over 40% of the global working-age population by 2050. For enterprises, it would unlock scale, resilience and competitiveness. For governments, it would maximise returns on investments in education and training.

As Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director-general of the World Trade Organisation and former Nigerian finance minister, has argued, "Africa cannot afford to educate talent only to trap it within artificial borders. The future lies in integration, not isolation."

Mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications will not happen overnight. It requires trust, coordination and political courage. But without it, the agreement risks becoming a market of goods without the necessary human capital mobility. With it, Africa can finally begin to trade not only in products and services, but in skills, ideas and shared ambition. This lays the foundation for a truly integrated and competitive continent.

The African Court of Justice as the African Continental Free Trade Area's judicial anchor



The more that trade and investment activities expand across national borders in Africa, the greater the likelihood of commercial disputes. These disputes can be between parties in both the private and the public sectors. This is why Africa must go beyond a dispute settlement mechanism and establish a fully-fledged African Court to dispense and enforce collectively accepted commercial justice.

Beneath the African Continental Free Trade Agreement's promise lies a constitutional and legal gap. The promise is of tariff elimination and the seamless movement of goods, services, and workers across a 1.5 billion -plus person market. The gap could undermine the continent's single-market ambitions. It is the absence of the African Court of Justice envisioned in Article 18 of the African Union's Constitutive Act.

The African Continental Free Trade Area has been in operation for a little over five years now. Its legal underpinnings remain incomplete, particularly for enforcement and judicial oversight. A strong, credible continental court is indispensable for the agreement's success. Article 18 of the African Union Constitutive Act mandates the establishment of a Court of Justice of the Union.

This court was intended to be the principal judicial organ of the Union. It would be responsible for the interpretation and application of African Union treaties and obligations. In theory, a functioning court would strengthen regional law, adjudicate cross-border disputes, and enhance legal predictability across member states. These are critical elements for a functioning single market.

In practice, however, the journey from article to institution has been anything but linear.

The long and slow path from protocol to practice

A Protocol of the Court of Justice of the African Union was adopted in July 2003. The treaty entered into force in February 2009 and was designed to provide the procedural, structural, and operational blueprint for the court envisaged in Article 18.

However, by mid-decade, the African Union decided to merge this court with the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. That court had been established separately in 1998. The goal was to create a single institution called the African Court of Justice and Human Rights. The merger was codified in a Protocol on the

Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights adopted in 2008.

A major milestone arrived in 2014 with the Malabo Protocol. This further amended the court's statute to grant it jurisdiction over international and transnational crimes. These include genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and corruption while signalling a uniquely African justice mechanism.

This evolution has fanned debate and criticism. According to Professor Hajer Gueldich, Legal Counsel of the African Union, the Malabo Protocol expands the court's scope. It has also raised serious concerns, including the granting of immunity to sitting heads of state and senior officials. Critics argue this is at odds with both African Union principles and international justice norms.

When Article 18 was adopted in 2000 as part of the African Union's Constitutive Act, the intention was clear. It was to create a fully functioning continental court that would anchor judicial interpretation and dispute resolution for pan-African treaties. But decades later, the African Court of Justice and Human Rights still remains non-operational.

The 2003 Protocol entered into force in 2009 after ratification by the requisite number of states. But the structural shift toward the merged court effectively reset the institutional clock.

The 2008 merger protocol requires ratification by 15 African Union member states to enter into force. This threshold has not been met. As of the latest reports, only a small number of states have ratified the court's statute. The Malabo Protocol itself has very limited ratification.

Indeed, despite regular discussions in African Union forums about fast-tracking operationalisation, the court has not yet assumed its full judicial role. This includes statements made in early 2025 by institutional reform champions.

To make the African Court of Justice and Human Rights operational, at least 15 instruments of ratification must be deposited with the African Union Commission. Each one must be by an African Union member state. This condition has not yet been met.

But beyond these legal formalities, several practical and political tasks also remain. One is the need to gather the

a single market without a court to enforce it is like a contract without consequences if breached.

requisite political will to ratify the Protocol. Governments must prioritise ratification and deposit instruments. It is also necessary to achieve institutional readiness. The appointment and seating of judges, administrative staffing, and budget provisions are required.

Public awareness is needed as well. Legal communities and civil society must understand and champion the court's potential. It will also be necessary to address immunity concerns. There is a growing push from both civil society and legal scholars to revise contentious provisions. These are in the Malabo Protocol and grant immunity to certain government officials. The officials face allegations of grave misconduct or abuse of office.

Indeed, to imminently get the court up and running to adjudicate on cross border commercial issues, there is a growing consensus that it should be de-linked from the provisions of the Malabo Protocol. Given the current momentum and the past pace of progress, projections suggest the court may become operational in the late 2020s. This hinges on political will and continued reform commitments.

A single market without judicial enforcement

The African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement includes its own Dispute Settlement Mechanism. This resolves trade disputes between member states. The system, however, is structurally isolated from broader continental jurisprudence. It lacks a binding continental judicial authority that can interpret related African Union law comprehensively.

Without an operational court, divergent interpretations of trade obligations may persist. This undermines legal certainty and investor confidence. A functioning African Court of Justice would provide clarity, continuity, and enforcement authority. This is comparable to the role played by the European Court of Justice in the European Union's single market.

The agreement's dispute system deals predominantly with disagreements between states. It leaves out private parties and investors unless their respective countries of domiciliation take up the case.

This gap reduces access to justice for businesses. It creates a patchwork of legal remedies across national, sub-regional, and continental levels. A continental court could provide a uniform forum for trade-related litigation. It could ensure consistent application of the agreement's legal norms.

Without a central court, African Union treaties and decisions may lack enforceability anyway. The agreement relies primarily on consensual dispute boards and arbitration. But without judicial authority, enforcement depends on political compliance. This can

be inconsistent, even if it can be secured at all.

The greatest risk of all though is that the agreement becomes economically integrated but legally fragmented. A continental court can harmonise law, precedent, and interpretation. It can strengthen the rule of law and ensure market integration is accompanied by legal certainty.

What is slowing the court's establishment

There are four primary factors slowing the establishment of the African Court of Justice.

The first is that many member states remain wary of relinquishing judicial sovereignty. Granting a supranational court authority over national legal systems is politically sensitive. This includes interpretation of African Union treaties. It is often viewed as a potential infringement on domestic powers.

Related to this is the resultant situation. The requisite ratification thresholds of treaties like the court's statute and the Malabo Protocol remain elusive. Slow ratification reflects broader political hesitation and competing national interests.

Besides this, establishing a continental court demands stable institutional and financial backing. The African Union's perennial budgetary challenges raise concerns over sustainable funding for an operational judicial body.

Finally, certain provisions in the Malabo Protocol have drawn criticism. These have been incorporated into the court's Protocol. They particularly grant immunity to sitting heads of state and senior officials. Criticism comes from lawyers, activists, and international justice advocates. Thus potentially dissuading states from ratifying the statute without reforms.

A missing pillar in Africa's integration architecture

The African Continental Free Trade Area's success goes beyond tariff lines and trade flows. It rests on legal fidelity, enforceability, and dispute resolution. The African Court of Justice and Human Rights, in its fully operational form, can anchor continental law. It can foster confidence in the rule of law, and serve as an indispensable support structure for the agreement and other treaty regimes.

Realising Article 18 of the African Union Constitutive Act is not just an institutional box to tick. It is a strategic necessity if Africa truly aspires to be an integrated, economically vibrant and legally coherent continental community.

Simply put, a single market without a court to enforce it is like a contract without consequences if breached. This is why the establishment of the African Court of Justice is one of the 12 action priorities of the Africa Prosperity Network's Make Africa Borderless Now! campaign.

Africa's strategic push for a single unhindered market



A fragmented Africa is a price-taker. An integrated Africa is a rule maker. This is in a global economy where unity is economic power and informs the wisdom behind the continent seeking to negotiate as one market. It aims to strengthen African countries and their enterprises globally on trade, tariffs, digital rules, standards and carbon markets.

By uniting its 54 or so sovereign nations under a single negotiating voice, Africa seeks to transform its bargaining power on the global stage. The argument is clear from climate change to trade, macroeconomic governance and socio-economic reforms. Collective, pan-continental negotiation positions beat individual bargaining. But despite progress, entrenched challenges continue to blunt Africa's unified voice. These are both internal and external. Now, however, the Africa Prosperity Network aims for the continent to overcome those hurdles. This is why it is one of the 12 priority areas of action the network has identified for its Make Africa Borderless Now! campaign.

Actually, the idea of Africa speaking with one voice is not new. Rather, it is rooted in the African Union's founding principles. It is reinforced in strategic continental frameworks like Agenda 2063, and envisions a "global power capable of rallying support around a common agenda and speaking with one voice" on international matters.

The one voice vision builds on decades of Pan-African diplomacy. It began with the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, and later evolved into the African Union in 2002 with expanded economic and diplomatic ambitions. Its core aim is to ensure that African priorities are negotiated from a position of continent-wide strength. These priorities range from economic growth and climate justice to fair trade and equitable finance. It should not be from individual national vulnerability.

Why a unified African front matters

In global political and economic forums, nations with unified positions wield significantly more influence. These forums range from the United Nations to the World Trade Organisation, and climate summits like the Conference of the Parties.

Climate negotiations are a case in point. Africa contributes only a small fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions. Yet the continent suffers disproportionately from climate impacts, ranging from drought to floods that devastate agriculture and livelihoods.

Recognising this, African negotiators have formed the African Group of Negotiators on climate change. This is a coalition that coordinates positions across the continent ahead of United Nations climate talks. The group works with the African Ministers of Environment and scientific experts. It ensures a credible, science-based and collective African

position in negotiations such as Conference of the Parties sessions.

"Science tells us that Africa is the most vulnerable continent, yet it has contributed the least in terms of emissions. Africa's voice in the global climate negotiations therefore becomes critical," says George Wamukoya, head of the African Group of Negotiators Expert Support.

This united approach has helped Africa articulate its interests more coherently at successive Conference of the Parties meetings. It has pushed for greater adaptation finance and recognition of Africa's vulnerabilities.

At Conference of the Parties 27 in Egypt, for example, Africa's collective advocacy was instrumental. It advanced discussions on climate finance, a long-standing priority for African negotiators.

Global carbon markets and related economic negotiations are another example. They show the advantages of Africa speaking with one voice.

With climate mitigation now heavily tied into global carbon markets, Africa's potential participation offers a significant economic opportunity. This is due to its vast forests, renewable energy resources and biodiversity. The Africa Carbon Markets Initiative, launched at Conference of the Parties 27, aims to scale up Africa's role in voluntary carbon markets. It seeks to unlock billions of dollars in revenue and create millions of jobs.

To capture this potential, Africa must negotiate collectively. It must ensure that market rules reflect African interests. These include integrity of credits, fair pricing and access to investment.

The risks of fragmented bilateral approaches

The other issue on which Africa urgently needs a single unified voice is international trade. This is especially with the African Continental Free Trade Area holding the promise of serving as a structural unity mechanism.

Indeed, it is one of the most significant steps toward economic unity. It is the world's largest free-trade area judged by number of nations, encompassing over 1.5 billion people.

The African Continental Free Trade Area is not merely about tariff reduction. It is a continental negotiating platform that strengthens Africa's hand, helps in setting trade rules, harmonising standards, and negotiating collectively with external partners. Rather than negotiating dozens of bilateral trade agreements with uneven terms, the continent aims to negotiate as a single economic bloc. This enhances bargaining power, especially with major economies and

regions like the European Union, China, India, and the United States.

As economists and business leaders have pointed out, this collective approach could significantly cut and even eliminate Africa's trade deficit. It could boost intra-African trade, and position the continent as a unified economic actor in global value chains.

In the recent past, Africa has used unified positions in several arenas. Most loudly, at least in contemporary times, this has been with regards to climate issues. Through the African Group of Negotiators, Africa has consistently pressed for recognition of its vulnerabilities and financing needs. The inclusion of agriculture priorities in the Paris Agreement and advancements toward loss and damage finance frameworks were influenced by collective advocacy.

Related to this has been Africa's united stance with regards to carbon markets. The launch of the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative at Conference of the Parties 27 showcased coordinated continental ambition. It featured commitments from multiple African nations and corporate buyers in high-stakes climate markets.

Such unified positions have brought Africa into global conversations where it was previously sidelined. They have amplified Africa's concerns on climate justice, monetary fairness, trade equity and socio-economic development. They have done this in forums where historical, severe power imbalances have hitherto dominated. These imbalances favour the developed countries of the world.

So what is holding Africa back?

Despite progress, multiple factors constrain the full adoption of a unified negotiating strategy.

One is Africa's persistent fragmentation and capacity gaps. Africa is diverse politically, economically and culturally. Therefore, aligning its 54 or so sovereign nations behind a single position is inherently complex. Negotiations require data, strategic expertise and legal skills that many countries lack. As a result, individual national interests often override continental priorities. This is especially when external powers woo individual governments with bilateral incentives.

Another challenge derives from deliberate external "divide and rule" pressures. Global powers frequently pursue bilateral agreements, which offer immediate benefits that undercut collective strategies. According to analysts, such tactics deliberately create incentives for countries to break ranks. Thus weakening the continent's unified front.

For example, development finance deals tied to specific national agendas can forestall deeper alignment with continental positions. In climate and finance negotiations, bilateral deals often lack transparency. They can divide negotiating leverage that would otherwise be stronger if pursued collectively.

Then there is the problem of uneven institutional coordination. While the African Union and its agencies are tasked with coordinating common positions, institutional capacity and funding remain weak. The African Union still relies heavily on external donors. This can influence priorities and limit autonomy in defining negotiating stances.

Moreover, coordination between the African Union and Regional Economic Communities is insufficiently integrated. This leads to overlapping or conflicting positions. Building technical negotiating expertise across domains remains a continental challenge.

Divergent economic interests are yet another factor. They inhibit Africa's ability to present unified positions, even on crucial matters. Countries with substantial natural resources have divergent priorities. These resources include fossil fuels or minerals essential to the green transition. Their priorities differ from those more vulnerable to climate impacts.

Aligning these interests into a continental negotiating position requires delicate balancing. This is true whether on climate finance or resource governance.

Strengthening the African voice

To cultivate a truly effective collective negotiating voice, Africa needs strategic investments. These are needed in coordination, institutional capacity and collective bargaining frameworks and apply whether on climate, trade, macro-economic governance, or socio-economic rights.

First, strengthening the African Union's institutional independence is crucial. A more financially autonomous African Union would be less susceptible to external influence. It would be better positioned to articulate African interests uncompromised by donor priorities.

Second, building pan-continental negotiation expertise would level the playing field. This can be done through joint training, research and data sharing. Platforms like the African Group of Negotiators can be broadened beyond climate. They can encompass trade, finance and investment negotiations.

Third, enhanced integration of civil society and private sector voices into continental strategy formulation will ensure positions reflect grassroots realities and broader socio-economic priorities.

Finally, leveraging digital technologies for coordinated communication and real-time negotiation support can diminish the current asymmetry in global bargaining processes.

Unity as strategic necessity

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, Africa's ability to transform its collective weight will determine its place in the 21st-century world order. This weight is demographic, economic and resource-based.

Speaking with one voice is not merely symbolic. It is a strategic imperative. When Africa negotiates as a bloc, it reduces the historical marginalisation that has long defined its role in global decision-making. The progress to date shows the potential of unity. This ranges from climate forums to the African Continental Free Trade Area. But the real test lies ahead. That is to consolidate these gains into sustained, continent-wide influence. This influence must yield tangible benefits for African businesses, governments and citizens alike.

Only then can Africa negotiate not just for survival, but for partnership, if not leadership.

Leveraging the African Diaspora ; the Trade Ambassadors in a borderless economy



Africa's diaspora communities can accelerate the African Continental Free Trade Area's implementation through their trade and investment resources, expertise and advocacy. But Africa needs to make deliberate efforts to attract them.

Even though the agreement promises to reshape Africa's economic destiny, trade liberalisation alone will not deliver results. It eliminates up to 90 percent of tariffs, harmonises trade rules, and unlocks intra-continental commerce at scale. Without capital, networks, expertise, cultural bridges and market connectivity, even the best agreements can languish on paper. Africa's diaspora community represents a strategic, yet under-leveraged force. It is estimated at between 140 million and 200 million people worldwide. It can accelerate the agreement's implementation and outcomes.

Viewed not merely as expatriates but as a "sixth region" of Africa, diasporans are uniquely positioned. The other regions are the more conventionally recognised north, west, east, southern and central Africa. They can enhance trade, investment, knowledge transfer, and advocacy. They bridge global markets and African economies like few other constituencies can.

Africa's diaspora comprises a broad spectrum of people living outside the continent. This includes recent economic migrants, long-established families in Europe and the Americas, highly educated professionals, entrepreneurs, retirees, and investors.

While numbers vary by source, estimates consistently place the diaspora above 140 million individuals globally. Recognised as Africa's 6th region, Global Africa (Africa's diaspora) is a demographic force comparable to the population of some of Africa's largest sub-regional blocs. This community's size and diversity are critical.

Global Africa comprises youth and professionals who can supply expertise in logistics, finance, digital tech, and regulatory affairs. These are all essential for cross-border trade platforms and compliance.

But perhaps, some of the strategic groups of Global Africans, within the scope of the AfCFTA, are the entrepreneurs and business owners who already operate transnational ventures and whose economic relevance may determine how Africa's 6th region shapes the agreement's activities, which can be scaled across African markets under the agreement.

Aside from the investors and capital holders who can channel remittances, direct investment, and diaspora

pooled funds into productive sectors, Global African communities provide cultural and social networks. These reduce barriers to market entry, build trust and sustain consumer demand for African goods and services.

Crucially, data suggests that Africans in the diaspora sent home roughly 95 billion US dollars in remittances during 2024. This figure exceeds foreign direct investment and official development assistance combined in most years. Importantly, it continues to grow.

While remittances have traditionally been spent primarily on consumption, in many countries they now support entrepreneurship, education, healthcare and housing. This strengthens local absorptive capacities for trade and investment. Increasingly, diasporans are shifting these flows toward formal investment channels. These include micro-enterprises, agricultural ventures, and digital startups.

The diaspora's roles in trade and investment

Remittance flows are the most tangible indicator of the African diaspora's economic engagement with the continent they originated from.

Total remittances to Africa in 2024 amounted to 95 billion US dollars. This surpasses both foreign aid and, broadly speaking, foreign direct investment. In some low-gross domestic product African countries, such remittances account for up to 20 percent of national income. Interestingly, around 20 billion US dollars of the remittances represent intra-African flows within the continent.

These flows contribute to foreign exchange stability, bolster household consumption, and, increasingly, finance diaspora ventures. All of these play into the ambitions of the agreement. Despite these impressive numbers, intra-African trade remains low at around 15 percent of total African trade. This compares to 70 percent in the European Union and 60 percent in Asia.

Given this backdrop, the diaspora's financial flows into Africa remain inordinately small for financing formal cross-border trade channels. These flows come from other continents and between countries on the continent. They are large in absolute terms. Mobilising even a fraction of the annual remittance flows into trade-related investment could unlock transformative capital. This capital could fund logistic corridors, manufacturing hubs, digital trade services and small and medium-sized enterprise expansion under the agreement.

Importantly though, Global Africans are not only remitters

but capital holders and investors. Through diaspora bonds, co-investment funds, or African-focused equity platforms, this pool of savings and risk capital can support infrastructure. This includes cross-border trucking, warehousing and customs technology, as well as supply chains and early-stage ventures. These benefit from tariff-free trade across the agreement's markets.

As one trade expert at the 2025 Diaspora Summit in Accra noted, diaspora investment instruments and sectoral opportunities reflect the African Union's conviction. These opportunities are across agriculture, energy, finance, education, tourism, culture, and the creative economy. The expert said responses must be transformative, not transactional.

Another advantage that Africans in the diaspora bring is that they often hold deep networks across both their host and home countries. These networks can connect African firms to buyers, distributors and partners in new markets. They effectively act as trade ambassadors.

For example, a Ghanaian entrepreneur in the United Kingdom might cultivate demand for west African agri-products in European markets. They might also import technology solutions from Europe into African hubs. This creates circular trade flows that benefit multiple countries under the agreement.

Beyond capital, the diaspora carries skills in digital platforms, logistics, legal compliance, financial services, and e-commerce too. These are areas where many African firms still lag.

Through structured programmes, this expertise can elevate the competitiveness of African small and medium-sized enterprises in intra-continental trade. These programmes include secondments, digital knowledge exchanges, and diaspora-led incubators.

As Wamkele Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat, has highlighted, diaspora engagement could be eased through mechanisms like the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System. This system aims to simplify cross-border payments and reduce reliance on foreign currency corridors.

Diaspora leaders also serve as advocates for Africa on the global stage. They shape perceptions that influence investment flows, global trade policy, and reputational positioning. Their voices contribute to repositioning Africa not as a market of aid dependency but as a strategic partner in global commerce.

"Governments need to know where the diaspora is located, what their skills and capacities are, and how willing they are to engage in development at home," emphasised Antonio Vitorino, director general of the

International Organisation for Migration, speaking at a recent forum on diaspora engagement.

Getting more out of the African diaspora

Despite the potential, diaspora engagement faces challenges. There are high transaction costs in remittances and investment channels. These can reduce capital mobilisation.

Regulatory barriers in host African countries and their markets limit diaspora entrepreneurship and formal investment. Lack of data on diaspora skill sets and preferences undermines targeted engagement. Also, underdeveloped formal linkages between diaspora networks and the agreement's policy platforms constrain progress.

However, there are opportunities emerging. Several African states have started issuing diaspora bonds and offering co-financing incentives. These channel remittances into productive uses.

Regional trade hubs and incubators are being established to serve entrepreneurs in the diaspora, providing access to regional markets. And digital trade platforms, powered by startups in diaspora-linked ecosystems, are lowering barriers to entry.

To fully leverage the diaspora for the agreement's success, African governments and private sector actors need to pursue several strategic priorities.

For a start they could establish structured engagement platforms for involving Africans in the diaspora. Creating a continental Global African or Diaspora Trade and Investment Council would institutionalise diaspora input. This council would have representatives from key diaspora markets in Europe, North America, and the Gulf. It would feed into the agreement's policymaking and implementation.

They could also expand the financial instruments available to Africans in the diaspora. Developing diaspora bonds, pooled investment funds, and trade finance facilities targeted at the agreement's sectors can transform remittances. They can become long-term capital for regional infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing value chains.

As a priority, African governments must invest in Global African or diaspora data registries. These would map the skills, interests and networks available in the diaspora. It would enable a more targeted engagement in trade, investment and skills transfer.

Then there is the need to promote digital and physical connectivity. This requires supporting digital commerce platforms and regional trade hubs in key cities including

The diaspora is not a peripheral actor but rather a core partner in Africa's economic future.

Nairobi, Cairo, Kigali, Rabat, Lagos, Addis Ababa, Accra, Luanda, and Johannesburg. Such hubs can reduce friction for diaspora-led enterprises operating across borders.

Diasporans can play a powerful role in reshaping global perceptions of African markets. They advocate for fairer trade rules, and attract foreign partners to invest through an agreement lens. This makes them pivotal in strengthening the African narrative. Their advocacy also persuades Africa sovereign and multilateral institutions to become more investor-friendly and consequently attractive in their activities.

The African diaspora as a continental advantage

If the agreement is the blueprint for Africa's economic integration, the diaspora is a pivotal operational force that can help deliver it. With deep pockets of capital, rich transnational networks, and a growing roster of entrepreneurial and professional talent, Africans abroad stand ready to accelerate intra-continental trade, industrialisation and shared prosperity.

Turning this potential into measurable results requires deliberate policy design, structured engagement mechanisms, and an acknowledgment. The diaspora is not a peripheral actor but rather a core partner in Africa's economic future.

As advocates of the continent's "sixth region" continue to assert, Africans in the diaspora can help move Africa from fragmentation to unity. They can move it from export dependency to domestic value creation, and from economic isolation to shared prosperity.



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Africa Prosperity Network, the sculptor of a borderless continental economy



Since 2023, the Africa Prosperity Network has emerged as a critical convening and advocacy platform. It works towards the accelerated and impactful evolution of a pan-continental single market in the form of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which commenced in January 2021. To do this it has used its annual Africa Prosperity Dialogues in Accra, Ghana, and a range of initiatives beyond them. These efforts influence how Africa thinks about, plans for and implements a borderless continental market.

Launched in 2023 in Accra, the Africa Prosperity Dialogues were conceived as a high-level forum. It brings together political leaders, private sector executives, policymakers, development partners and civil society around one unifying question. How can Africa translate the African Continental Free Trade Area from legal text into tangible prosperity?

From the onset, the Africa Prosperity Network positioned the dialogues as a bridge between policy ambition and commercial execution. "The African Continental Free Trade Area cannot succeed as a purely governmental project. It must be co-owned by Africa's entrepreneurs, investors and workers," the network's chairman and founder, Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko, has said in public engagements. "The Dialogues were designed to align political will with market reality."

The 2023 inaugural event set the tone by focusing on practical bottlenecks to the single market. These included rules of origin, customs digitisation, trade finance and infrastructure connectivity. By convening African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat officials alongside customs authorities, logistics firms and manufacturers, the forum created rare, candid exchanges. These informed subsequent policy refinements. Participants credit these discussions with sharpening awareness among national policymakers. It highlighted the private sector's readiness, and frustration, around cross-border trade.

By the 2024 and 2025 editions, the dialogues had evolved into a recognised continental policy marketplace. Panels and closed-door roundtables addressed labour mobility, cross-border payments, and the harmonisation of investment regimes. Wamkele Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat, has consistently underlined the value of these platforms. He noted that "dialogue with the private sector is essential if we are to build an African market that works in practice, and not just on paper."

Influencing the African Continental Free Trade Area narrative

One of the network's most significant achievements through the dialogues has been reframing the African Continental Free Trade Area. It is not merely a trade agreement, but a socio-economic transformation project. Discussions in Accra have repeatedly emphasised the free movement of skills and labour as integral to competitiveness. This echoes the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons that underpins the African Continental Free Trade Area vision.

African Union officials attending the Dialogues have highlighted how this reframing supports continental agendas. In remarks delivered at one session, a representative of the African Union Commission observed that "economic integration and human mobility are two sides of the same coin. Prosperity depends on both." Such statements reflect how the network has helped mainstream an idea. An African single market must be people-centred.

The dialogues have also influenced discourse at the sovereign national level in various African countries. Finance and trade ministers returning from Accra have cited the events as venues where peer learning accelerated domestic reforms. These ranged from adopting digital customs systems to aligning national African Continental Free Trade Area strategies with industrial policy. The presence of heads of state and former leaders has lent political gravitas. It reinforced the message that integration is a strategic imperative rather than a technocratic exercise.

The network's wider influence

While the Africa Prosperity Dialogues are the network's flagship events, its impact extends well beyond its annual conventions. The Africa Prosperity Network has invested in sustained advocacy for a continent without sovereign national borders in economic terms. It uses research, strategic communication and coalition-building.

Through policy briefs and opinion leadership, the network has consistently argued that Africa's fragmented markets are a self-imposed constraint. "Borders should not be barriers to African prosperity," Otchere-Darko has written. This encapsulates the network's philosophy that sovereignty and integration are not mutually exclusive. These interventions have helped keep market integration high on the political agenda between African Union summits and ministerial meetings.

The network has also worked closely with business

associations and regional economic communities to promote African Continental Free Trade Area readiness. By supporting private sector coalitions across west, east and southern Africa, it has amplified business voices. These voices call for faster implementation of tariff schedules, mutual recognition of standards and interoperable payment systems. A leading pan-African banker involved in the network's initiatives recently remarked that "the Network has given structure and coherence to private sector advocacy around the African Continental Free Trade Area."

Another area of the network's influence has been labour and investment mobility. Recognising that capital and skills must move as freely as goods, it has hosted targeted dialogues engaging migration experts, regulators and employers. These engagements have fed into broader African Union conversations on aligning the Free Movement Protocol with African Continental Free Trade Area objectives.

African Union labour officials participating in such forums have consequently come to accept a point. The continent's economic integration will stall if African talent remains trapped within national borders. By consistently linking labour mobility to productivity and competitiveness, the network has helped normalise what was once a politically sensitive topic.

With regards to investment within Africa, the network has advocated for harmonised incentives and dispute resolution mechanisms. This reduces uncertainty for cross-border investors. Its engagements with sovereign wealth funds, development finance institutions and multinational firms have reinforced a message. Africa's single market must be predictable to attract long-term capital.

Building a pan-African coalition of self-belief

Perhaps the network's most intangible yet powerful accomplishment has been coalition-building. It has succeeded in bringing together actors who rarely share the same room. This includes presidents and start-up founders, customs chiefs and logistics innovators, labour leaders and project financiers. This convening power has fostered a shared belief. It is in the desirability, and inevitability, of a unified African market.

As one regional trade expert put it during a network-hosted session, "integration advances when belief becomes consensus." By nurturing that consensus, the Africa Prosperity Network has contributed to a cultural shift around the African Continental Free Trade Area. It has moved from scepticism to cautious optimism.

The next step, the "Make Africa Borderless Now!" campaign

The 2026 edition of the Africa Prosperity Dialogues is perhaps the most ambitious yet. It is transforming this annual event from transformative dialogues to a truly pan-African movement of the continent's citizens. This ranges from people living at the communal grassroots to key stakeholders in cross border trade and investment all

around Africa.

This movement is the people-driven "Make Africa Borderless Now!" campaign. It advocates for the full implementation of existing African Union protocols to achieve a truly integrated and borderless continent. This is for the free movement of people, goods, capital, and services.

The overarching objective is to transform the socio-economic integration of Africa. It should move from an aspiration of leaders into a concrete reality driven by citizen demand. The focus is on removing physical, financial, and digital barriers.

The campaign is officially led by the Africa Prosperity Network itself. It works in collaboration with major pan-African institutions. These include the African Continental Free Trade Agreement Secretariat, the African Development Bank, and the African Union Development Agency - New Partnership for Africa's Development.

The campaign's blueprint is built upon 12 core pillars. It comprises a practical plan, grounded in existing African Union treaties and protocols. It is pushed forward with people-powered urgency for implementation. The pillars

include three aimed at making Africans citizens of a united continent. These are visa-free travel across Africa, Open Skies to liberalise air routes, and a continent-wide biometric

passport and digital African ID.

Four pillars aim at facilitating trade and investment within the African single market and between that market and the rest of the world. These are a single African customs union, harmonised standards and a continent-wide commercial law ecosystem, seamless cross-border digital payments, and full activation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Digital Trade Protocol.

Four pillars provide the underpinnings on which a single pan African market can operate and indeed thrive. These are trans-African infrastructure and logistics corridors, an African Court of Justice to enforce a true single market, placing women and youth at the centre of continental prosperity, and one African voice in global negotiations.

"All of these echo long-agreed frameworks," notes Otchere-Darko. These range from the Abuja Treaty (1991) to the Yamoussoukro Decision (1999) to the Free Movement Protocol (2018). But they have waited decades for action.

The Make Africa Borderless Now campaign seeks to collect a critical mass of signatories from across the continent. This will be in the form of a petition. It aims to persuade African Continental Free Trade Area signatory countries to implement key treaties and protocols. These are requisite for the success of a pan-African single market regarding trade, investment, work and tourism.

"The petition is simply about asking African leaders to

*sovereignty and integration
are not mutually exclusive.*



gather the political will to implement treaties and protocols they themselves have adopted and agreed to implement but are being slow. Our goal is to send a strong delegation to the African Union to present 10 million signatures and say, 'Your people want a borderless Africa, simply by implementing what you have already agreed to do,' explains Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko.

Measuring impact in a long game

The transformation of Africa into a seamless economic space is a generational project. The Africa Prosperity Network's achievements should therefore be measured not only in immediate policy changes, but in the quality of dialogue and alignment it has helped create. Since 2023, the Africa Prosperity Dialogues have become a fixture in the continental calendar. They influence how leaders, officials and businesses interpret the African Continental Free Trade Area's promise.

In the words of African Continental Free Trade Area secretary-general Wamkele Mene, "implementation is about partnerships and persistence." The network's work exemplifies both. By combining high-level advocacy with practical engagement, and by extending its influence beyond its flagship event, the African Prosperity Network has positioned itself as a catalyst. It is for Africa's journey toward a truly single market.

As Africa grapples with global uncertainty and internal fragmentation, platforms that sustain belief in integration matter more than ever. The network's record since 2023 suggests a point. The vision of an Africa without economic borders is no longer abstract rhetoric. It is a project steadily acquiring institutional, political and commercial momentum.



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Africa at the AI Inflection Point: From Catch Up to Strategic Leap

By Kevin Kissi, Founder and Principal Consultant at Kissi & Co., Founder and Executive Director at Engineer Africa

Every era is defined by a small number of technologies that quietly reshape power, productivity, and prosperity. Electricity did this in the twentieth century. The internet did it at the turn of the millennium. Today, artificial intelligence is doing it again, faster and more pervasively than anything before it. AI is not simply a new tool. It is a general purpose capability that is redefining how capital is deployed, how institutions function, and how competitive advantage is created. For Africa, this moment represents a clear inflection point.

Across the United States and other advanced economies, AI adoption is accelerating at unprecedented speed. Infrastructure is being built, business models are being rewritten, and entire layers of the technology ecosystem are emerging and consolidating within months. Perhaps most telling is how the nature of work itself has changed. Only a decade ago, learning to code was viewed as a reliable path to future relevance. Today, that paradigm is already fading. Value is no longer created primarily by writing code, but by directing intelligence, understanding how to frame problems, manage AI systems, coordinate agents, and apply machine intelligence to real outcomes.

This shift matters deeply for Africa. The continent does not need to replicate the West's technological journey step by step. Training large populations for roles that are already being automated would be a strategic mistake. The more urgent priority is developing AI literate leadership. Executives, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and operators must understand how to deploy intelligence effectively. This is not a narrow technical challenge. It is a strategic capability that determines how nations and institutions compete.

The relevance of AI becomes even clearer when viewed through Africa's most persistent constraints. The greatest opportunities lie not in novelty applications, but in applying intelligence to foundational sectors.

In infrastructure and transportation, AI can enable predictive maintenance of roads, ports, and power systems, allowing governments to move from reactive repair to proactive planning. In agriculture, intelligent systems can support yield forecasting, climate adaptation, and supply chain coordination, increasing productivity while strengthening food security. In healthcare, AI can expand access to diagnostics, triage, and resource allocation, acting as a force multiplier in regions where skilled professionals are limited. In each

case, the promise is the same. Greater impact per unit of capital deployed.

Capital itself remains decisive. Conversations about the African diaspora have long focused on remittances. While important, this perspective is incomplete. The diaspora's true economic value extends far beyond annual cash flows. It includes accumulated net worth, institutional experience, entrepreneurial expertise, and access to global networks. When aligned with African small and medium sized enterprises, both on the continent and offshore, this capital can become catalytic rather than consumptive.

AI enabled SMEs offer a particularly powerful bridge. They absorb capital efficiently, reduce execution risk, and translate global best practices into local impact. This reframes diaspora engagement away from sentiment and toward structured partnership.

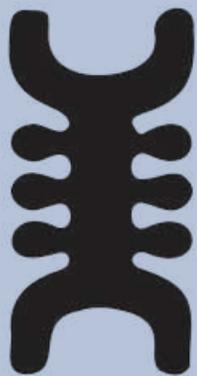
Africa also enters the AI era with underappreciated advantages. A young population unburdened by legacy systems. Fewer sunk costs in outdated infrastructure. Greater room for policy experimentation. And a global diaspora already embedded in advanced economies. These conditions make leapfrogging possible, if acted upon deliberately.

The AI era will not wait. Those who move early and think systemically will shape its outcomes. For Africa, staying ahead will require coordinated investment in AI literacy at the leadership level, disciplined focus on applied intelligence in core sectors, and a reimagining of diaspora engagement as long term economic partnership. The decisions made now will determine whether Africa is merely affected by the AI revolution, or helps define it.

The diaspora's true economic value extends far beyond annual cash flows. It includes accumulated net worth, institutional experience, entrepreneurial expertise, and access to global networks.



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The Real Test of AfCFTA: Integrating Her fragmented markets

Mirroring the East African model.

By Godfred Nana Yaw Amoako, Aspiring Policy Analyst

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promises prosperity, but its success depends on whether small businesses, women, and youth can trade across borders with ease. East Africa's Simplified Trade Regime (STR) offers a model worth scaling.

East Africa's Simplified Trade Regime shows what is possible. Small traders move goods across borders with reduced paperwork. Why should this not be replicated continent-wide?

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the most ambitious integration project in Africa's history. A single market of 1.4 billion people and a combined GDP of over US\$3 trillion promises prosperity through trade. The real test of AfCFTA lies not in its numbers, but in whether small businesses, women entrepreneurs, and young innovators can participate fully.

The East Africa Simplified Trade Regime (STR) was introduced within the East African Community to ease cross-border trade for small-scale traders. It allows low-value consignments typically under US\$2,000 to be cleared with simplified documentation and a common list of eligible goods. By reducing paperwork and cutting transaction costs, the STR has enabled thousands of informal and small-scale businesses, many of them run by women, to move products such as maize flour, textiles, and household goods across borders more efficiently.

In practice, traders report saving two to three days in clearance time and reducing costs by up to 30% compared to standard procedures. The quiet success of STR illustrates how targeted reforms can make integration tangible at the grassroots level, offering a model that AfCFTA could adapt and scale continent-wide.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 80% of businesses across Africa and contribute up to 50% of GDP in some countries. They employ millions, sustain households, and drive innovation. However, fewer than 20% engage in cross-border trade.

Complex procedures and stunted growth for SMEs

The barriers are clear; complex customs procedures, high transport costs, and fragmented regulations. A shea

butter producer in Tamale (Ghana) struggles to reach Lagos or Nairobi because of tariffs and paperwork. A farmer in Kisumu (Kenya) faces delays that make regional exports uncompetitive. In Southern Africa, small textile manufacturers in Lusaka cannot scale because transport costs erode margins; an obstacle that operationalising the Single African Air Transport Market and investing in continental infrastructure corridors could directly reduce.

Unless AfCFTA streamlines trade procedures, SMEs will remain excluded from continental opportunities; a challenge that could be addressed by building a *One African Customs Union* to harmonise customs systems and remove non-tariff barriers.

Women run about 30% of registered businesses in Africa, yet they receive less than 10% of available credit. Banks demand collateral they often cannot provide. Trade networks remain male-dominated. Where deliberate policy support exists,

the results are transformative.

Rwanda's coffee cooperatives show how women entrepreneurs, given access to export markets, can generate income, dignity, and influence. In Ghana, women-led agribusinesses have expanded through targeted financing schemes. But in Dakar, textile entrepreneurs still struggle to secure loans; a gap that could be bridged by fully implementing the AU Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, which prioritises targeted financing and empowerment for women and youth in business.

Scaling success requires gender-responsive trade policies, targeted credit lines, and stronger representation of women in regional trade platforms. Empowering women is not charity – it is smart economics.

Closing gender gaps in trade could add US\$15 – 20bn annually to Africa's GDP

Africa's youth, over 60% of the population, are building fintech solutions, agritech platforms, and creative industries. Their innovations are unmatched, but they remain local because of fragmented digital infrastructure.

Kenya's M-Pesa transformed financial inclusion. Thus far, a Nigerian fintech solution cannot serve clients in Ghana

The quiet success of STR illustrates how targeted reforms can make integration tangible at the grassroots level, offering a model that AfCFTA could adapt and scale continent-wide.

due to disconnected mobile money systems. A Ugandan agritech startup struggles to expand into Tanzania because digital trade protocols are not operational. In South Africa, creative industries generate billions but lack cross-border distribution channels. All these are issues that the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade and seamless mobile money interoperability through PAPSS are designed to solve.

This is where the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) becomes critical. PAPSS is already operational, enabling instant cross-border payments in local currencies. It can help SMEs scale by reducing transaction costs and eliminating reliance on foreign currencies. The challenge is not the absence of innovation, but limited awareness and access. SMEs need more information, training, and support to use PAPSS effectively. AfCFTA's Digital Trade Protocol must therefore go beyond policy, it must ensure that entrepreneurs are equipped to leverage these tools.

Digital trade must be fully operational. The AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade should harmonise rules on e-commerce, digital signatures and trust services. Scaling up PAPSS and cross-border mobile money interoperability will ensure digital payments function across Africa using local currencies. Entrepreneurs require training and support to adopt these tools alongside policy frameworks.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can only succeed if reforms focus on practical, people-centred solutions that reflect the realities faced by traders, entrepreneurs and workers across the continent. The following priorities offer clear, actionable steps to unlock Africa's full potential as a borderless market.

Simplifying trade procedures across regional blocs is essential. Establishing a unified African Customs Union would eliminate non-tariff barriers, digitise customs processes and create a seamless trade environment. This would enable small and medium-sized enterprises to move goods without excessive paperwork or delays.

Transport and logistics systems need reimagining. The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is operational, but its benefits depend on affordable freight services, accessible passenger routes and integrated logistics. Neighbouring countries must co-invest in infrastructure corridors, roads, rail, ports, energy and digital networks, to connect Africa physically and commercially.

Improving mobility is another key priority. Introducing Visa-Free Africa and a single biometric passport would allow people to travel, connect and build a truly continental workforce. Recognising skills across borders would further support labour mobility, innovation and knowledge sharing.

Harmonising product standards is vital. The principle of One Standard, One Test, One Market means goods approved in one country should be accepted continent-wide. This approach reduces duplication, lowers costs and speeds market access for African producers.

Inclusion requires deliberate action. Full implementation of the African Union Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade will secure targeted financing, representation and opportunities. Empowering women and youth are central to economic transformation.

Africa must also present a united front. A single position in global trade negotiations will strengthen bargaining power, secure fairer terms and protect African interests. Operationalising the African Court of Justice will enforce commitments and safeguard businesses, investors and citizens within the single market.

AfCFTA will succeed only if it delivers for the majority; not just the elite

The experience of the East Africa Simplified Trade Regime provides a useful lens through which to view AfCFTA's broader ambitions. By reducing paperwork, lowering transaction costs, and opening regional markets to small-scale traders, STR has shown that integration can be practical and inclusive. Traders using STR report saving two to three days in clearance time and cutting costs by up to 30% compared to standard customs procedures.

In contrast, under current AfCFTA implementation, customs delays can stretch to a week or more, eroding competitiveness and discouraging small businesses from engaging in cross-border trade. STR therefore stands as a proof of concept; it demonstrates that when integration is simplified, ordinary Africans benefit directly, and continental trade becomes a lived reality rather than a distant aspiration.

AfCFTA's success will not be measured by treaties signed or summits held, but by the daily realities of traders, entrepreneurs, and innovators. When SMEs can move goods without prohibitive costs, when women can access credit and export markets, and when youth can scale innovations across borders, integration becomes tangible.





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Pursuit of a Borderless Dream, in spite of the nightmare of racial scars

By Glenn E. Singleton

In 2022, I obtained Ghanaian citizenship through the Government of Ghana's Return programme as an African-American Diaspora. This was after eighteen years of being a consistent visitor to the country and five years of being a property owner and founder of Door Of Return Ltd., a Heritage company that has been organising cultural tours for Black Americans since 2019 even before the Year of Return programme was announced. But my citizenship through the office of the Diaspora Affairs came as a result of a collaborative effort to re-develop the WEB Du Bois centre into a world-class museum for history, learning and tourism.

When I received my Ghanaian passport, I decided to take a trip to Zanzibar, Tanzania, to see the island's famed beauty for myself. I flew Ethiopian Airlines from Accra to Addis Ababa to be connected to Zanzibar. This was not my first time flying with Ethiopian Airlines, but it was my first time using my Ghanaian passport, as the other times had been on my United States of America passport. On those previous occasions, I had been treated exceptionally well, I did not wait too long to be taken to the provided hotel where I was to spend the night ahead of my onward flight the next morning. I was placed at the newly constructed Skylight Hotel. But on this occasion of traveling on my Ghanaian passport, the treatment was different.

When I arrived at the desk where I was to be assigned a hotel, I was asked to wait, no explanation was given. After what seemed like almost an hour, I was finally told there was a bus waiting outside to transport me to the hotel. The drive to the hotel seemed further away from the airport city. Eventually we arrived at a roadside hotel located on a dimly-lit, untarred street. It looked more like a motel than a hotel. I decided not to complain but manage instead since it was only going to be a night. However, when I got upstairs to the room, there was no air conditioning and the windows had no nets to prevent mosquitoes or bugs from flying into the room.

Here I was in a hot room with no air conditioning and no way to keep the windows open. When I went back down to the reception to complain I was told they didn't use air conditioners and that since I had been assigned by an airline they could not help. Worst still, they would not let me leave until I threatened to escalate the situation on grounds of kidnapping before I was allowed to leave and find myself a more comfortable lodging option. I never got any kind of redress from Ethiopian Airlines to date.

My experience, although not limited to Ethiopia, as I've experienced similar treatment in Egypt, highlights the

condition of the average "Black" African passport-holder everyday as they try to navigate travel whether around the continent or outside of it.

In his book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King Jr. offered an argument that remains flustering in its clarity, he noted that the collective liberation of Black people worldwide would depend, in significant measure, on the moral and political leadership of the American Negro, and by this statement King was not asserting the supremacy of the African-American; he was making a point that must be taken seriously today.

Forced into proximity with the modern nation-state, racial capitalism, and democratic contradiction, Black Americans were compelled to develop a strategy for identifying injustice and organising against it.

Africa, by contrast, has to a large extent been denied that reckoning. The continent was dismembered long before it could fully articulate race as a political problem of global consequence. The average African is not aware about how race affects his life and his place in the global order of things. And as leaders gather under the Africa Prosperity Dialogues' banner of a "borderless Africa," we have to make sure not to repeat the same mistake; pursuing integration without first confronting a foundational problem.

Africa's crises—economic fragmentation, political instability, extractive dependency—are often discussed as technical failures of policy or governance. I do not think they are. Rather, I believe they are the unresolved aftershocks of colonialism and racism—our passive confrontation with white supremacy, our penchant for foreign goods over locally manufactured ones, our migration patterns, our worship of eurocentricity, our demonisation of indigenous belief systems in favour of foreign ones. Slavery racialised Africa as a supplier of bodies for cheap labour and colonialism reorganised it as a warehouse of resources. And when we gained "Independence", we designed new flags and wrote new anthems, but what we failed to do was to have a collective confrontation with the racial logic that diminished our historical relevance and made domination possible in the first place. A logic that remains operative even now.

Consider the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations final. What should have been a celebration of African excellence became, in moments both overt and subtle, a stage for racial animus—against players, referees, and fans.

Nationalistic pride or ego is one thing, what happened in Morocco was simply a shameful display of racism in its most blatant form, echoing colonial hierarchies learned and internalised over generations. The 2025 Afcon did not create the problem; it simply revealed it.

A truly borderless Africa cannot be built atop unexamined racial fractures. Free movement of goods and people will not heal the wounds that the Berlin conference of 1884/85 inflicted on the continent. Some of Africa's most deadly internal conflicts in its recent history are tied directly to race and borderlines. The Biafran genocide in Nigeria, The Rwandan Genocide, Apartheid, the Tigray conflict, among others. The Africa Prosperity Dialogues must not avoid race conversations as it pursues the borderless Africa agenda.

Martin Luther King understood something else that bears repeating, the African diaspora is not an accessory to Africa's future; it is integral to achieving it. Yet across the continent, the diaspora is often welcomed symbolically either through heritage programmes and investment forums, while being excluded substantively from policy discussions and formation. If there is one lesson we can learn from America's story, it is that integration on paper is not integration in practice.

If Africa is serious about unity, diaspora citizenship must move beyond access to land and tourist visas. It must include voting rights, political representation, and a central voice in shaping national futures. The diaspora, descendants of those forcibly removed, possess not only the capital and skills, but also a hard-earned language required for confronting racial power and injustice. The work ahead is not merely administrative; it is cartographic and moral. Just as the Africa Prosperity Dialogues is challenging the Mercator projection for distorting the world in Europe's favour, Africa must summon the courage to rethink borders drawn in colonial conference rooms. Borders that severed kinship systems, languages, economies and encoded violence into Africa's geography.

The promise of a borderless Africa is compelling, but without racial truth that promise is brittle. We cannot invite the Diaspora to return home only to be confronted with another version of colonial injustice they have had to deal with through the centuries and are seeking to escape from.

Glenn Singleton is Founder and CEO of Courageous Conversation@ USA and Door of Return Ltd., Ghana. He currently resides in both Washington, D.C., and Accra, Ghana and is the Nkosohene (Development Chief) of Apirede in the Akuapim Traditional Area of the Eastern Region.

...when we gained "Independence", we designed new flags and wrote new anthems, but what we failed to do was to have a collective confrontation with the racial logic that diminished our historical relevance and made domination possible in the first place"



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